

# Setting as the Genesis of Motif

1. Introductions—Choose a setting postcard—introduction
  - a. Name
  - b. Writing background
  - c. Where are you from
  - d. Favorite setting in literature or reality
2. Setting--Definition and Examples from Literature

DEFINITION OF SETTING from Bedford/St. Martin Press (AP text)

Setting, quite simply, is the story's time and place. While setting includes simple attributes such as climate or wall décor, it can also include complex dimensions such as the historical moment the story occupies or its **social context**. Because particular places and times have their own personality or emotional essence (such as the stark feel of a desert or the grim, wary resolve in the United States after the September 11th attacks), setting is also one of the primary ways that a fiction writer establishes **mood**. Typically, short stories occur in limited locations and time frames, such as the two rooms involved in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," whereas novels may involve many different settings in widely varying landscapes. Even in short stories, however, readers should become sensitive to subtle shifts in setting. For example, when the grieving Mrs. Mallard retires alone to her room, with "new spring life" visible out the window, this detail about the setting helps reveal a turn in the plot. Setting is often developed with narrative description, but it may also be shown with action, dialogue, or a character's thoughts.

**social context:** The significant cultural issues affecting a story's setting or authorship

**mood:** The underlying feeling or atmosphere produced by a story

## a-b. Definition—time and place in a narrative

- Revealed through natural elements, concrete objects, events, places
- Details--
  - location (Are we on a football field, or in a prison cell? In San Francisco, or in Paris? On earth, or in outer space?)
  - time (When is this story taking place?)
  - historical time (Is it the modern day, or the 17th century, or some imagined past or future time?)
  - seasonal time (Is it winter or summer?)
  - daily time (Is it morning or evening?)
  - weather (What's the temperature like? Is it humid or arid? Is it raining?)

c. Beyond time and place—the air sucked in through the nostrils of the characters

1. The physical place inhabited by the speaker
2. The touchstones of similar experience for the reader—reader relate-ability
3. Specific versus the universal
4. Gray screen versus cushion

### 3. Examples in Literature

- i. Natural Elements—Hemingway (Time markers)
- ii. Concrete Objects—Fitzgerald (East and West Egg)
- iii. Events—Glass—Lockerbie Bombing (Dec 21, 1988 270 victims)
- iv. Places—Hosseini—Kabul alleyway
- v. time and place—Tyler--autumn in a stranger's backyard

### 4. Exercise 1 with Postcards

- a. List the details of the scene from the card first squeezing all the details out of a setting—
  - a. Going into detail with the surface, inside and beyond the borders
  - b. Go further beyond the edges, behind buildings, up trees and around bends
    - i. List of prepositions
    - ii. Use people as part of the setting
    - iii. Include natural elements like weather, foliage, water
- c. Choose the vital parts to include in your writing
- d. Use all of the details for a setting—no—but the writer must be consistent with the details that are used.
- e. Test—does the setting make you picture the time and place accurately?

## 5. Developing the Setting beyond Backdrop

- a. Settings that operate beyond a backdrop and become symbolic are
  - i. Specific
  - ii. Use sensory language
  - iii. Develop into metaphor
- b. Warning against assumption (Rabbit Gnaw aha)
  - i. Do not assume that the reader has the same experience with key elements
    1. What color is puce?
    2. What does a linden tree look like? What does the word “linden” mean?
    3. How would you describe the call of a jackdaw versus a sparrow?
    4. What does a desert morning feel like?
    5. What type of light exists in the city between four and five on a summer morning?
    6. What does wet concrete smell like after a quick summer shower?
  - b. Example of personal landscapes in literature
    - i. Ted Kooser—Abandoned Farmhouse

## 6. Exercise 2—Personal landscape, time and surroundings

- a. Guided Visualization
- b. 20 Questions
- c. Research, reality and fiction
- d. Share results

## 7. Mapping the setting--Know the logistics of your story

- a. Landscape and time that can be traversed
  - i. Concrete versus abstract
  - ii. Described versus assumed
  - iii. Use totems or anchors in the landscape even if fictitious

#### iv. Examples

1. Maleficent—the fairies' moor has its own landscape
2. *Alice in Wonderland* can be traversed despite the absurd
3. Tolkien
4. Stephen King

#### 8. Exercise 3—Setting Map

- i. Choose one setting for a novel, a short story or a memoir—jot ideas for the landscape and the time period in a thumbnail
- ii. Draw a map of the place
  1. Name the streets, avenues, paths and houses
  2. Add details that give away the time period
  3. Choose the focal point and give it a color
  4. Trace the path of the main character through this landscape either in a scene or the whole story

#### 9. Symbols and Repetition that grow into Motif

##### a. Definition and History

- i. Symbolic elements that recur throughout a work and contribute to the theme. The use of motif in literature reached a peak in the French Symbolist Period (1848)—reaction against it immediately after. This is the type of analysis most criticized as “reading too much into a work.

\* A motif can be a character type, an event but this workshop is focused on setting elements.

- ii. Strings of the same thread that bind the work outside of the character and plot but contribute to the theme.
- iii. Use with intention—don't sprinkle but employ
- iv. Signal to the reader to pay attention

##### b. Standard examples

- i. the use of weather, the word “blood” or references to birds in *Macbeth*

- ii. Zora Neal Hurston's tree motif that begins with Janie's budding and bursting peach tree in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
- c. Additional examples
  - i. Li Young Li—*The Winged Seed*—Shoes and walking—his father's difficult life
  - ii. Julia Glass—*Three Junes* and *The Whole World Over*—use of animals—dogs and birds(parrot) and the use of a red objects
  - iii. Louise Erdrich—*Love Medicine* and others—nature, the crucifix
  - iv. Ann Tyler—Baltimore neighborhoods sliced into totems
- 10. String Exercise 4 with the group
  - a. Using nature—describe a storm as destructive but energizing
  - b. Using concrete objects—describe something red to signal change or tonal shift
  - c. Using place—describe a door that forbids entrance and distresses
  - d. Using time—describe a summer evening that refreshes and calms
- 11. **Individual String Exercise 5**--written work and map
- 12. **Summary and Reflection**—Setting is often viewed as the ignored middle child in the family of narrative elements—character, plot, setting and theme. Although too much description of the setting can bog down the narrative, the author owes the reader more than a gray screen on which the characters act out the conflict. Layered into setting can be connected images, references and descriptions that develop into motif—symbols that connect to the theme—the author's purpose.

## Evaluation

# The Last Things I'll Remember

by [Joyce Sutphen](#)

The partly open hay barn door, white frame around the darkness,  
the broken board, small enough for a child  
to slip through.

Walking in the cornfields in late July, green tassels overhead,  
the slap of flat leaves as we pass, silent  
and invisible from any road.

Hollyhocks leaning against the stucco house, peonies heavy  
as fruit, drooping their deep heads  
on the dog house roof.

Lilac bushes between the lawn and the woods,  
a tractor shifting from one gear into  
the next, the throttle opened,

the smell of cut hay, rain coming across the river,  
the drone of the hammer mill,  
milk machines at dawn.

"The Last Things I'll Remember" by Joyce Sutphen from *First Words*. © Red Dragonfly Press, 2010. Reprinted with permission.

## Sins of the Fathers

by [Mark Vinz](#)

My daughter wants the car tonight, no,  
needs the car tonight—to go somewhere,  
to do some things, you know, be back  
before it gets too late, of course,  
if I say so, which I always do,  
of course. I trust her—it's the others  
I don't trust, the others I worry about,  
and round we go again.

Headlights pass the driveway—  
I study every shadow on the wall,  
each voice from the dark street,  
and laughter—faint, familiar  
laughter, rising and falling  
on every breath of wind.

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