

Setting

Setting refers to the sum total of references to physical and temporal objects and artifacts in a literary work (its time, place, and milieu (historical, social, political, cultural, spiritual, philosophical, and psychological context). Writers usually establish setting by description and narration. In some literary works, setting may be so significant that it virtually becomes an active participant in the action.

Three basic types of setting

Nature and the outdoors (as hostile or friendly, destructive or beneficent force)

Natural surroundings: wilderness, desert, hills, shorelines, valleys, mountains, cliffs, meadows, fields, trees, lakes, streams, rivers, seas, bogs, caves

Living creatures: birds, dogs, cats, horses, snakes, vultures, wolves, rats, whales, squid

Times, seasons: morning/evening, noon/midnight, day/night, summer/winter, autumn/spring

Conditions: destructive storms, blistering heat, scorching drought, drenching humidity, numbing cold, blinding snow, torrential rain, impenetrable fog, unnerving calm

Manufactured or constructed objects

Interiors and exteriors of buildings and rooms (indicative of the character of those who build or inhabit them): houses/business offices, estates/tenements, castles/cottages), jails/prisons

Objects: kitchen tables, park benches, lights, rocking chairs

Personal possessions: necklaces, hair ribbons, jewelry, glasses, photographs, shoes, saddles, walking sticks, books

Historical and cultural conditions and assumptions

religious ritual, skepticism; political, social climates, historical eras

Functions of setting

- 1) to establish verisimilitude
- 2) to underscore the importance of place, circumstance, and time on human growth and change
- 3) to organize a work
 - a) by creating graphic descriptions that depict clear, vivid, and lifelike settings
 - b) by creating a frame by beginning and ending with a description of the same scene
 - c) by enclosing the entire work within one setting that is constant and prominent through the work
- 4) to serve as a symbol through which the author can express ideas
- 5) to create an atmosphere or mood (the permeating emotional texture within a work)
- 6) to establish irony

The language that a writer uses to describe the setting is an important clue to interpreting its function.

Setting analysis

When gleaning evidence in order to analyze setting, discover all the details that might possibly form a part of setting and determine how the author has used these details. Avoid merely describing the setting; instead, relate the setting to some aspect of the work (action, organization, character, atmosphere or mood, irony, verisimilitude, symbolic implications).

Setting

Questions to consider while gleaning evidence in order to discern setting

How fully are objects described? How vital are they to action? How important are they in the development of plot or idea? How are they connected to the mental states of characters?

What connections are apparent between locations and characters? Do locations unite characters? separate them? facilitate their privacy? make intimacy and communication difficult?

Does the author create such vivid and detailed visual descriptions that you imagine them or draw them?

What is the economic status of characters: rich, poor, destitute, moderately well off? How does this economic status determine what happens to the characters? How does their economic condition affect their actions and attitudes?

What cultural, religious, and political conditions are displayed and acted upon? 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 manufactured and constructed objects? How are the conditions of these objects and the outlook and behavior of the characters connected?

How important are sounds or silences? To what degree is music or other sound important in the development of character and action?

How important to plot and character are shapes, colors, times of day, seasons of the year, light and dark, conditions of vegetation, climate, and weather conditions?