Fictional Place

**Place and Atmosphere**

Like dialogue, setting must do more than one thing at once. It might illuminate the story’s symbolic underpinnings or reveal emotion or subtle aspects of a character’s life.

Place produces character. There is no Harry Potter without Hogwart’s. There is no Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind* without a plantation in the South. There is no Colonel Buendia in *100 Years of Solitude* without the town of Macondo.

* A great way to convey character is to describe a space that he or she created, such as the bedroom your character sleeps in.

A character can also rebel against his or her social/physical environment, and then conflict is born.

Setting contributes significantly to the tone of the story. Example:

“The house lay directly in line with a gap in the encircling hills to the northwest, and through this notch the prevailing winds poured, falling on the house with ferocity. The house shuddered as the wind punched it and slid along its sides like a released torrent from a broken dam. Week after week in winter it sank and rose, attacked and feinted. When she put her head down and went out to the truck it yanked at her clothing shot up her sleeves, whisked her hair into a raveled fright wig.

(Annie Proulx “What Kind of Furniture wout Jesus Pick?”)

**Harmony and Conflict between Character and Place**

Setting and characters of a story may be in harmony. Example:

“The bus to St. James’s—a Protestant Episcopal school for boys and girls—started its round at eight o’clock in the morning, from a corner of Park Avenue in the Sixties. The earliness of the hour meant that some of the parents who took their children there were sleepy and still without coffee, but with a clear sky the light struck the city at an extreme angle, the air was fresh, and it was an exceptionally cheerful time of day. It was the hour when cooks and door men walk dogs, and when porters scrub the lobby floor mats with soap and water.”

(John Cheever, “The Bus to St. James’s”)

Setting and characters may be in conflict. Example:

“He opened the door himself and started down the walk to get her going. The sky was a dying violet and the houses stood out darkly against it, bulbous liver-colored monstrosities of a uniform ugliness though no two were alike. Since this had been a fashionable neighborhood forty years ago, his mother persisted in thinking they did well to have and apartment in it. Each house had a narrow collar of dirt around it in which sat, usually, a grubby child. Julian walked with his hands in his pockets, his head down and thrust forward and his eyes glazed with the determination to make himself completely numb during the time he would be sacrificed to her pleasure.”

(Flannery O’Connor, “Everything that Rises Must Converge”)

**Place and Emotion**

We all have had the experience of seeing our inner emotional states reflected by the outer world. A thunderstorm viewed when in the throes of new love might seem to glitter and rumble in anticipation. The downpour would refresh and exhilarate, soaking to the roots of daffodils just breaking the soil. The very same storm would feel very different in the middle of a breakup: The raindrops would be thick and cold, almost greasy; the lightning would slash at the clouds; the thunder would growl. Torrents of rain would beat the delicate tulips to the ground.

Some writers worry that description of setting is boring for readers. But when a reader senses that setting is being used to reveal something important, there is no danger of it being “the stuff you skip.”

What do we skip?

We skip description of setting that seems to exist only as an excuse for flower inflated language: “The majestic mountains rose like great behemoths above the grassy plains and the plains themselves rolled away like a great and endless ocean.”

We skip forced and overly fastidious cataloguing of details: “The dead man’s pantry was stocked with canisters of oatmeal, Cream of Wheat, corn meal, flour, rice (brown and white), couscous, instant grits, and bottles of various cooking oils—corn, olive, canola, sunflower and vegetable.”

We also skip generic description that lacks significance or judgment: “Robert’s farm consisted of 227 acres of land, most of which was tillable, but seven acres of which was made up of inaccessible bottomland along a steep creek.”

**Symbolic and Suggestive Place**

Setting can be used to comment on the action, like it does in “Sea Fairies” or in O’Connor’s story “The Live You Save May Be Your Own.” At the end, Mr Shiflet has kicked an insulting hitchhiker out of his car. In his fury, he prays for the Lord to “break forth and wash the slime from this earth!” His prayer is apparently answered:

“After a few minutes there was a guffawing peal of thunder from behind and fantastic raindrops, like tin-can tops, crashed over the rear of Mr. Shiflet’s car. Very quickly he stepped on the gas and with his stump sticking out the window he raced the galloping shower to Mobile.”

More often setting is a suggestive backdrop that prepares the reader for the conflict that develops:

“A pine forest in the midafternoon. Two children follow an old man, dropping breadcrumbs, singing nursery tunes. Dense earthy greens seep into the darkening distance, flecked and streaked with filtered sunlight. Spots of red, violet, pale blue, gold, burn orange. The girl carries a basket for gathering flowers. The boy is occupied with the crumbs. Their song tells of God’s care for little ones.”

(Robert Coover, “The Gingerbread House”)

**Alien and Familiar Place**

Many poets and novelists have observed that the function of literature is to make the ordinary fresh and strange. F. Scott Fitzgerald, on the other hand advised that reporting extreme things as if they were ordinary was the starting point of fiction. Both are true, and especially of setting.

For example, read this description of LA by Tom Wolfe:

“Endless scorched boulevards lined with one-story stores, shops, bowling alleys, skating rinks, taco drive-ins, all of them shaped not like rectangles, but like trapezoids, from the way the roofs slant up from the back and the plate-glass fronts slant out as if they’re going to pitch forward on the sidewalk and throw up.”

At the same time, Ray Bradbury can make outer-space feel down-home:

“It was quiet in the deep morning of Mars, as quiet as a cool black well, with stars shining in the canal waters, and breathing in every room, the children curled with their spiders in closed hands.”