

## Setting for special effects

Many stories spring out of strong settings, but even those that don't use setting. In movies, music and landscape shots often appear as a backdrop for the action, especially to augment suspense, romance, and sometimes simply to dazzle you. The quality of photography – the selection of details, the angles of light and shadow – engage you most. In writing, we can achieve similar effects with words describing landscapes and cityscapes. So consider the following auxiliary uses of setting.

### Setting as quality of vision

In a dialogue scene, delicate imagery and metaphors may seem unnatural to your reader, so break away from the drama occasionally to give bits of the stage – the clanking of spoons on china. Here's your chance to show your skill and speed, to build your reader's confidence in your narrative vision. If your words render a setting keenly, the reader might be inclined to accept the psychological insights implied in the action and dialogue. With sharply observed bits of the world, you convince. A touch of extraordinary landscaping here and there may be enough to draw us into the story and to keep us in it.

In *The Easter Parade* Richard Yates grabs our attention in a printing room scene by engaging our perception:

Workmen hurried everywhere, all wearing crisp little squared-off hats made of intricately folded newspaper.

"Why do they wear those paper hats, Daddy?" Emily asked.

"Well, they'd probably tell you it's to keep the ink out of their hair, but I think they just wear 'em to look jaunty."

"What does *jaunty* mean?"

Shortly after the dialogue, Yates gives us this description:

They watched the curved, freshly cast metal page plates slide in on conveyor rollers to be clamped into place on the cylinders; then after a ringing of bells they watched the presses roll. The steel floor shuddered under their feet, which tickled, and the noise was so overwhelming that they couldn't talk: they could only look at each other and smile, and Emily covered her ears with her hands. White streaks of newsprint ran in every direction through the machines, and finished newspapers came riding out in neat, overlapped abundance.

There's a lot of dialogue before and after this moment; the narrative pause effectively grounds the scene. Yates makes us feel that we are there in the pressroom, with the ringing bells, shuddering floor, tickling feet. Although the novel is not about the newspaper business, but about two girls growing up unhappily, this scene establishes a strong backdrop. The daughters are impressed by their father, and they are ready to believe anything he tells them. Reading scenes like this, I believe, too, for I am there, I see. I see the father's work place. If I didn't his working for a newspaper would not mean much.

Here's an example of the quality of vision in Michael Ondaatje's novel, *The English Patient*. In the scene, a Bedouin healer treats a wounded man:

He crouched by the burning man. He made a skin cup with the soles of his feet and leaned back to pluck, without even looking, certain bottles. With the uncorking of each tiny bottle the perfumes fell out. There was an odour of the sea. The smell of rust. Indigo. Ink. River-mud arrow-wood formaldehyde paraffin ether. The tide of airs chaotic. There were screams of camels in the distance as they picked up the scents. He began to rub green-black paste onto the rib cage.

Ondaatje engages your senses. "The smell of rust": You smell and see. "Screams of camels": You hear and see. "... to rub green-black paste onto the rib cage": You see and feel. The texture of the sensations is so rich that you experience the scene before you can doubt it. This healer's handling his tools in his desert creates and sustains a scene – with substantiated characters in a setting. By substantiated I mean that we see the healer at work on his substances. Ondaatje does not merely tell, he shows.

### **Mood and atmosphere**

You can set the tone of a scene with your handling of the setting. This is especially important in horror stories, romance, and other "mood" genres.

Here's a mood-setter from a Gothic classic, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*:

One may guess the power of the north wind, blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few stunted firs at the end of the house; and by a range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun ... The narrow windows are deeply set in the wall, and the corners defended with large jutting stones ...

The narrator completes the image of the house's exterior with the following description:

A quantity of grotesque carving lavished over the front, and especially about the principal door, above which, among a wilderness of crumbling griffins, and shameless little boys, I detected the date "1500."

Then she gives us the interior:

Above the chimney were sundry villainous old guns, and a couple of horse-pistols, and, by way of ornament, three gaudily painted canisters disposed along its ledge. The floor was smooth, white stone: the chairs, high-backed, primitive

structures, painted green: one or two heavy black ones lurking in the shade. In an arch, under the dresser, reposed a huge, liver-coloured bitch pointer surrounded by a swarm of squealing puppies; and other dogs haunted other recesses.

The barren landscape, with stunted trees, thorns, and lack of sunshine, create a threatening mood. The interior of the old house, with its darkness, intensifies the sensation of threat. The smooth white stone adds coldness. Although the mere mention of all these details would create a threatening enough mood, the narrator does not stop there. She slants the verbs to distort the picture, to make it spooky. Chairs *lurk* in the shade. Dogs *haunt* recesses. Even the adjectives are slanted: *villainous* guns. She could have described pretty much the same thing with different verbs, "Chairs repose in the shade, and dogs roam in the recesses," and she would have relaxed the mood. She guides the reader with verbs, adjectives, and adverbs toward a single mood.

However, you don't always need to use a long description to be effective. For example, German writer Günter Grass, in his novel *Dog Years*, gives us a startling detail to establish a surreal atmosphere:

... where the dike burst in '55 near Kokotzko, not far from the Mennonite cemetery – weeks later the coffins were still hanging in the trees – he, on foot ...

This is the middle of a half-page-long sentence, and the humble placement of the image of coffins hanging in trees only sharpens its effect, to augment the theme of postwar Germany, where war deaths hover in the air. Grass does not need to point with slanted verbs and modifiers at this grotesque image. It does its own work – but isn't subtle, since it is a loud image. Grass' technique is not superior to Brontë's technique. They achieve different effects. Brontë's narrator, passionately involved in the story, explicitly works on the mood, which anticipates disaster. Grass' narrator, ironically detached, works his way out of a catastrophe, without needing to embellish it. Both methods are effective. When you choose a narrator emotionally involved in a drama, you might choose Brontë's method; when you want distance, choose Grass' cooler, more matter-of-fact method.

### **Foreshadowing**

You can use setting to steer the reader's expectations. Mood is a big part of foreshadowing. In the preceding example, Brontë foreshadows something frightening. The mention of villainous guns raises the suspicion that someone will be murdered. Darkness, griffins and haunting dogs forecast something on the verge of the supernatural. Later, she delivers on most of her promises.

In Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel," a Swede believes that Nebraska is the wild West, and that he will be killed there. He provokes a fight, wins it, goes to another bar to brag about it, and there he is killed. As we follow him, we encounter these images:

In front of the saloon an indomitable red light was burning, and the snowflakes were made blood-colour as they flew through the circumscribed territory of the lamp's shining.

The snowy night and the red flakes obviously foreshadow the bloodshed. In your writing, you may strive for a bit more subtlety, but it's probably

best to be somewhat obvious. If your foreshadowing is too subtle, there won't be any shadows to see.

### **Setting as alpha and omega**

In a screenplay, before every take you must indicate whether you are inside or outside, and the time of day. As a fiction writer, you may find these "establishing shots" tiresome, but you are not exempt from the obligation to establish where you are and what time of day the drama takes place. Of course, now and then it becomes boring to say, "in the evening." So you may try twilights, dusks, noons, teatimes, and some other times, but eventually, even these will run dry. So be it. You still need to write, "in the morning," just as in dialogue you must rely on one simple word, *said*. If you don't tell when your action takes place, it might appear to happen in some generic time or always, as a repeated action. Unless you want that effect, indicate the days and nights.

For an example of how to open a piece of fiction with a setting and orient us as to the time the action takes place, take a look at Dickens' brief opening of *Our Mutual Friend*:

In these times of ours, though concerning the exact year there is no need to be precise, a boat of dirty and disreputable appearance, with two figures in it, floated on the Thames between Southwark Bridge, which is of iron, and London Bridge, which is of stone, as an autumn evening was closing in.

The beginning draws us into a scene. We have a stage. At first we do not see the characters and the boat clearly, but enough is established for us to begin seeing and wondering.

In introducing the setting, it's important that you orient us, make it clear where we should be imaginatively. Here's how Guy de Maupassant opens "Mademoiselle Fifi." He places us in an interior, with a vantage point toward the exterior.

The Major Graf von Farsberg was reading ... with his booted feet on the beautiful marble fireplace, where his spurs had made two holes, which grew deeper every day, during the three months that he had been in the chateau of Urville.

A cup of coffee was steaming on a round marquetry table, stained with liqueurs, charred by cigars and hacked by the penknife of the victorious officer ... After throwing three or four enormous pieces of green wood on to the fire – for these gentlemen were gradually cutting down the park in order to keep themselves warm – he went to the window. The rain was descending in torrents, a regular Normandy rain, which ... formed a kind of wall with oblique stripes.

Although de Maupassant does not tell us directly that it's day-time, he makes it clear: He tells us several paragraphs later that the cup of coffee is Major's sixth cup since that morning and that the officer looked over the flooded park (which he could not see at night).

Both of these openings set up moods and expectations – first for some murky action; second, for whimsical deeds to kill the boredom of a rainy day.

You can also close a story with the impressions of a place, which, in cinematic terminology, can create a perfect fade-out. This is how James Joyce closes his "The Dead" after the main character realizes that without having passionately lived, he would fade away and die:

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bogg of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

What's more to say after this? If the story ended with a philosophical statement, the impact would be smaller. In this way you'll carry the images for days after you've read the story.

### **Setting as a character portrait**

It's hard to describe a person's face in a fresh and telling way. After all, in how many ways can you describe eyes and a nose, if you don't rely on metaphors? Not many. However, by describing a person through how he arranges his surroundings, you have quite a few options.

In *Dead Souls*, Nikolai Gogol uses objects in a living room to portray a character:

A lemon completely dried up, and no larger than a broken walnut-wood knob from an arm-chair; a wine glass covered with a letter, and containing some sort of liquid and three flies; ... a toothpick, which was quite yellow, and with which the owner had probably cleansed his teeth prior to the arrival of the French in Moscow ... From the middle of the ceiling hung a chandelier enveloped in a linen bag, to which the accumulated dust gave the aspect of a silkworm's cocoon with the worm in it ... It would have been impossible to affirm that a living being inhabited the apartment, had not an ancient, threadbare nightcap, which lay upon the table, borne witness to the fact.

The setting of the room gives us the character, a hoarder. This portrayal is augmented by other details:

For all of his domestic servants ... Pliushkin had but a single pair of boots, which was always to be found in the vestibule. Anyone who was summoned into the master's presence generally ran across the yard barefooted; but on entering the vestibule he pulled on the boots, and, thus arrayed, made his appearance in the room ... If anyone had glanced out of the window in the autumn, and especially when the first morning frosts were setting in, he could have

seen all the house-serfs taking such leaps as are hardly made on the stage by the most accomplished dancers.

How's that for describing a stingy character? Certainly better than a pile of adjectives. To adhere to the principle "show, don't tell," present people by what's around them.