

The Potential of Setting

by
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Good writing uses every available aspect of craft to contribute to the effectiveness of the work. The use of setting is a prime example of an aspect of the fictional work that too many writers ignore, or, at least, needlessly neglect. The best works of literature use setting as a tool to enhance every other aspect of the story: character, pace, tension and theme to name a few. The writer's decision as to what setting he or she will incorporate into the narrative is the first step in exploiting this powerful aspect of writing—as I have written before (in my definition of a story), *a story is a chronicling of events about a defined character experiencing a problem/dilemma in his or her environment and engaged in the process of finding some resolution*. The story's environment, therefore, is primarily represented by the story's setting. Remember, the character's environment helps to determine the character's dilemma, and so the story's setting helps to illustrate the details of the character's process of finding a solution to that dilemma.

As an example, I could set a story of a character in the New York subway system (should the character's dilemma be related in some way to that environment). On the face of it, describing the subterranean reality of a subway, the people, the sounds, the odors, the sensations, might be an initially promising place to situate a character; if, for instance, his problems arise from a terrible fear of being attacked while riding on one of the trains (the psychological after-effects of an actual attack experienced years before). Now, he must ride the subway for an adequate reason; possibly to keep an important job that he would otherwise lose if he let his fears get in the way of his daily commute. He has other problems; perhaps his wife is weary of his complaints, and threatens to leave him if he refuses to keep a job; perhaps he doesn't have enough money to purchase alternate transportation (if you're traveling from the boroughs to Manhattan you probably have no other choice). Yes, I would say that, in the case of this particular character, the subway is his psychological (and potentially physical) battleground.

How, then, might we better use the available setting to enhance the overall story?

Aside from setting being used as the physical aspect of conflict (the primary use of setting) the conscientious writer will subsequently use every description of setting as a reflection of what is happening

emotionally and psychologically at any given point in the story. The character's perception of his or her surroundings will be colored by his or her emotional and psychological reactions to those surroundings. The interplay of the two will create a greater cumulative effect.

As an example, let us take our character with the terrible fear of riding the subway. As he descends the steps into the tunnel he is confronted by multiple perceptions. Objectively, he may see the rusted guardrail bolted to the wall; he may count the narrow steps leading to the first platform; he may push through the indifferent crowd moving from platform to stairs and from stairs to platform; he may stand in the dim tunnel watching for the headlight of the A train; he may hear the din of the train's engine and watch the cars settle along the platform; he may watch the doors of the cars open, see the flood of human bodies moving in and out of the car, and then move to join them for the long ride into the darkness of the tunnels.

We may translate these details into a dramatic scene that reflects the character's state of mind as he struggles with his debilitating fears:

He never touched the iron rail leading down the stairs; the coldness of the metal too often woke an apprehension in his thoughts. He exhaled a deep breath at the top of the stairs and then began his descent into a close passageway papered on both sides by insipid advertisements. The light changed from bright daylight to the uncomfortable dimness of fluorescent lighting. The sounds changed too, from the distant collection of traffic sounds to the close, complaining noise of buried machines. His shoes left their steps in the echoes of collective footfalls. He raised his head and entered the line before the turnstile, certain that at any moment someone from either side of him would clutch his arm, or follow him through the labyrinth leading from one train to another. Once free of the turnstile he increased his pace, avoiding the critical gaze of uniformed city workers and the querulous expressions of his fellow passengers; the tiled walls on either side of him kept him from moving away from the crowd. When he reached the edge of the platform he stared down at the rails of the empty tunnel. The shadows rose sharply along the rails. He watched a small rat exploring the debris in the deeper shadows beneath the edge of the platform. He counted every breath that he drew before the sound of the train began reverberating through the empty space of the tunnel; in a moment, as he held his arms in front of his chest, the train's headlight erupted at the far end of the tunnel and expanded in the shadows like a small nova. Then the train ground noisily toward the platform, a silvery behemoth that momentarily would consume him. Can I stand this one more time? he thought. Can I possibly stand this?

How a writer describes the setting of a story depends on several factors: the first is viewpoint. From what viewpoint is the story being told? Is the story being told from a single character's viewpoint, or multiple viewpoints? Also, is the viewpoint told from the first person, second person or third person perspective? Is the viewpoint objective (ala Hemingway) or subjective (ala everyone else)? Once these kinds of questions are answered in the writer's mind, then he or she may utilize the full potential of setting without too much heartache.

From a single character viewpoint (or from alternating character viewpoints) setting becomes enhanced when that setting is perceived through that character's senses.

This is an important principle to remember, since it very easy for the writer to slip out of character and begin describing things in a manner outside of the viewpoint character's immediate level of perception. Consider the above example: the viewpoint character perceives the same physical setting as every other person accessing the subway. But it is that character's *perception of the setting* that enhances the quality of the story. The character's mindset at the moment that he is descending the subway steps is tense; he expects something negative to happen to him and so what he sees as he makes his way through the passageways is confrontational. The walls are papered by 'insipid' advertisements, the noises of the machines are 'complaining', the shadows rise sharply, the city workers have 'critical' gazes and his fellow passengers have 'querulous' expressions. Even the headlight of the train 'erupts' at the end of the tunnel. The train itself is a silvery behemoth that 'momentarily would consume him'.

It is important to marry a character's emotional and psychological state to his or her environment, or setting. If the story's setting is to serve a noble purpose it should reflect the state of mind of the viewpoint character perceiving it—however, caution should be taken in ascribing emotional states to *inanimate objects*. Remember, the viewpoint character is experiencing the feeling, not the objects within the setting. This is a subtle difference, but an essential one, and one that certainly means the difference between meaningful prose and purple prose of the most aggravating nature. Take the sentence from our example: *The sounds changed too, from the distant collection of traffic sounds to the close, complaining noise of buried machines*. Now, the machines themselves are not complaining. This would give them an animation that would pretty much keep *everyone* out of the subways. It is actually the viewpoint character's *perception* of the sounds that define them as complaining. As I said, it is a subtle difference, and the difference between tone-deaf writing and writing in tune. If I were to write *the machines in the subway complained noisily* I would be stepping into the realm of fantasy or, hopefully, I would be writing about a character experiencing a psychotic episode. A proliferation of this kind of character perception creates a hodgepodge of descriptions that completely negate the reality of the setting.

The purest objective assessment of a story's setting still requires discernment on the part of the writer as to what to include in the character's world. Ernest Hemingway was a master at minimalist description. Much of his work disdained ever having to describe a character's emotional state as reflected by his or her setting. Still, the bare essentials of the settings of his stories were carefully chosen to represent the focus of the viewpoint characters. In the best of his work, the settings of his stories stood as symbols for the state of the characters involved. The characters did not overtly evaluate them; still they perfectly reflected the character's psychological state. Hemingway produced his weakest writing, I believe, when he neglected this relationship within his own work.

Even a completely omniscient viewpoint needs to be emotionally and psychologically consistent. I suppose, in this sense, even God would have a consistent emotional viewpoint. Consistency is the key.

But which comes first—the story, or the setting?

Preferably, the story will dictate the setting and vice versa. All things within a piece of fiction work together to produce the story's

cumulative effect on the reader. In our example, the subway system is the focal point of both the conflict of the story and the point of origin for the overriding problem. The setting of a story should never exist as simple color. Some aspect of the setting should go toward explaining the character's dilemma, as well as intensify the conflict experienced by the character within that setting. If the writer can arbitrarily switch the characters and their dilemmas from one setting to another, then the organic connection between character dilemma and setting is a weak one. Too many times a fictional work will diminish its strength by providing stock settings to support stock dilemmas. The haunted house scenario works well to illustrate this principle. A collection of characters is terrorized in a haunted house. All right, but why is the house haunted and what relationship do the characters have to the house? What are the characters doing there? How does the haunting relate to the characters' motivation for being there? Too often the 'haunted house' is prefabricated just to provide cheap thrills for the reader. When character motivation fails grow organically from the circumstances of setting (re: environment) then the process of the story is illogical and untrue.

Inconsistencies in the emotional and psychological reactions of characters to their environments produce uneven work. A character can be delineated by that character's thoughts, dialogue, background and reaction to the people and places surrounding him. When you find yourself asking the question of which comes first, the character, the problem or the setting, I hope that you will answer that all three come together, or are better designed as the story develops in the writer's mind to work in harmony with one another to produce an organic fiction.