

# Setting



## DEFINITION

What is setting? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Setting is *where* and *when* a story or scene takes place. The *where* can be a real place like the city of New York, or it can be an imagined location, like Middle Earth in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Similarly, the *when* can be a real time period (past or present) or imagined (the future). Other aspects that determine a setting include landscape, architecture, time of day, social context, and weather. For example, the setting of Jane Austen's [Pride and Prejudice](#) is the upper-middle class countryside of 19th century England, while the setting of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* is a park bench in New York's Central Park.

Some additional key details about setting:

- Setting is sometimes also called "the scene" or "sense of place."
- Far from being just a "backdrop" for the story, the setting of a piece of literature often shapes the story's main events and motivates the characters to act as they do.
- Many works of literature have multiple settings—whether that means moving between the interior and exterior of the same house, different countries, or different centuries. It is important to note how plot developments and character developments correspond to changes in the setting.

## Understanding Setting

Setting is an essential component of literature, and it's one of the first things a writer considers when he or she invents a story. It not only influences a story's characters and events, but also enhances the reader's ability to imagine those characters and events. In other words, setting the scene lets the reader know what type of literary world he or she is entering, so that he or she can get "grounded" and experience it more fully. But well-developed settings don't necessarily need to be richly detailed. Consider Samuel Beckett's play [Waiting for Godot](#). To set the scene, Beckett writes only two lines:

*A country road. A tree.  
Evening.*

The playwright's spare description of setting isn't underdeveloped—rather, it's quite carefully considered. In this case, Beckett chooses to create a sense of "nowhere" or "no-place" because he feels this will best complement the absurd, existentialist mood of his play. This sense of being "nowhere in particular" is just as effective and important to *Waiting for Godot* as a highly specific description can be to a work of historical fiction.

## Fictional and Non-Fictional Settings

Settings can be either imagined or real. It's worth noting that the categories of "imaginary" and "real" don't necessarily correspond to fictional and non-fictional works, respectively—a fictional story can be set in a *real* location, such as Alabama, New York, or Paris. In fact, when an author is very familiar in real life with the setting of his or her story, he or she can use that familiarity to craft a convincing and detailed literary world.

James Joyce is one example of a fiction-writer who worked in an innovative way with non-fictional settings. Joyce grew up in Dublin, and all his most famous works are set in the city. Scholars and fans who attempt to retrace the steps of his characters have found that, with very few exceptions, his descriptions of the city's geography are remarkably accurate to the last detail. In the example section below, we've included an excerpt from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to show how Joyce's descriptions of Dublin's landscape mirror his characters' shifting emotions.

## Setting and Exposition

The most important components of setting, such as the overarching time period and location in which a piece of literature takes place, are usually introduced in the [exposition](#) of a text (which is often at its beginning). However, it's wise *not* to tune out once you know the general *where* and *when* of a narrative, since setting often shifts. Observing changes in the time of day, the seasons, the weather, the geography and the landscape throughout any given story will enrich your understanding of its characters, their relationships to place, as well as their social and national identities.

## Aspects of Setting

The setting of a story can involve a number of elements:

- **The physical location:** The physical realities of where the story takes place, including geography, landscape, and other factors (urban or rural; domestic or wild; inside or out; on earth or in space).
- **Time:** When does the story take place? In the past, the future, the present? What are the particular details of that time.
- **The social milieu:** Setting is not *just* about the physical aspects. It's also about the social world. Is the setting wealthy or poor? Homogenous or diverse? Are things improving or getting worse?
- **Change:** Setting can also be affected by how it changes, either over time (the changing seasons or the construction of a house or town or city), or suddenly (a terrible storm). The changes that do (or don't) affect a setting are as important as the setting itself.

The more specific an author can be with their setting, the more real the story will feel and the more the setting will start to "reach out" and

affect the characters and their actions, in the same way the world around living people affects how they act and think.



## EXAMPLES

In the sections that follow, we give some examples of setting and their impact in various works of literature and film.

### Setting in Literature

#### Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

*Pride and Prejudice* takes place in 19th century rural England. The relationship between the novel's protagonist (Elizabeth Bennet) and her wealthy suitor (Mr. Darcy) is central to Austen's investigation of class and character. In the example below, Elizabeth pays her first visit to Darcy's estate—Pemberly—after having rejected his marriage proposal, in part because she perceives him as snobbish and stuck-up:

Elizabeth, as they drove along, watched for the first appearance of Pemberly Woods with some perturbation; and when at length they turned in at the lodge, her spirits were in a high flutter.

The park was very large, and contained great variety of ground. They entered it in one of its lowest points, and drove for some time through a beautiful wood, stretching over a wide extent.

Elizabeth's mind was too full for conversation, but she saw and admired every remarkable spot and point of view. They gradually ascended for half a mile, and then found themselves at the top of a considerable eminence, where the wood ceased, and the eye was instantly caught by Pemberley House, situated on the opposite side of a valley, into which the road, with some abruptness, wound. It was a large, handsome, stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills;—and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance. Its banks were neither formal, nor falsely adorned. Elizabeth was delighted. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste. They were all of them warm in their admiration; and at that moment she felt that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!

Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley is a turning point in her relationship to Darcy. When they encounter Darcy on the estate, Elizabeth finds him to be greatly "altered," and not at all uptight as she once thought: he greets her with warmth and is polite to her relatives, even though they are from a lower social class than Darcy. In short, Darcy behaves with the same lack of pretension and "natural" grace that Pemberley

possesses. Austen uses her description of Darcy's setting—his *home*—to shed light on his true character.

#### Setting in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce chronicles the coming-of-age of Stephen Daedalus, an aspiring young writer growing up in Dublin. Stephen is Joyce's literary alter ego—like Joyce, Stephen lives in Dublin and knows the city like the back of his hand. Joyce draws upon his extensive knowledge of Dublin to create an urban setting in his novels that is intensely detailed and often reflective of his characters' emotions. In the example below, Stephen walks from his house in a poor neighborhood to Trinity College. On his way, he thinks about his favorite writers Newman, Cabalcanti, and Ibsen to distract himself from the poverty around him:

The lane behind the terrace was waterlogged and as he went down it slowly, choosing his steps amid heaps of wet rubbish, he heard a mad nun screeching in the nuns' madhouse beyond the wall.

—Jesus! O Jesus! Jesus!

He shook the sound out of his ears by an angry toss of his head and hurried on, stumbling through the mouldering offal, his heart already bitten by an ache of loathing and bitterness...but, as he walked down the avenue and felt the grey morning light falling about him through the dripping trees and smelt the strange wild smell of the wet leaves and bark, his soul was loosed of her miseries...His morning walk across the city had begun, and he foreknew that as he passed the slob lands of Fairview he would think of the cloistral silver veined prose of Newman, that as he walked along the North Strand Road, glancing idly at the windows of the provision shops, he would recall the dark humor of Guido Cavalcanti and smile, that as he went by Baird's stonecutting works in Talbot Place the spirit of Ibsen would blow through him like a keen wind, a spirit of wayward boyish beauty...

Here, Joyce describes the "waterlogged lane" and "mouldering offal" around Stephen's home to show that the Daedalus family lives in poverty, which Stephen longs to escape. By providing detailed descriptions of the grim setting and *pairing* them with glimpses into Stephen's lofty imagination, Joyce is able to show the reader how Stephen creates a parallel, inner world for himself in order to escape his difficult circumstances.

#### Setting in Ben Lerner's *10:04*

In his novel *10:04*, Lerner tells the story of a writer living in New York city who has agreed to donate his sperm to his best friend, Alex, so that she can have a child. Alex and the narrator aren't romantically involved, and their relationship remains friendly throughout the novel. However, the narrator is going through a turbulent time in his life and feels conflicted about "coconstructing a child" with her. Lerner's narrator hides out in his apartment through two hurricanes,

and the extreme weather stirs up his inner turmoil. In the following example, Alex and the narrator have dinner then watch a movie while taking shelter together in her apartment:

It was only when we sat down to eat by the light—even though we still had power—of some votive candles Alex had discovered that the danger and magnitude of the storm felt real to us, maybe because our meal had the feel of a last supper, maybe because eating together produced a sufficient sense of a household against which we could measure the threat...The food tasted better than it was, since it might be the best we'd have for a while...Was I drinking quickly in part because I felt a little awkward about staying the night at Alex's, something I'd done countless times before? I was just uneasy about the storm, I said to myself... I looked through some discs and put on *Back to the Future*... I turned to Alex and watched the colors from the movie flicker on her sleeping body, noted the gold necklace she always wore against her collarbone. I tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear and then let my hand trail down her face and neck and brush across her breast and stomach in one slow motion I halfheartedly attempted to convince myself was incidental...

The setting of this passage (i.e., the storm) isn't just a "backdrop" for the scene; it's the reason that the narrator finds himself alone in a dark apartment with his sleeping friend. In this sense, the setting plays a significant role in what happens. The storm briefly exposes a hidden layer of the relationship between Alex and the narrator, changing his perception of their intimacy and providing an opportunity for the narrator to develop that intimacy further.

### Setting in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

In the prologue of [\*Romeo and Juliet\*](#), Shakespeare warns the audience that the tragic story they're about to hear is largely a consequence of the play's setting:

Two households, both alike in dignity,  
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,  
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,  
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.  
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes  
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;  
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows  
Do with their death bury their parents' strife.  
The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,  
And the continuance of their parents' rage,  
Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,  
Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;  
The which if you with patient ears attend,  
What here shall miss, our toil strive to mend.

Here, Shakespeare not only alerts the reader to the geographic setting of the play (Verona, Italy), but also describes the social element of the story's setting: by beginning with "two households, both alike in dignity" Shakespeare indicates that the two families in question—Capulet and Montague—share the same high social status. In doing so, Shakespeare suggests that *Romeo and Juliet* isn't just a love story, but a political story as well.

### Setting in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*

[\*The Glass Menagerie\*](#) takes place in the Wingfield family's apartment in a St. Louis tenement building. The play's main character, Tom Wingfield, narrates the events of the play from the apartment's fire escape, telling the story of his impoverished family, whom he works hard to support and also longs to escape. In the following passage, Williams establishes the setting of the play:

The Wingfield apartment is in the rear of the building, one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers of lower middle-class population and are symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism.

The apartment faces an alley and is entered by a fire escape, the structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation. The fire escape is part of what we see—that is, the landing of it and the steps descending from it.

As Williams explicitly states, the fire escape symbolizes Tom's wish to escape poverty and the responsibility of caring for his family. While the audience may not perceive the symbolic importance of the fire escape, Williams intentionally makes it central to the stage design as a way of highlighting the theme of escape.

### Setting in Movies

#### Setting in *August, Osage County*

*August, Osage County* is a film adaptation of a play by Tracy Letts. The title immediately divulges the setting of the film, which takes place in the Weston family home outside Pawhuska, Osage County, Oklahoma in August.

Letts' story is a black comedy about a family in shambles. Violet Weston, a drug-addicted cancer patient, hosts her relatives in her Osage County home, where they've all congregated in an effort to support her after her husband, Beverly, commits suicide. The setting—Violet's home—is like a petri dish, causing all of the secret tensions between the assembled family members to surface in just a few weeks. In this sense, the play's title isn't just the backdrop for the

story; Letts clearly felt the setting was important enough to the narrative that she used the setting as her title.

### Setting in *Synecdoche, New York*

In *Synecdoche, New York*, director Charlie Kaufman tells the story of theater director Caden Cotard. Cotard lives in Schenectady, a town that actually exists in upstate New York, until his wife and daughter leave him and his health takes a downward turn. He moves to New York City where he embarks on an ambitious dramatic project: building a mock version of NYC in an enormous old warehouse, and instructing actors to live out their lives, simply playing themselves, in the constructed city.

As the fictional New York that Cotard builds in his downtown warehouse becomes increasingly complex, he starts to relive and process his deteriorating personal life within its confines. Cotard constantly makes additions to the miniature city, which grows more elaborate throughout the movie, reflecting his continued inability to come to terms with what's happened to his personal life and family. Therefore, in Kaufman's film, the movie's setting reflects the protagonist's interior life.



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

As the writer Eudora Welty once said, "Every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else... Fiction depends for its life on place. Place is the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of, What happened? Who's here? Who's coming?" Accordingly, writers take great care in deciding on and describing the settings of their works, in order to:

- **Reflect or emphasize certain character traits belonging to people who inhabit certain settings.** For example, in the *Pride and Prejudice* quotation above, Austen's descriptions of Mr. Darcy's graciousness and of his estate's natural beauty mirror one another.
- **Give physical form to a theme that runs throughout the narrative.** For example, the fire escape in *The Glass Menagerie* quotation above becomes a physical symbol of Tom Wingfield's desire to escape his surroundings.

- **Indicate the social and economic statuses of their characters, as well as how those characters do or do not conform to those statuses.** In the *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* quotation, Joyce's description of Stephen's neighborhood emphasizes his family's poverty. However, Joyce's description of Stephens's thoughts as he passes through the neighborhood shows that Stephen uses his love for literature to insulate himself from poverty.
- **Create a source of pressure or stress that causes characters to act in a certain way.** For instance, in *10.04*, the storm brings out the narrator's suppressed attraction to his friend and gives him an excuse to act on it. Similarly, the tenement house in *The Glass Menagerie* creates an environment of desperation that drives the main characters' behavior.



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Setting](#): A brief explanation of literary settings.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Setting](#): A basic definition and etymology of setting—it comes from the Old English word *settan* meaning "to put in one place, fix firmly."
- A list of the [50 Coolest Fictional Cities](#).
- From Atlas Obscura, [The Obsessively Detailed Map of American Literature's Most Epic Road Trips](#)
- Elizabeth Bennet's [visit to Pemberly](#) in the 1995 BBC film version of *Pride and Prejudice*.

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Scopa, Sally. "Setting." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

### Chicago Manual

Scopa, Sally. "Setting." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/setting>.