

Writing About Setting

Using Sinclair Ross' "The Lamp at Noon"

Definition

Setting is the **time** and **place** of a story. The elements include descriptions of place, the political and cultural time, and objects that the characters know and own. (See notes on Plot)

Purposes or Uses

Setting can be used to

- ground the reader
(The story takes place in an isolated farmhouse on the prairies during the Depression.)
- reveal /highlight character & action
(Paul and Ellen react to the storm differently.)
- establish mood (atmosphere)
(The dust creates an atmosphere of darkness, despair, and suffocation.)
- be symbolic.
(The farmhouse represents a cage to Ellen, not security.)



To discover the actual purpose of the setting of a short story, it is important to ask a variety of questions. The list that follows will help you discover a setting's purpose.

Questions to Ask

General questions to ask:

1. Where and when does the story take place? What are the cultural, religious, and political conditions of the era?
2. How detailed are the visual descriptions? What visual imagery is used? (Consider colour, shapes, time of day/night, clouds, storms, shadows, seasons, the landscape, etc.).
3. How important are sounds or silences; references to smell and/or taste and/or touch?
4. What is the state of the characters' home, office, furniture, objects, animals, etc.?
5. Do any objects cause inspiration, difficulty, or conflict (e.g., a bridge, a telegram, a walking stick, a letter, a hair ribbon, a watch, a dead bird, a storm, etc.)?
6. Are there multiple places where the story takes place? What is the purpose of each?



Questions to Discover Specific Ideas

1. Setting and Character
 - a. To what degree does the setting influence/reveal/reflect the characters?
 - b. Are they happy or unhappy where they live?
 - c. Do they get into discussions/arguments about their home environment?

Do they want to stay or leave?

- d. Do the economic, religious, or ethnic aspects of their setting make the characters undergo changes?

2. Setting and Action

- a. Is the setting essential to the action of the characters?
- b. Does the setting serve as part of the action (hidden vs public places; seasonal conditions such as searing heat or numbing cold; a farm house vs the stable; etc.)?
- c. How do objects, such as money or property, affect the motivation of the characters?

3. Setting and Atmosphere

- a. How do descriptive words paint verbal pictures and evoke moods through references to colours, shapes, sounds, smells, touches, or tastes?
- b. Does the setting establish a feeling of joy, hopelessness, fear, warmth, etc.?
- c. What connection do you find between the work's atmosphere and theme?

4. Setting, Symbol and Irony

- a. Are any aspects of the setting symbolic, that is, do they stand for something else?
- b. What do the symbols contribute to developing character, plot and/or theme?
- c. Does the setting establish expectations that are the opposite of what occurs?

Sample Paragraphs

Read each of the following sample paragraphs and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each.

The setting in "The Lamp at Noon" by Sinclair Ross takes place on the prairies during the Depression. There is a strong wind storm which has been going on for three days and it causes Ellen to be caged up in the house with her baby, while her husband, Paul, spends most of his time in the stable to get away from his wife's complaints. The wind storm scares Ellen and makes the baby cry. As a result Ellen wants to leave the farm and go into the city where she could work less hard and have some luxuries. (Here she has no luxuries and barely enough to eat and wear.) Paul, on the other hand, wants to stay. He feels the storm is only a temporary setback and feels once it is over they will make the farm a success. So they fight over whether to stay or go. Finally, near the end of the storm Ellen freaks out and takes the baby and runs out into the storm. The baby suffocates from her holding him too close to prevent the dust from killing him. Paul finds them and carries them back to the farmhouse. Ellen has gone crazy and doesn't realize the baby is dead; in fact, she sees a red sky and thinks the next day "will be fine." So the setting here is important because without the wind storm and the isolation of the farm house Ellen wouldn't have gone crazy and run away, thus killing her baby.

In “The Lamp at Noon” Sinclair Ross uses the setting of a farm house, a stable, and several objects to enhance the conflict between a farm wife and her husband over life style. The story takes place during the Depression on the third day of a violent wind storm and concerns Paul and Ellen, a young couple with a baby, who had been struggling for five years to make a decent living farming. The baby lies in “a homemade crib”; Ellen wears “scuffed old slippers” and Paul wears cowhide shoes “hard as boards” causing his feet to be “so calloused” that he doesn’t “feel them anymore.” Ellen feels defeated by the harsh environment and wishes to abandon the farm for a life in the city. “I wouldn’t mind the work or the skimping if there was something to look forward to. It’s the hopelessness-going on-watching the land blow away—Look at the sky-what’s happening. Are you blind? Thistles and tumbleweeds-it’s a desert. You won’t have a straw this fall. You won’t be able to feed a cow or a chicken. Please, Paul, say we’ll go away-” Paul, however, is determined to keep trying, feeling that the land will “come back. There’s good wheat in it yet.” His pride won’t allow him to admit defeat and leave the farm to work in Ellen’s father’s store. Therefore, to escape from his wife and the daily arguments with her that go on “Week in and week out” Paul finds “a deep hollow calm within” in the stable with the bony, thin livestock. It is here that he imagines her flight, denies its possibility, and resolves to prove her wrong for he “out of the wilderness, would make a farm and home again.” Meanwhile, Ellen remains “caged” in the two-room farmhouse, desperate for but not receiving solace from her husband until, ironically, she turns to her child “to feel the comfort of his little body in her arms”, runs away with him near the end of the storm in an attempt to save him, and, tragically, kills him by holding him too close to her. The importance here is that the storm did not directly kill the baby; he died from her desperate action of clutching him close to her in an attempt to seek the comfort and solace that her husband could not concede to give. In the end they both lost their child; Ellen lost her sanity and Paul lost his dream. The farm itself, appropriately, reflected all the loss: “suddenly the fields before him struck his eyes to comprehension. They lay black, naked. Beaten and mounded smooth with dust as if a sea in gentle swell had turned to stone.”

Quick Scale: Grade 10 Writing About Literature

This Quick Scale is a summary of the Rating Scale that follows. Writing is usually required to be carefully revised, edited, and proofread.

Aspect	Not Yet Within Expectations	Meets Expectations (Minimal Level)	Fully Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
<i>SNAPSHOT</i>	<i>The writing features problems with style, form, and mechanics that make it difficult to determine the purpose and meaning. Reflects little knowledge of literary topic and writing conventions and techniques.</i>	<i>The writing is generally clear, with a beginning, middle, and end. Development may seem uneven. The writer has difficulty controlling the form and style. Tends to talk about literary element rather than identify it.</i>	<i>The writing is clear and carefully developed, with some sense of audience and purpose. Some variety and engaging features. May overexplain in places, telling rather than showing."</i>	<i>The writing creates an impact, with a sense of vitality, economy, and finesse. Features some complex, engaging ideas, language, structures, and techniques. Relies on "showing," not telling.</i>
MEANING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sense of audience • understanding of the topic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plot • character • theme • point of view • irony • literary devices • development • support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • little sense of audience or purpose (unfocused) • may be too short with few examples and details • no clear thesis statement • inadequate material and understanding of literary topic • details, examples, or quotes not clearly linked to topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • some sense of audience; little impact • includes basic understanding of literary element • easy-to-follow development • simple details, examples, or quotes sometimes linked to support topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sense of audience; some impact • clear, focused thesis statement • clearly and logically developed demonstrating good understanding of topic • relevant details and examples support topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strong sense of audience; engaging • clear if not provocative thesis; strong sense of direction • efficiently developed around relatively mature understanding of elements of literature; attempts to interpret • well-chosen details, examples, and quotations
STYLE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • voice and tone • syntax • word choice • techniques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • little awareness of audience • simple sentences and coordination; limited range • basic vocabulary; may make errors; repetitive as well as colloquial • immature style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • voice and tone may be inconsistent • some sentence variety; often problems with subordination • some variety in word choice; not concise • direct, conversational; difficulty expressing abstract ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • appropriate voice and tone • varies sentences • varied word choice; some complex vocabulary • some risk-taking to create effects; uses a variety of stylistic or rhetorical techniques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • creates and sustains effective voice and tone; may use humour or irony • syntactic maturity • effective, economical word choice • takes risks, often showing originality and inventiveness
FORM <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • beginning • structure and sequence • transitions • paragraphing • ending 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • beginning unclear • sequencing is often confusing • few transitions; may seem disjointed • paragraphing illogical or missing • weak ending 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organization adequate but ineffective • connections among ideas often unclear • transitions awkward; paragraphs not well developed • conclusions often short or formulaic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organization carefully and logically structure • transitions make connections clear • competently developed paragraphing • explicit, logical conclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • structure appears natural and spontaneous • well-chosen transitions create unity • effective paragraphing creates continuity • ending has some "punch"
CONVENTIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • spelling • sentence structure and punctuation • usage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • frequent noticeable errors in basic sentence structure, spelling, and usage that distract the reader and may interfere with meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • noticeable errors that may cause the reader to pause or reread; often surface errors could be fixed by careful proofreading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • few errors; these do not affect meaning; appears to have been carefully edited and proofread 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • few errors; these do not distract the reader (may only be noticeable when the reader looks for them)