

Setting refers to the "where" and the "when" of a literary work, the particular place and time and social environment that frame the characters. Setting provides the context of the story, the world in which it occurs and to which it takes the reader. Setting can also be or become more than a physical background for a story, helping us to understand the behaviour of the characters and the significance of their actions. "The Lottery" is set in an ordinary town but an unspecified time and place, thus giving it a timeless quality and a sense that people have been performing the ritual of the lottery for a very long time. This in turn emphasizes the mindless inertia arising from group thinking - it's tradition, it's always been done this way so don't question it, just do it no matter how senseless it may be - and creates horror in readers who see the senselessness of it all.

By providing the context of the world in which a story occurs, setting may have important effects on the characters. It makes them what they are, just as we are affected by where and when we live, where we grow up, and where we work. Through place, or time, or social environment, the setting may set boundaries, limiting what a character can do or strive for or aspire toward. It may set up challenges, testing the characters and creating or limiting their opportunities. In any case, it establishes the world in which the characters act, and so must be paid attention to.

Setting also can affect the reader. A writer's description of setting is meant to place the characters in a situation which the reader can see and sense, so the writer may use the setting to establish a particular "feel" to the story - i.e., its tone or atmosphere or mood. Or, he/she may use it to produce a particular emotional response in the reader or to indicate his/her attitude toward the story or the characters. For example, notice the difference in feel between these two potential "settings" and in your response to each:

It was a warm and sunny day.

The morning was clear and sparkingly sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day.

What did you notice? As you probably could tell, the first version is mostly neutral in feel and tone and time of day, so it would not cause a reader to focus on setting very much, whereas the second version would establish a much more definite (and pleasant) mood and atmosphere (as well as time of year). Depending on what effect is wanted, a writer might use either approach.

Handled skilfully, description of setting may even set up the tensions or conflicts of a story by creating an apparent picture or mood and then introducing a discordant element or shifting the "feel" in some way. Here's an illustration of this kind of effect from Jack London's story "All Gold Canyon":

It was the green heart of the canyon, where the walls swerved back from the rigid plan and relieved their harshness of line by making a little sheltered nook and filling it to the brim with sweetness and roundness and softness. Here all things rested. Even the narrow stream ceased its turbulent downrush long enough to form a quiet pool. Knee-deep in the water, with drooping head and half-shut eyes, drowsed a red-coated, many-antlered buck....There was not a sigh of wind. The air was drowsy....An occasional butterfly drifted in and out through the patches of light and shade. And from all about rose the low and sleepy hum of mountain bees.... [The buck] dozed knee-deep in the cool, shaded pool. There seemed no flies to vex him and he was languid with rest....

But there came a time when the buck's ears lifted and tensed with swift eagerness for sound. His head was turned down the canyon. His sensitive, quivering nostrils scented the air....A sound of scrambling...and the spirit of the place fled away on the heels of the red-coated buck.

The setting, then, may shape the story by acting as a mirror of mood or emotions, or by moulding characters. It also may work to test or challenge the characters, provide an escape for readers through imaginary settings, and even isolate characters in an alien place or time. You will see these different effects in the stories we read.
