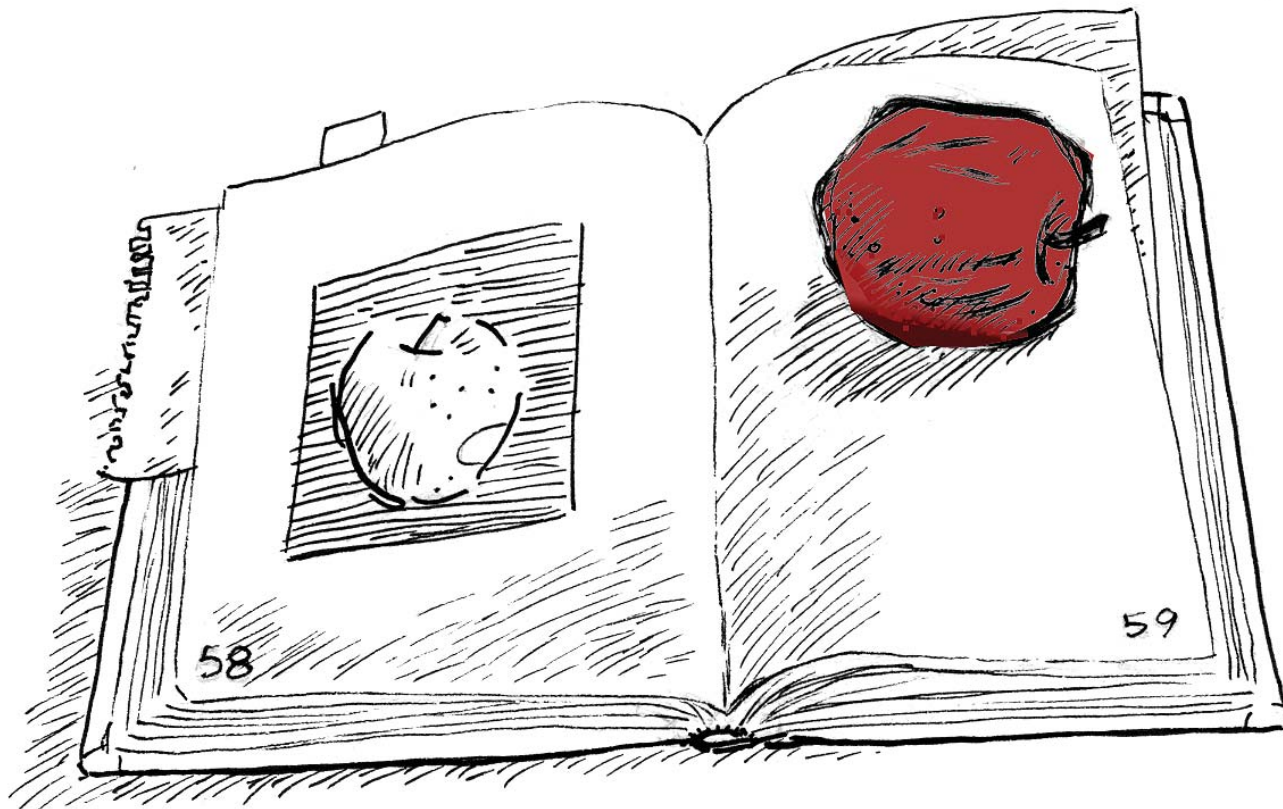


# Atmospheric Setting

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By definition **setting** establishes a story's time, place and social environment.

Setting is also a plot device which consciously and subconsciously affect the mood of the reader as well as the plot.

A **plot device** motivates the plot:

setting, type of narration, epiphany moment, unresolved conclusion, *etc.*

A **literary device** is a component which makes up a story:

metaphor, symbol, allusion, *etc.*

Two of the approaching stories we will discuss in upcoming weeks deal heavy with **setting** as major influences on the text:

William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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In some cases setting can become a character in itself. The classic example, “The House of Usher” by Edgar Allan Poe, displays how the location of the plot within a centuries old mansion in Europe acts as a controlling aspect of the Usher family, adding conflict and drama to the main character Roderick and his sister.

In this story, the unnamed narrator takes the reader through a surreal landscape of depression, phobias, and insecurities all from the opening passages. Poe wants the reader to feel the same heavy melancholy that the characters experience.

It opens immediately with a harsh reality, establishing a long-winded sentence just to promote mood.

Notice the opening sentence’s structure and the ending image.

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During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was; but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveler upon opium—the bitter lapse into every-day life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought

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which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime.

What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled luster by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodeled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows (231).

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Fall of the House of Usher." *Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Vintage Books, 1975.

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To take this concept up another notch: **seasons** and actual **timing of events** within a story play crucial roles in plot development.

An author will use seasons to promote a cultural expectation. More often than not, winter will be used to promote heightened conflict in dramas.

- Typically winter is seen as a season of death and coldness.
- Summer on the other hand is typically seen as a time of idleness, laziness, soul searching, and relaxation.
- Spring is the time for rejuvenation of spirit or sex.
- Fall is the time of death or harvest.

Some writers make these symbols operate in an obvious, allegorical manner.

Some use hidden references to the time of year for subtle readings.

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The element of Time is also crucial. Be sure to note the hour of the day in relation to the plot. Oftentimes authors will utilize cultural impressions on activities in the stories:

- Twilight or evening hours often indicates murder, a death scene.

Additionally characters may appear lost or confused, wandering in the dark.

- Early morning hours often display birth or construction of new ideas.

Fresh attitudes or fresh approaches to problems can be addressed.

Of course, every writer puts a new spin on such ideas. If writing was predictable, it would be static and boring. Literature changes and restructures itself for every generation. There is no predictable strategy for these concepts.

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However, when you read, pay attention to how writers present scenes and how they explore expectations. You can notice a pattern developing which is useful for the analytical process.

Besides utilizing settings, seasons, and timing of day to enhance mood, weather likewise plays into plot enhancement.

Thomas Foster, author of *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* states:

Rain can be more mysterious, murkier more isolating than most other weather conditions [...] Then there is the misery factor [...] rain has a higher wretchedness quotient than almost any other element of our environment [...] And finally there is the democratic element.

Rain falls on the just and the unjust alike (76).



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Weather conditions enhance mood.

- Depending how a writer spins the sequence of events, rain can represent either a restorative, cleansing, rejuvenating, or even a baptismal element.
- However, just as standing in the rain can result in pneumonia and cause death, writers may want to expose a negative mood from a heavy downpour.

Thunderstorms with heavy gale-force winds, producing hail and flooding, can suggest negative consequences, negative moods regarding a character.

- A character who enters a scene in the dead of night or in the middle of a storm will often promote an energy of chaotic change or even catastrophe.
- Fog as well can show a character as mysterious or confused.

Ultimately physical forces in nature promote a character's mental state of being as well as promote the mood of a story.

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It is important to keep in mind everything discussed so far in this presentation is a generalization of creativity. *To reinforce a statement made earlier:*

- If the act of writing was predictable, the end results would be static and boring.
- Literature changes and restructures itself for every generation.
- There is no predictable strategy for these concepts.

The Modernist movement serves as a strong example. It began in the early Twentieth Century with such authors as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and e.e. cummings.

- Followers of this movement in Literature held heavy distrust for what society once held as absolute truths: religion, government, and basic social structure. Modernists believed World War I resulted due to the misleading intentions of these specific institutions.

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What results, Modern Art and Modern Writing break traditions and basic rules. Stories and poetry from this time period use ironic circumstances to supply the reader an expectation—then twist the plot into something different and unexpected. Oftentimes such writers control all of the elements in their work in order to project a theme. No object or image is used simply as decoration.

Users of this technique are called “intentionalists”— that is, writers who control every aspect in a story in order to express a controlling theme; every image shown in the work serves a purpose to explain the motivation of a character and the actions/reactions of characters in a scene, no matter how obscure the element. Accidental or spontaneous composition does not exist for this style of writing: everything shown to the reader plays a part in the construction of the story.

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To illustrate: T. S. Eliot in his long poem *The Wasteland* uses seasonal elements to evoke moods in the reader. However, he twists the definitions of the universal symbols into something unexpected. This first part of the poem is called “The Burial of the Dead.”

The section’s title alerts the reader that the theme of the poem will concentrate on material which is somber and thought-provoking. The reader expects the subject to project imagery of grey skies, heavy clouds, possible rain, depressing weather conditions, autumnal seasons.

Yet Eliot opens the poem with the line: “April is the cruelest month,” which inverses standard interpretation for a funeral. He has picked springtime as the setting for this depressing theme.

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The first seven lines read:

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.

Notice the paradox he establishes.

- The typical cultural expectation of springtime is a season of new life and renewed spirituality.
- Winter of course is seen typically as cold and indifferent.

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Eliot however presents the month of April as cruel and heartless, without mercy or compassion for humanity.

Winter on the other hand is presented as warm, secure.

The beginning of this poem shows a strong contrast between Winter and Spring, and at the same time, reverses their psychological influences and thus adds a new layer of meaning to a common experience.