



## Day 2: Revealing Emotions Through Setting

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Have you ever read a story and described it to someone as “light-hearted” or maybe “unsettling”? Some readers refer to this as the atmosphere or mood of the story. It’s usually based on the feeling you had while reading. This feeling is elicited from the setting on two levels: macro and micro.

Macro is the overarching location of place. The south of France. Suburban Los Angeles. The rural county fair. Each of these evokes an emotional response in the reader just by virtue of naming it. The macro setting involves the “set pieces” that make up the location. This may include intangibles like weather, year, time of day, and season. A snowstorm. A clear, moonlit night. July 4, 1776. This also includes tangibles large and small like buildings, furniture, and even jewelry. A Victorian home. A wooden rocking chair. Heirloom pearls. These also begin to form an emotional response in the reader.

Micro setting is at the sentence level. Word choice and sensory images (which we discussed yesterday) also affect how the reader interprets the setting and his or her resulting emotions. Snow can be blustery or delightful. Heirloom pearls can be nostalgic or a burden. The difference is how your character perceives these details and how you present them to the reader.

Let’s take a look at four ways to make sure the setting of your story is working on both macro and micro levels to reveal emotions.

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### Emotions Through Setting Tip #1: Setting is personal.

While I hope you are able to incorporate all of the information from this class into your story, I really want you to tuck this tip into your writer’s toolbox: **Everything about the setting should**

**be filtered through your character's unique perspective.** Sorry for the bold and underline, but I had to call it out; it's that important.

I've edited many manuscripts where the setting feels like it was torn from the pages of a guidebook or taken directly from the author's experience with the place. That might be a good starting point, but description should **always** be filtered through your character. (Again, sorry for the bold and underline and for being so emphatic!)

Consider your character's emotional state and relationship to the location, not to mention his or her personality. For example, someone going to Hawaii on her honeymoon is in a different state of mind than someone traveling to Hawaii for her grandmother's funeral. How would that color her description? How would the narrator's choice of words differ in each circumstance?

Suspense writers are often quite adept at using the setting to reflect the character's emotions and set the mood, so I'll turn to one of the masters of the genre: John Le Carré. Here, the main character is trying to uncover the details of his wife's mysterious death:

The mountain stood black against the darkening sky, and the sky was a mess of racing cloud, perverse island winds and February rain. The snake road was strewn with pebbles and red mud from the sodden hillside. Sometimes it became a tunnel of overhanging pine branches and sometimes it was a precipice with a free fall to the steaming Mediterranean a thousand feet below. He would make a turn and for no reason the sea would rise in a wall in front of him, only to fall back into the abyss as he made another. But no matter how many times he turned, the rain came straight at him, and when it struck the windscreen he felt the jeep wince under him like an old horse no longer fit for heavy pulling.

~*The Constant Gardner*, John Le Carré

Let's review some of the words (micro) in this excerpt: black, darkening, abyss, sodden, precipice. There is little doubt what the main character is feeling as all of these reflect his emotional state.

What if these words were used to describe his relaxing weekend getaway to a Mediterranean beach? Readers would feel dissonance between the narrative and his emotional state. It just wouldn't ring true. Instead, we'd expect words like bucolic, rugged coastline, rolling waves.

## Immerse Yourself

- ✓ At the beginning of each scene, ask yourself what emotion(s) you want readers to have.

- ✓ How can the word choices, through the character directly or the narrator, convey these emotions?
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## Emotions Through Setting Tip #2: Connect details and emotions.

Taking the last point a bit further...The things a character notices show a reader how he or she feels about the macro or micro setting. Let's take a look at a macro example first.

Minna's Court Street was the old Brooklyn, a placid, ageless surface alive with talk, with deals and casual insults, a neighborhood political machine with pizzeria and butcher shop bosses and unwritten rules everywhere. All was talk except for what mattered most, which were unspoken understandings.

~***Motherless Brooklyn*, by Jonathan Lethem**

What is clear from this short excerpt is that this story could not take place anywhere else—not just in Brooklyn but on Court Street specifically. It is also clear that the character, Minna, focuses on certain principles of how his street operates. This says a lot about his state of mind and emotions. We get the sense that Minna has to remain vigilant, be cautious, and know when to back off. Are there any other emotions you're getting from this passage?

Below we have an example of micro setting. The author is tapping into emotions based on specific word choices around sensory images, combining tips from yesterday's lesson as well.

Year Four was when Clark realized this was the way the years would continue to be marked from now on, counted off one by one from the moment of disaster.

He'd known for a long time by then that the world's changes wouldn't be reversed, but still, the realization cast his memories in a sharper light. The last time I ate an ice-cream cone in a park in the sunlight. The last time I danced in a club. The last time I saw a moving bus. The last time I boarded an airplane that hadn't been repurposed as living quarters, an airplane that actually took off. The last time I ate an orange.

~***Station Eleven*, by Emily St. John Mandel**

This excerpt from the dystopian novel *Station Eleven* is doing double duty. Clark, the main character, is reminiscing about things he misses from the time before the deadly flu. These things are very specific to Clark. We learn a lot more about him, and we understand his longing. These things aren't oddities; they are universal in their commonness. That is wonderful, but the author was able to achieve something even more remarkable in this short passage.

Each thing Clark identifies is associated with a sensory image.

- Ice cream—did you pick up on the coldness (touch) or the creaminess (taste)? Or both?
- Dancing—did you feel the movement?
- An airplane taking off—did you notice the rumble of the engines (touch and sound)?
- Orange—did you pick up on the distinct scent (smell) or flavor (taste)?

The author doesn't have to mention the senses because they are all inferred by the vivid imagery that is so specific.

## Immerse Yourself

- ✓ Pay attention to what the character notices given his or her emotional state. Your character may notice something new or unusual during heightened emotions.
- ✓ How can you filter the character's attention on macro and micro level descriptions?

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### Emotions Through Setting Tip #3: Record emotional change over time.

In most stories, characters undergo some kind of transformation which leads to a better understanding of themselves and the world around them. Often there is a change in the setting that precipitates the change in emotions. That might be a literal physical change of address such as the coming-of-age immigrant novel *Brooklyn* by Colm Toibin, where the character moves from Ireland to Brooklyn. Or a dramatic change to the current location. Think of Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind*.

Also consider that the setting may remain the same but the character's adventures cause him or her to look at the setting in a different way. Dorothy is not the same girl after visiting Oz. Frodo needs more than the Shire after his arduous journey to Mordor.

How can you indicate your character's emotional change through setting details? I have two examples to share, one with my annotations. This first excerpt comes close to the beginning of the novel.

By two o'clock the clouds had given up their roiling and simply sat down on the land, transforming the rain into a gray fog. It was like a cold steam room and it pinned in place every odor. The Major was still screwing up his nose against the ripe smell of urine long

after a wandering collie had left his mark on the corner post of the wooden bus shed. The rough three-sided wooden shed with its cheap asphalt roof offered no protection from the fog and leached its own smell of creosote and old vomit into the dampness. The Major cursed the human instinct for shelter that made him stand under it.

~*Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*, by Helen Simonson

The Major is not very happy about the situation, is he? What micro-level word choices lead you to that conclusion? There are so many! Pretty much every word in this passage is designed to leave no doubt as to his feelings, but I'd like to point out that the Major can't even let the "cheap asphalt roof" go unremarked. These setting details reinforce the Major's emotional state at the beginning of the story, which allow the reader to fully grasp his change by the end.

What does the following selection say about the character, Alice, and her emotional state? Let's deconstruct this paragraph. (**Bold** notes mine)

The cluttered kitchen irritates her. (**Look at the adjective and active verb. This is not a woman who is in love with her home. She has a growing awareness of the dissatisfaction in her life.**) The Formica countertop is patterned with pink and black loops like rubber bands lying against each other, getting on her nerves, all cocked and ready to spring like hail across the kitchen. (**If the author stopped at the pattern it would still be a good visual, but she took the description one more step by describing what those squiggles mean to the character—an image that's tense and poised for change.**) Alice wonders if other women in the middle of the night have begun to resent their Formica. (**This is a telling statement next to showing statements, which compliments the showing.**) She stares hard at the telephone on the counter, wishing it would ring. She needs some proof that she isn't the last woman left on earth, the surviving queen of nothing. The clock gulps (**What a wonderful action verb that also gives a strong sensory image.**) softly, eating seconds whole while she waits; receives no proof. (**This last sentence is fresh but it still shows how this woman feels about her life.**)

~ *Pigs in Heaven*, by Barbara Kingsolver

Notice that Alice focuses on the Formica countertop. All of her descriptive energy goes here. The description of the other objects in the kitchen is limited—the clutter, the telephone—so the reader's attention is not distracted from the conflict between where Alice is now emotionally and her yearning to be or feel something different. This is made even more poignant by the fact that this feeling sends Alice on her story journey.

## Immerse Yourself

- ✓ Is there an object that embodies your character's emotional state at the beginning of your story? At the end?

- ✓ How can/does the character's feelings toward this object change over the course of the story?
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## Emotions Through Setting Tip #4: Choose your words carefully.

This might feel a bit redundant given that we've been talking about word choice (micro setting details) throughout today's lesson, but I wanted to make this its own tip as an additional reminder. Every word should be chosen with intention because the reader is interpreting and casting judgment. I'd like to invite you to note the words that evoke the character's emotions while reading this passage.

Here is the set-up: This novel is set in Venice in 1946, after the close of WWII. Widow Grace Miller leaves Paris for Venice and invites her son Adam, the story's narrator, to join her. As the novel opens, Adam tells us about his mother's decision to leave Paris:

After the war, my mother took a house in Venice. She'd gone first to Paris, hoping to pick up the threads of her old life, but Paris had become grim, grumbling about shortages, even her friends worn and evasive. The city was still at war, this time with itself, and everything she'd come back for—the big flat on the Rue du Bac, the cafés, the market on the Raspail, memories all burnished after five years to a rich glow—now seemed pinched and sour, dingy under a permanent cover of gray cloud.

After two weeks, she fled south. Venice at least would look the same, and it reminded her of my father, the early years when they idled away afternoons on the Lido and danced at night. In the photographs they were always tanned, sitting on beach chairs in front of striped changing huts, clowning with friends, everyone in caftans or bulky one-piece woolen bathing suits. Cole Porter had been there, writing patter songs, and since my mother knew Linda, there were a lot of evenings drinking around the piano, that summer when they'd just married. When her train from Paris finally crossed over the lagoon, the sun was so bright on the water that for a few dazzling minutes it actually seemed to be that first summer. Bertie, another figure in the Lido pictures, met her at the station in a motorboat, and as they swung down the Grand Canal, the sun so bright, the palazzos as glorious as ever, the whole improbable city just the same after all these years, she thought she might be happy again.

~*Alibi*, Joseph Kanon

What is the overall mood from these paragraphs? Paris is dissatisfying. Venice, seemingly untouched by the war, is full of sunlight and memories. I'm picking up on the nostalgia, particularly pre-war nostalgia, which is its own brand of sentimentality.

Let's look at some of the specific word choices that contribute to the mood of these paragraphs. Grace's post-war Paris is "grim" and "grumbling." It's even "pinched and sour." Venice, by contrast, is "dazzling" and "glorious." The sweet memories themselves are very specific too.

But after the nostalgia, did you feel another emotion riding its coattails? I had a sense of doubt. I started to think that maybe the dazzling and glorious Venice wasn't going to be satisfying for Grace. It is just two words that casts the doubt. Scroll back up and see if you notice those words also.

In the last sentence Venice is "improbable." The "whole improbable city" is unlikely to live up to Grace's memory of it. Then at the very end, Adam acknowledges: "She thought she might be happy again." That word *might* is not an accident.

This uses specific setting word choices to develop conflict within the character, which is a lovely segue to the topic we'll discuss on Day 4!

## Immerse Yourself

- ✓ Do you consider the reader's takeaway of every word?
- ✓ How can you use specific word choices to reinforce the character's emotional state, especially in the opening pages?

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## Up Next

Have you ever played the "I Spy" game? We going to do a version of it in today's exploration! Head over to the next document posted in today's module.