Setting

Setting transports a reader into the world of literature. Setting is the time and place of a story; it's whatever the author uses to create an environment for the plot and character to act. For instance, think of a Dracula horror movie. The set designers create a drafty castle room complete with ancient oversized furniture, wall tapestries, clocks chiming midnight, a fire burning low, dusty shelves, and a human skull as a paper weight. The lighting technicians determine to mute the lights to appear as candlelight, they flicker some lights to suggest drafts, and they impose darkness as night. The sound engineers will develop sounds of wind, rain, and perhaps even howls or screams. The makeup artists whiten the skin, darken the eyes, hollow the cheeks, redden the lips. The set designers, lighting technicians, sound engineers, and makeup artists all combine to do what the author does--create a setting for the story.

At bedtime, when my sons were young, we would read Jon Scieszka's *Time Warp Trio* books. In this series, three young boys mistakenly travel through time to get into and out of trouble. Setting becomes the primary focus for each book, creating new worlds for the same main characters. For instance, *The Good, The Bad*, *The Goofy* takes place in the Wild West, *The Not-So-Jolly Roger* puts the trio on a pirate's ship, *Knights of the Kitchen Table* places them in medieval England, *Your Mother was a Neanderthal* lands the boys with dinosaurs and cave dads and moms, *Tut, Tut* finds the boys in Egypt, and *2095* sends the boys to the future New York City. The settings for these creative Scieszka novels establish new worlds, new conflicts, and new options for the characters. Setting helps create Scieszka's different worlds.

In this lesson we will identify and discuss four principal setting contexts: historical, geographical, physical, and psychological. Additionally we will present the four chief functions of setting: settings that meld, catalyze, antagonize, or symbolize. To help illustrate setting contexts, we will use as are extended examples Moses leading of the children of Israel out of bondage and Joseph Smith and the restoration of the gospel.

Historical and Geographical Contexts

Generally speaking, the most common definition of setting is when and where a story takes place. *When* is the historical context of a story, and *where* is the geographical context.

Historical context includes the year and historical era. But historical context also establishes the social, cultural, economic, and political environments of the story. The historical context becomes important in the accounts of Moses and the Exodus and Joseph Smith and the Restoration.

For example, 430 years prior to Moses leaving Egypt, ancient Joseph was entering Egypt as a slave, yet through his goodness and God's direction, Joseph became second only to the Hyksos pharaoh. Because of this power, Joseph was able to bring his 70 family members to Egypt to escape the famine. However, four centuries later, the Hyksos pharaohs had long been replaced

by other pharaohs who enslaved and hated the Israelites. At the time of Moses, the Israelites had essentially become despised beasts of burden for the Egyptians. The historical context was right for the children of Israel to leave Egypt.

And in Joseph Smith's account, we know that 1820 was a significant time in religious fervor and revivals. People were searching for and receptive to religious discussion and teaching. Churches were competing against each other to obtain converts and to espouse their doctrines. It was during this time that the young Joseph, confused by all the different churches and teachings, wanted to do what was right. So when he reads James 1:5 "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be give him," Joseph decides to ask God which church to join. The historical context was right to inspire a young boy to seek God in prayer, and the time was right for God to give His answer.

To clarify the historical context of a story, it is helpful to chart the different elements of the historical climate. Below is a sample chart.

Historical Contexts					
Year	Era	Social	Cultural	Economic	Political

Geographical context includes the location of the story. The geographical location identifies which country, region, state, city, and neighborhood is the setting for the story. Characters may react differently if the setting is in Africa or in Europe, if they live in a metropolis or in a village.

Location, consequently, is significant for Moses and the Exodus. When ancient Joseph brought his family to Egypt, Egypt was a peaceful place for the family to thrive. On the other hand, there former home of Palestine was a battleground for warring nations that moved back and forth in the conquests between the Nile and the Euphrates. Israel would have found no peace there. They required the stable conditions of Egypt for their growth and development.

Yes, they were eventually enslaved in Egypt, but that also became a disguised blessing for them as well. The cruelty of the taskmasters, the hatred that existed between the Hebrews and the Egyptians, and the length of their servitude fused the Israelites into a united people.

The hatred the Israelites felt toward the Egyptians prevented intermarriage between the Hebrews and their neighbors. To reap the benefits of the Abrahamic promises, Israel had to remain a pure race, and the Lord used this means to achieve it. So the location of Egypt is significant for the children of Israel.

And we know that Palmyra, New York, and the United States become vital to the Prophet Joseph and the Restoration. God had been preparing the location for centuries by bringing religiously oppressed peoples to North America to seek their religious tolerance. These individuals became

leaders and founders of churches and the nation who taught and established religious freedom. And fourteen hundred years earlier, a Nephite prophet Moroni had deposited a sacred record of gold plates in a hillside outside what was to become Palmyra, New York. A young Joseph's family moved to that area, and Joseph was ready at the right time and at the right place to receive these records.

To clarify the geographical context of a story, it is helpful to chart the different elements of the geographical environment. Below is a sample chart:

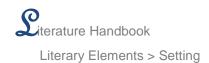| Geographical Contexts				
Country	Region	State	City	Size

Not all of these aspects of historical and geographical context may pertain to every story, so don't be concerned if you can't determine each category. Also it is often difficult to separate these contexts into simple categories. By creating a geographical setting, the author often is also establishing an historical setting. Simply use these categories as tools to gain a visual perception of the story's historical and geographical settings.

Physical and Psychological Contexts.

Two additional areas an author may emphasize to establish setting are the physical context and psychological context of a story.

Physical context are elements and items external to a character. Physical context includes time of day, weather, sensory details, clothing, and whether the character is inside or outside. When an author uses smells, sights, sounds, tastes, or textures to help establish an environment, these details are called sensory description or imagery because they appeal to our five senses. The author is focusing on physical context. In many ways, the physical context is similar to props in drama or film.

The physical context with Moses and the Exodus is evident in different forms. For example, when Moses throws his rod down at Pharaoh's feet and the rod turns into a serpent, that is part of the physical context. Additionally, when Pharaoh continues to refuse God's demands to allow Israel's escape, Moses sends forth ten terrible plagues: rivers turning to blood; invasions of frogs, lice, flies, and locusts; deaths of livestock; boils upon people and animals; darkness; and ultimately, deaths of firstborns. These continue to exemplify the physical context. And another example of physical context is the crossing of the Red Sea. When Pharaoh's soldiers purse after Israel, they arrive at the shores of the Red Sea. Israel is horrified to think they are about to be destroyed and challenge Moses. Moses declares, "Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will shew to you to day" (Exodus 14:13). Moses holds up his rod, stretches his hand over the Red Sea, and the sea divides, and the children of Israel walk across on dry ground. This event demonstrates the physical context of setting.

Joseph Smith reveals the physical context of the First Vision by sharing that he "retired to the woods . . . on the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty" (JSH 1:14). Further, George Manwaring writes the words to our hymn "Joseph Smith's First Prayer" (Hymn 26), and we add to our image of the scene:

> Oh, how lovely was the morning!
> Radiant beamed the sun above.
> Bees were humming, sweet birds singing,
> Music ringing through the grove,
> When within the shady woodland
> Joseph sought the God of love.

All of these become part of the physical context of setting.

To clarify the physical context of a story, it is helpful to chart the different elements of the physical environment. Below is a sample chart:

Physical Context					
Time of Day	Inside	Outside	Weather	Sensory Details	Clothing

Psychological context includes the values and emotional aspects of a character. The psychological context consists of outside elements and values that help formulate a character's beliefs and background. Examples of psychological aspects of setting include mood, health, ethnicity, religion, gender, family, and education.

The psychological context of Moses is manifest when we consider Moses's early life. Of course he was born a Hebrew slave who was destined to death, but because of his Levite mother's inspiration, Moses is put into a bulrush basket, cast into the river, and watched over by his sister Miriam until Moses is safe in the hands of Pharaoh's daughter. Moses is then raised and trained in Pharaoh's palace. We assume he had access to the royal Egyptian libraries as well as the Israelite scriptures taught to him by his mother who became his nursemaid. He had all the luxuries and training of royal son. Yet when Moses flees the court for exile in the wilderness, he becomes a humble shepherd and servant to Jethro. We try to imagine the contradictions in Moses's life and the impact they have on him. Despite his royal training, when God calls him to lead Israel out of Egypt, we learn of his reluctance. He to the Lord, "O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since though hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue" (Exodus 4:10). We get a glimpse of what goes through the mind of a prophet.

We also get a glimpse into the mind of the boy Joseph through the First Vision. Here we have a young fourteen-year-old boy who humbly goes to a grove to pray:

> After I had retired to the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked around me, and finding myself alone, I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.
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> But, exerting all my powers to call upon god to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction—not to an imaginary ruin, but to the power of some actual being from the unseen world, who had such marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being—just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it feel upon me.
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> It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!* (JSH 1:15-17)

From this passage we recognize the power of Satan and his determination to keep Joseph from praying, even to anticipating his death and destruction. As Joseph feels this darkness and his imminent destruction, the powers of heaven break through, dispel the evil power, and Joseph sees and feels a bright light descending upon him, two glorious Personages stand in his presence and identify Themselves as God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. All of this represents the psychological context of setting.

To clarify the psychological context of a story, it is helpful to chart the different elements of the psychological environment. Below is a sample chart:

Psychological Context						
Mood	Health	Ethnicity	Religion	Gender	Family	Education

You have probably already recognized that these four major categories of setting are complex and most often overlap and mesh--there are no clear boundaries. It's not necessary to break setting into these multiple components to appreciate a story, but by expanding the definition of setting, we are better able to appreciate what an author is trying to create.

Now that we understand what setting is, it's time to discuss how setting can function within a story. Susan Monroe Nugent claims that authors use setting to catalyze, antagonize, symbolize, or meld.

Settings that catalyze. A catalyst is an agent that stimulates an action. A particular setting may stimulate a character to act in a particular way. When I was young, one of my favorite stories was Esther Forbes's *Johnny Tremain.* The story takes place in Boston before the American Revolution. The Revolution becomes the catalyst for this novel—all of the events leading up and beginning the revolution serve as the impetus for plot of the novel. The young 14 year-old Johnny is an apprentice to a silversmith when his hand is badly disfigured with melted silver. He then is apprenticed to work on a newspaper, and Johnny becomes involved with the rebellion of the Sons of Liberty. The American Revolution becomes the catalyst that stimulates Johnny to become active.

Settings that antagonize. An antagonist is anyone or anything who is a major source of conflict with the main character or protagonist. Setting can provide that conflict. Philip Caputo's autobiograhpy *A Rumor of War* exemplifies a setting that antagonizes. When Caputo arrives in Viet Nam in 1965 as a young marine, he has idealistic view of war. But he soon discovers horrors. Caputo describes a nighttime reconnaissance as he and fellow troops slowly seek the jungle of enemy troops. He describes the sharp grasses that cut their clothes and skin, insects that eat them, frightening animal night sounds, heat that oppresses them, night that hides booby traps that could kill or maim them, and fears that nearly paralyze them This environment becomes an enemy, a setting that antagonizes.

Settings that symbolize. Symbols are objects that represent something beyond themselves. We'll be discussing symbols in other lessons; however, we'll briefly make a reference now to setting in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick.* (Let me just say that *Moby Dick* is one of the first books that had an impact on my life. It is a powerful story that some readers miss if they only see a whaling encyclopedia.) Most of the novel takes place on the whaling ship *Pequod*. The ship and its crew become much more than a whaling expedition. The ship, crew, and quest are symbols of a larger world, of types of people interacting, of dreams that become obsessions, and of individuals learning about themselves. Setting can be symbolic.

Settings that meld. The word *meld* means to merge or to blend. In the context of setting, *meld* refers to conditions in which the setting changes the character, but the character also changes the setting--neither remains the same after these two interact. In the 1920s, O.E. Rølvagg wrote *Giants in the Earth*. It is the story of the Norwegian immigrant family of Per Hansa, his wife Beret, and their young children pioneering and settling in the Dakota Territory in the 1870s. As Per and Beret try to subdue and cultivate the Dakotan prairie, that same prairie changes and molds their characters and the characters of their children. They change the environment, and the environment changes them—settings that meld.

The above categories often overlap or work together within a single story, but by categorizing the functions of setting, we are better able to recognize how authors use setting to develop plot,

conflict, character, and theme. Setting is much more than the date and place of a story. Setting is the creation of an environment, of a world, that permits a story to occur.