

13 | SITUATION AND SETTING: WHAT HAPPENS? WHERE? WHEN?

Questions about the **speaker** in a poem (*Who?* questions) lead to questions about *What?* and *Why?* as well as *Where?* and *When?* First you identify the imagined **situation** in the poem: To whom is the speaker speaking? Is there an **auditor** in the poem? Is anyone else present or referred to in the poem? What is happening? Why is this event or communication occurring, and why is it significant? As soon as you zoom in on answers to such questions about persons and actions, you also encounter questions about place and time. (Where and when does the action or communication take place?) In other words, situation entails **setting**.

The place involved in a poem is its *spatial setting*, and the time is its *temporal setting*. The temporal setting may be a specific date or an era, a season of the year or a time of day. Temporal and spatial settings often influence our expectations, although a poet may surprise us by making something very different of what we had thought was familiar. We tend, for example, to think of spring as a time of discovery and growth, and poems set in spring are likely to make use of that association. Similarly, morning usually suggests discovery—beginnings, vitality, the world fresh and new.

Not all poems have an identifiable situation or setting, just as not all poems have a speaker who is easily distinguishable from the author. **Lyrics** that simply present a series of thoughts and feelings directly, in a reflective way, may not present anything resembling a scene with action, dialogue, or description. But many poems depend crucially on a sense of place, a sense of time, and scenes that resemble those in plays or films. And questions about these matters will often lead you to define not only the “facts” but also the feelings central to the design a poem has on its readers.

To understand the dialogue in Thomas Hardy’s *THE RUINED MAID*, for example, we need to recognize that the two women are meeting after an extended period of separation (the situation) and that they meet in a town rather than the rural area in which they grew up together (the setting). We infer (from the opening lines) that the meeting is accidental and that no one else is present for the conversation. The poem’s whole “story” depends on their situation: After leading separate lives for a while, they have some catching up to do. We don’t know what specific town they are in or what year, season, or time of day it is—and those details are not important to the poem’s effect.

More specific settings matter in other poems. Etheridge Knight’s *HARD ROCK RETURNS TO PRISON FROM THE HOSPITAL FOR THE CRIMINAL INSANE* depends entirely on its prison setting, as does A. E. Stallings’s *HADES WELCOMES HIS BRIDE* on all the vividly rendered objects that make up its version of the underworld. Here, the contrast between the actuality of the setting and the alternately matter-of-fact and glowing terms in which the speaker presents it generates **irony**, adds to the overall creepiness, and helps define the ambiguities of the speaker’s character.

Situation and setting may be treated in various ways in a poem, ranging from silence to the barest hints of description to full photographic detail. Often it is

relatively easy to identify the situation at the beginning of a poem, but the implications of setting, and what happens as the poem unfolds, may be subtler. Poets often rely on readers to fill in the gaps, drawing on their knowledge of circumstances and familiar experiences in the present or in the past. The poem may specify only a few aspects of a *kind* of setting, such as a motel room in the afternoon.

SITUATION

The following poem portrays a situation that should be—at least in some of its aspects—familiar to you. How would you summarize that situation?

RITA DOVE

Daystar

She wanted a little room for thinking;
 but she saw diapers steaming on the line,
 a doll slumped behind the door.
 So she lugged a chair behind the garage
 5 to sit out the children's naps.

Sometimes there were things to watch—
 the pinched armor of a vanished cricket,
 a floating maple leaf. Other days
 she stared until she was assured
 10 when she closed her eyes
 she'd see only her own vivid blood.

She had an hour, at best, before Liza appeared
 pouting from the top of the stairs.
 And just *what* was mother doing
 15 out back with the field mice? Why,
 building a palace. Later
 that night when Thomas rolled over and
 lurched into her, she would open her eyes
 and think of the place that was hers
 20 for an hour—where
 she was nothing,
 pure nothing, in the middle of the day.

1986

The mother in Dove's *DAYSTAR*, overwhelmed by the demands of young children, needs a room of her own. All she can manage, however, is a brief hour of respite. The situation is virtually the whole story here. Nothing really happens except that daily events (washing diapers, picking up toys, explaining the world to children, having sex) that surround her brief private hour and make it precious. Being "nothing" (lines 21 and 22) takes on great value in these circumstances.

Not every poem presents, as Dove's does, familiar and real or realistic situations (any more than all fiction does). Yet even poems that present imaginary or fantastic situations must make them somehow real-seeming and relevant to us. The two poems

below are good examples. Both contemplate imaginary situations but of very different kinds. The first works by simply twisting a familiar situation: The poem describes the speaker's experience as a student in a college course, only the course is in *Humanity*, not *Humanities*. The second poem is more abstract and speculative: Like the genre of fiction and film to which its title refers (science fiction), it imagines a possible future. As you read the poems, think about what each suggests about real-world situations ("what is") by the way it depicts its wholly imaginary ("what if") one.

DENISE DUHAMEL

Humanity 101

I was on my way to becoming a philanthropist,
 or the president, or at least someone who gave a shit,
 but I was a nontraditional student
 with a lot of catching up to do. I enrolled in Humanity 101
 5 (not to be confused with the Humanities,
 a whole separate department). When I flunked
 the final exam, my professor suggested
 I take Remedial Humanity where I'd learn the basics
 that I'd missed so far. I may have been a nontraditional student,
 10 but I was a traditional person, she said, the way a professor
 can say intimate things sometimes, as though
 your face and soul are aglow in one of those
 magnified (10x) makeup mirrors.

So I took Remedial Humanity, which sounds like an easy A,
 15 but, believe me, it was actually quite challenging.
 There were analogy questions, such as:
 Paris Hilton¹ is to a rich U.S. suburban kid
 as a U.S. middle-class kid is to:
 1.) a U.S. poverty-stricken kid,
 20 2.) a U.S. kid with nothing in the fridge,
 or
 3.) a Third World kid with no fridge at all.
 We were required to write essays about the cause of war—
 Was it a phenomenon? Was it our lower animal selves?
 25 Was it economics? Was it psychological/sexual/religious
 (good vs. evil and all that stuff)? For homework
 we had to bend down to talk to a homeless person
 slouched against a building. We didn't necessarily have to
 give them money or food, but we had to say something like
 30 *How are you?* or *What is your favorite color?*
 We took field trips to nursing homes, prisons,
 day-care centers. We stood near bedsides
 or sat on the floor to color with strange little people
 who cried and were afraid of us at first.
 35 I almost dropped out. I went to see the professor
 during his office hours because I wanted to change my major.

1. Socialite and media personality (b. 1981), granddaughter of Hilton Hotels founder Conrad Hilton.