

**Discuss the significance of urban and/or rural settings in two works of literature you have studied.**

'Setting' is a literary term relating to the time and place in which the action of a work takes place. At its most simple level, 'setting' refers to the backdrop of the story: a country, a city, a period in time. However, in the literature I have studied, setting often functions as more than simple backdrop. Setting can reflect an author's themes and concerns, can mirror a character's emotional state, or can influence a character's actions. Setting can also impact the reader in terms of helping generate an emotional or cathartic reaction. In both *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw and poems written by Charlotte Mew, the reader is aware that setting functions as more than simple backdrop. As a dramatic text intended to be performed onstage, in Shaw's play the physical set is used as a method of characterisation, particularly Henry Higgins' laboratory and Lisa Doolittle's ramshackle room above an oil shop. By contrast, the people in Charlotte Mew's poetry not only reflect the urban and rural settings they live in, but are also shaped by these settings. And both texts use setting as a way of illuminating the writers' themes and concerns, illuminating the circumstances of the people who populate the literary worlds.

In Act One of Shaw's play, the audience are permitted to see inside the home of Lisa Doolittle, the play's protagonist, a lower class girl who earns money selling flowers on the street. She is painfully poor, barely eking out a living, and can hardly afford the rent of this dirty and pitiful little hovel. Shaw describes her room in some detail in an extended stage direction which says: *'a small room with very old wallpaper hanging loose in damp places... a broken pane in the window... a wretched bed...'* When presented physically onstage, these directions make it easy for the audience to sympathise with Lisa's plight. Words such as *'broken'* and *'wretched'* imply a life of hardship, and the descriptions of Lisa *'trudging'* around this setting suggests her both the misery and difficulty of her circumstances. Moreover, elements of the setting are used symbolically by Shaw. He notes an empty birdcage hanging on one wall, which symbolises Lisa's life: she is trapped in poverty as a bird might be trapped in a cage. However, the fact that the cage is empty foreshadows how Lisa will eventually escape her life after she undergoes Higgins' transformation. Connected to this idea are the magazine clippings that she posts on the wall around her mirror. Shaw implies that Lisa has dreams and ambitions that extend beyond her meagre circumstances. This is perhaps a way of challenging his audience's preconceptions. When the play was first performed in 1912, his audience would have been exclusively upper class. These people may be surprised to learn that poorer members of society have their own hopes, dreams and aspirations, an idea subtly implied by the details of the staged set.

Similarly, Shaw employs the potential of the theatrical stage to convey ideas about Henry Higgins, a linguist who eventually helps Lisa by teaching her to speak properly. Act Two is set inside Higgins' living room, which doubles up as his linguistic laboratory. In another extended

stage direction, Shaw lists Higgins' scientific equipment, including: a phonograph, organ pipes, tuning forks, and a life size model of human vocal chords, throat and mouth. Whether consciously or subconsciously, the audience are encouraged to understand that Higgins values science above comfort; after all, this is supposed to be his living room! Moreover, the pride and enthusiasm with which he explains his equipment to Pickering strongly conveys his interest in anything scientific. In dramatic terms, it is clear that the setting of Higgins' laboratory 'mirrors' his character. In fact, his love of science is so profound that it often interferes with his ability to fit into other settings in wider society, such as his mother's at-home in Act Three. Therefore, Shaw describes him as of the '*energetic, scientific type*' who takes '*violent interest*' in anything scientific. So, when Lisa comes to him for help, it's no surprise that he treats her as an object of study rather than a person with her own rights, hopes and dreams.

Whereas 'mirror' is a term used when setting reflects a person's character, 'mould' is the term used when a character is influenced or shaped by his or her setting; and while this terminology derives from dramatic texts, the readers of Charlotte Mew's poetry can see how her speakers are often shaped by the environment in which they live, particularly the interior spaces in her poems. This is most evident in the poem *Rooms*, which describes the ever-diminishing circumstances of Mew's life through the extended metaphor of different rooms she lived in. The first line of her poem begins: '*I remember rooms that have had their part/ In the steady slowing down of the heart*'. As a common symbol of emotion, the way her heart slows down encapsulates the idea of 'mould' – that the melancholy and frustration felt by the poem's speaker is, at least in part, caused by the series of rooms she lived in throughout her life. Later, the reader is taken on a whistle-stop tour through various rooms such as: '*The room in Paris, the room in Geneva/ The little damp room with the seaweed smell...*' What is noticeable about these rooms is actually their complete lack of description. Despite being set in fabulous European cities, we learn almost nothing about these rooms, nor the events that took place inside them. Instead, Mew employs the poetic technique of anaphora, by which she simply lists '*the room... the room...*' giving the reader the impression that nothing worthwhile ever happened inside while regular iambic pentameter swiftly transports the reader from one room to the next.

In Mew's poems, there is often a tension created between interior spaces, or urban space, and the wider rural world more associated with nature. In actual fact, interior spaces represent the social restriction of early twentieth century society. As someone who was more independent and creative, Mew found the rules of society quite oppressive. She was most likely a lesbian, but kept this hidden throughout her life. She also had to hide the fact that two of her siblings had been confined in mental asylums because of the prejudice that mental disability might bring. Knowing this context allows the reader to bring meaningful connotations to one particular line in *Rooms*, when we do actually get a description of the outside world: '*the ceaseless, maddening sound of the sea*'. The word '*maddening*' not only hints at the mental illness in her family, but also suggests the

debilitating effect of having to live under the restrictions of an intolerant society. Therefore, the sea becomes a symbol of the life she is missing out on, and her feelings of anger are perhaps aroused by a certain envy of the to-and-fro, coming-and-going movement of the tide. This idea is emphasised through the sibilant sounds at this point in the poem: 'seaweed,' 'smell,' 'ceaseless,' and 'sound of the sea' all contain the soft S sound that begins to drive her mad because she can't get out and experience the world for herself.

While these authors use setting in contrasting ways to either reflect or shape the characters in their stories, they actually use setting in similar ways as a means of illuminating important themes and concerns and to reveal the preoccupations of the people who populate their worlds. Shaw's play opens on the streets of London, and one of his primary themes is class difference between the upper and lower classes who live and work right next to each other, but who rarely interact outside of their own social strata. The action unfolds on the pavement outside a theatre: Lisa is first glimpsed seated on the ground, illuminating her low position in society. In fact, Higgins draws attention to this when he describes her '*kerbstone English that will keep her in the gutter.*' At the start of the play it begins to rain, which drives all the characters to huddle close together under the portico of a church. Without this aspect of setting, the sudden weather change, the action of the play would never have played out as it did, as Freddy would never have bumped into Lisa in his hurry to escape the rain. Therefore, the setting also acts as an inciting incident in Shaw's play.

Similarly, Mew uses setting to illuminate the themes and concerns of her poem *The Farmer's Bride*. Set in a rural community in the Southwest of England, the changing seasons in the poem represent the cycles of life and fertility which so preoccupy the poem's speaker, the farmer. The poem begins at harvest time, and harvest can be seen to symbolise fertility. In fact, the farmer is more intent on gathering a bountiful harvest than he is on assuaging the fears of his young bride. Later the season changes to a mournful and lonely winter, a pathetic fallacy where the setting helpfully echoes the farmer's loneliness and fear that he will remain childless. In the same stanza, the Christmas berries which decorate a happy family's home also symbolise fertility. However, while Mew, like Shaw, employs setting to illuminate themes and concerns, unlike Shaw there is little evidence of setting acting as an inciting force. For example, while the farmer's young bride does prefer to be outside in the fields, or in the barn with the animals, she does this out of her own volition, not because any outside force incites her to. And the farmer didn't choose his bride because it was harvest time; rather his own advancing age and fears of loneliness compelled him to take this course of action.

In conclusion, George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and poems by Charlotte Mew both reveal how setting can be employed as more than a simple backdrop in literary works. The works reveal how setting can both reflect a character's preoccupations and shape a character's personality. On

occasion, setting can even intrude into a story line, propelling the action and inciting characters to make choices they might otherwise not have made. In cases such as this, it is hard to argue that setting is merely a backdrop; rather, setting can be as important to a story as a character's own decisions might be.