

## Setting

Setting includes several closely related aspects of a work of fiction. First, setting is the physical, sensuous world of the work; second, it is the time in which the action of the work takes place. Third, it is the social environment of the characters: the manners, customs, and moral values that govern the characters' society. A fourth aspect, **atmosphere** or **mood** (*the emotional feelings inspired by a work, describing the dominant mood of a selection as it is created by diction, dialogue, setting, and description; often the opening scene in a play or novel establishes an atmosphere appropriate to the theme of the entire work*), is largely (but not entirely) an effect of setting.

This assignment will concern the first, (some of the) third, and the fourth aspects of the novel's setting. The overall physical setting (Naples in general), time frame, and politics (an aspect of the social setting) was part of my general introduction to the novel, and this information can be found in the notes for the novel and in the in-class presentations. This assignment will also ignore the frame story (since it is irrelevant for our purposes, as we will not be reading the other books in the series).

## The Bildungsroman

*Bildungsroman* is a novel dealing with one person's formative years or spiritual education. In German it means *novel of formation*. It can be distinguished from the more general category of a "coming of age" novel in that a *Bildungsroman* details how a character's growth and maturity is shaped by the world around him or her (especially the social setting). As such, the primary conflict is with society, since in the novel of formation the protagonist struggles to find his or her individual voice against a world that seeks to define the protagonist in a particular way.

One of the more influential modern investigations of the *Bildungsroman* was by Mirianne Hirsch from a 1979 article in the journal *Genre* entitled "The Novel of Formation as Genre: From *Great Expectations* to *Lost Illusions*." In the article she identifies seven characteristics of the *Bildungsroman*, which are as follows:

1. The novel of formation is a novel that focuses on one central character, a *Figurenroman*. It is the story of a representative individual's *growth and development* within the context of a defined social order. Although he learns and grows, the protagonist is an essentially *passive* character, a plaything of circumstance. Unable to control his destiny actively, he is someone who gives shape to events without actually causing them.
2. The novel of formation's concern is both *biographical* and *social*. Society is the novel's antagonist and is viewed as a school of life, a locus for experience. The spirit and values of the social order emerge through the fate of one representative individual. Consequently, the novel of formation does not represent a panorama of society and might thus be distinguished from the panoramic or social novel.
3. The novel of formation's plot is a version of the quest story; it portrays a search for meaningful existence within society, for the authentic values which will facilitate the unfolding of inner capabilities. The *linear chronological plot*, according to Scholes and Kellogg, represents "a general movement to emphasize character in narrative," since it "allows for free and full character development without interference from the requirements of a tightly knit plot. Growth is a *gradual process* consisting of a number of encounters between subjective needs and an unbending social

order. Since it entails the consideration of various alternative, the growth process necessitates errors and the pursuit of false leads.

4. It is the development of selfhood that is the primary concern of the novel of formation, the events that determine the life of the individual, rather than all the events of that life: this type of novel is a *story of apprenticeship* and not a full biography. *Its projected resolution is an accommodation to the existing society.* While each protagonist has the choice of accepting or rejecting this projected resolution, each novel ends with a precise stand on his part, with *his assessment of himself and his place in society.*
5. The narrative point of view and voice, whether it be the first or third person, is characterized by *irony* toward the inexperienced protagonist, rather than nostalgia for youth. There is always a distance between the perspective of the narrator and that of the protagonist.
6. The novel's other characters fulfill several fixed functions: *educators* serve as mediators and interpreters between the two confronting forces of self and society; *companions* serve as reflectors on the protagonist, standing for alternative goals and achievements (for example Wilhelm Meister and Lothario, Emma Woodhouse and Jane Fairfax, Lucien de Rubempré and David Séchard); *lovers* provide the opportunity for the education of sentiment. (In the novel of formation these figures are subordinated to the protagonist in contrast to the social novel where a number of characters provide equal centers of interest.)
7. The novel of formation is conceived as a *didactic* novel, one which educates the reader by portraying the education of the protagonist (296-299).

I'm not terribly interested in whether *My Brilliant Friend* matches these characteristics exactly, so much as that it matches most of them (believe it or not, academics can get very contentious indeed about definitions). For our purposes, the concept is useful because the *Bildungsroman* exists at the intersection of dynamic characterization, setting, and societal conflict-- building on skills you should have already acquired, while giving you a way to organize the book so that it will be more digestible and useful to you. Thinking about the novel this way will also make the next big assignment much easier for you.

### **Assignment Directions (Overview)**

You will analyze the growth and initiation into society of a character from *My Brilliant Friend* through an analysis of the different settings in the novel. This will be accomplished by making lists of data and interpretation using a set of pre-defined categories for each location:

Specific places:

Associated with:

Activities (taking place or associated with):

Characteristics:

Contribution to the social setting:

Behaviors or psychological attributes of character (in this setting):

Primary atmosphere/mood (an adjective):

Quote/s:

Contribution to the character's growth and maturation (analysis):

I strongly suggest that you do this assignment with a partner (only turn in one assignment with both names on it), otherwise you will likely find it tedious. There will be fairly substantial class time to work on this, so start bringing your book to class for the next few days.

You will have at least three full class periods to finish this, assuming that you use the time wisely. If time is being ill-spent, it will become a homework assignment with a conventional due date.

### Choice of Characters

You may choose either Elena or Lila. Understand that I am stretching the definition of a *Bildungsroman* in the interests of giving you more flexibility. Though both young women are trying to find their place in society, a *Bildungsroman* chronicles the formation of character of the protagonist (which is obviously Elena).

### Locations You Will Include in This Assignment

Choose any THREE of the following: 1) neighborhood in Naples (domestic spaces); 2) neighborhood in Naples (public spaces); 3) neighborhood in Naples (school); 4) neighborhood in Naples (forbidden or hidden spaces); 5) Naples (outside of neighborhood); 6) Ischia (if choosing Elena) OR neighborhood in Naples (shoe repair shop) (if choosing Lila)

### Specific Directions for the Different Categories

**Specific places:** Identify the specific locations classified under the main category. These can be place names, specific spaces within a physical location, or types of locations (conceptual sub-categories) that fall under the main category.

**Associated with:** List the main characters associated with these spaces along with a short description in parentheses. This description should 1) be short; 2) describe their character type (using the Plot Vocabulary if appropriate); and 3) describe their plot function (especially in terms of conflict they are developing). This does not have to be an exhaustive list, and it should focus only on characters that play an active and important role in the plot at that location (not who just happen to be there).

**Activities (taking place or associated with):** These should be more conceptual, not a blow-by-blow account of plot details. Do not forget to also include activities that typically happen at that location, even though the plot may focus more on atypical actions there. Also, remember to think about this from the point of view of the character that you have chosen, otherwise this will become overwhelming very quickly.

**Characteristics:** These should be descriptions that summarize the data from the previous category. Again, they should be in terms of the character that you have chosen.

**Contribution to the social setting:** Remember the social setting include the manners, customs, and moral values that govern the characters' society. You are listing ways that this social setting affects your character. If something in your list is potentially unclear, clarify briefly in parentheses.

**Behaviors or psychological attributes of character (in this setting):** This should only be in terms of the character that you have chosen. Do not start listing behaviors or states for other characters unless you feel that a similarity or contrast with other characters is somehow significant, including that information in parentheses (keep it brief though).

**Primary atmosphere/mood (an adjective):** This should be a descriptive word.

**Quote/s:** Include a representative quote that seems to sum up this location in terms of the character that you have chosen. If you feel this cannot be done adequately with a single quote, you may include one or two more, but do not go overboard. Include any relevant context needed to understand the quote in parentheses before the quote (for example, if it's dialogue, indicate who is speaking to whom).

**Contribution to the character's growth and maturation (analysis):** This should be a short paragraph that takes into consideration the information that you have already gathered, describing how the setting contributes to your character's search for her place in society (her maturation as an autonomous subject). You may wish to refer back to Mirianne Hirsch's characteristics of a *Bildungsroman* for guidance. This should focus on analysis and interpretation, not specific plot points, though you may refer (briefly) to a plot point if it is relevant. I would expect any ambiguities or contradictions to be pointed out, not ignored, since 1) a character's actions and attitudes are seldom completely consistent, and 2) you are writing about characters that are not static. See my example to get a handle on the level of detail and specificity that I expect here (do not turn this into a mini-essay, but it still needs to have clearly defined point of view).

### Example (partial)

The example is taken from the movie *Star Wars*, a movie that I have seen three or four times-- or, perhaps more accurately, three or four dozen times. It has many of the characteristics of a *Bildungsroman*, which is obviously why I am using it (that and the fact that the movie is bad-ass). This (partial) example is completed from the point of view of the protagonist Luke Skywalker.

#### **Tatooine (domestic spaces)**

**Specific places:** Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru's moisture farm; Ben Kenobi's hermitage

**Associated with:** Owen and Beru Lars (antagonists; Luke's uncle and aunt who run a moisture farm and want him to remain with them); Ben Kenobi (deuteragonist; former Jedi knight who is hiding in the desert from the Empire)

**Activities (taking place or associated with):** farming; buying, selling, and bartering; repair and maintenance; conversation (characters tend to talk about taking action without actually doing it)

**Characteristics:** ordered; the illusion of security (the characters generally do not realize how precarious their safety is); maintained by routines; governed by predictable cycles of events and relationships to the outside world

**Contribution to the social setting:** conservative bias (this inhibits Luke's growth and potential); pressure to fit into the existing social order; represents a compromise of values and principles in order to avoid conflict (characters work within an evil system without overtly challenging it, or, at the very least, work outside the system without posing a direct threat to it); at the same time, there are clear norms of right and wrong, good and bad behavior (though characters do not always live up to these ideals, such as when Uncle Owen instructs Luke to wipe the memory of the droids to avoid detection in case they turn out to be stolen), exemplified by Ben Kenobi passing on to Luke his father's lightsaber (a symbol of righteousness)

**Behaviors or psychological attributes of character (in this setting):** immature; complacent; minor rebellion that does not truly challenge the status quo

**Primary atmosphere/mood (an adjective):** safe

**Quote/s:** (Beru to Owen after Luke has left the room) "Owen, [Luke] can't stay here forever. Most of his friends have gone [...] Luke's just not a farmer, Owen. He has too much of his father in him."

**Contribution to the character's growth and maturation (analysis):**

Though Luke feels comfortable in places of relative safety, he chafes at the strictures and limitations of this environment. He wants to grow as a person and recognizes that he cannot achieve his full potential in such a secure setting, since it does not adequately test his character. At the same time, he is comfortable in these spaces and reluctant to leave them, though he intuits that he must-- at least eventually. Significantly, it is an external stimulus (the attack on his aunt and uncle's farm) that finally allows him to commit to change. In terms of Luke's character, this is where he is least individuated and least mature (compared to the growth he will have experienced by movie's end).

**Tatooine (public spaces):**

**Specific places:** desert; Mos Eisley cantina; streets of Mos Eisley

**Associated with:** R2-D2 (deuteragonist; droid that flees to the desert on a secret mission; object of the Empire's manhunt); sand people (antagonists; an indigenous, tribal population who resent excursions into their territory); Ben Kenobi (deuteragonist; Luke's mentor and an experienced guide through the dangers they must face); Imperial Stormtroopers (antagonists; agents of the galactic Empire who target Luke and Ben for being custodians of the missing droids); Han Solo (foil and uneasy deuteragonist with his own agenda; smuggler who agrees to transport Luke and Ben to Alderaan)

**Activities (taking place or associated with):** buying, selling, bartering, negotiation, cheating, and stealing; violent confrontations; treacherous behavior; criminal activity; satisfaction of base pleasures

**Characteristics:** anarchic (poorly defined power hierarchies, as characters operate both inside and outside ostensible authority); dangerous; unpredictable (in the way that actions can lead to unexpected results)

**Contribution to the social setting:** defined by lawlessness (in areas outside the cities) or criminality (in the cities themselves); avowed authoritarian control belied by a lack of structures to adequately maintain control; pressures to circumvent social and legal norms for individual gain (given the abundant opportunities for doing so and the high likelihood of getting away with it); pragmatic culture built around expediency and zero-sum interpersonal relationships (characters look for advantage over others)

**Behaviors or psychological attributes of character (in this setting):** reckless (Luke has some experience in this world, but not enough to really understand its dangers); naïve; eager for experience

**Primary atmosphere/mood (an adjective):** menacing

**Quote/s:** (Ben Kenobi speaking to Luke about Mos Eisley) "You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy. We must be cautious."

**Contribution to the character's growth and maturation (analysis):**

Here Luke is first able to test himself and his abilities, though he lacks the skills and survival instincts to successfully navigate this world alone. He enjoys the greater freedom of action, but is not tempted by the darker possibilities that this environment offers-- partially because his innate moral sense is so strong and partially because he is still relatively naïve. This is his first glimpse of the larger world and its dangers (both physical and spiritual), and it makes him eager to experience more, as he craves both adventure and the trials that he senses lay ahead. This is the outer boundary of Luke's world, and its perils strengthen his resolve to become the type of person that he wishes to become (a champion of truth and justice like Ben).