**A Brief Guide to Symbolic Settings**

Broadly, you have learned that setting is the time and place of a story, but understanding *how* an author uses the setting can help you understand a story. Below are a few important considerations regarding the setting of a story that are important.

The setting of a story can be stated in general terms and help describe the situation or context of the novel. For example, in the novel *Speak*, the story takes place at a fictional high school called “Merryweather High” in Syracuse, New York. Even though the exact year is not stated, it’s not important that the author do so. We just know that the author depicts a present-day experience of an unnamed freshman girl in suburban America. However, the setting is more complex than it may first appear. In his book *How to Read Novels Like a Professor,* Thomas Foster writes:

**“Places in a work of fiction are never real but must *behave* as real. Even real places are added to, modified, limited or falsified to add to the work. And places almost always work symbolically to enhance the novel” (45)**.

Let’s take the first indication of setting from the novel. The protagonist communicates to us that the “sun doesn’t shine much in Syracuse, so the art room is designed to get every bit of light it can” (10). The comment that Syracuse does not receive much sunlight is true in the literal world. Syracuse often receives extra cloud cover from the evaporation of water from the eastern Great Lakes to its west. It also gets hammered with lake-effect snow during the winter months. In this sense, the setting *behaves* as real.

Inexperienced readers will gloss over this setting, believing that the author picks Syracuse, New York, at random, or that the *school* designed the art room to receive light. By contrast, an experienced reader will see the author’s choice of setting as *intentional* because Anderson designs the art room and chooses its position to receive light in the novel, and she takes time to point this out to the reader using imagery. The image of south-facing windows is a *choice* the author makes intentionally, not randomly. Anderson *chooses* to provide the art room as a place that receives light with its south-facing windows *despite* the novel’s setting in a city that receives little sunlight. Because light almost always bears a positive connotation—and the chapter has a distinctly positive tone to it—it seems obvious to the critical reader that:

1. The general setting of the novel is important (that it takes place in Syracuse, and not Miami, for instance, where sunlight is abundant).
2. The specific setting of the art room, including the orientation of the windows, is important (it allows the protagonist to be *in the light*—whatever that suggests).
3. The setting is probably symbolic.

At this point, we cannot know *why* these observations are important because this description occurs early on in the novel. All that is important is that we are aware that of its potential significance and ask good questions:

“What might light imply given the plot events of this chapter?”

“Are there other examples of light (or darkness) that may appear earlier/later on in the novel in different settings?”