The Impact of Setting and Movement in the Message of a Work

In the realm of art, the framing of the work is as important as the work itself. In literature, the setting of the plot serves this same purpose – providing a context in which to analyze and understand the actions of characters. In another parallel, a character’s spatial interaction with a story’s setting is often an avenue for infusing a plot with additional themes, perspectives, and layers. Thomas Mann in *Death in Venice*, Franz Kafka in *The Metamorphosis*, and Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* all use setting and movement to enhance the messages their work expresses in different and similar ways.

Written in 1912, Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* revolves around a vacation that a wealthy, aging, German author makes to the Italian city of Venice where his suppressed homosexual thoughts arise from the infatuation with a young boy. The city of Venice functions as a character itself in the narrative, and is every bit as carefully chosen and crafted as the main character Gustav Aschenbach. Aschenbach has lived his entire life with high self-discipline, dedication to his occupation of being an author, and one that is nearly devoid of passion. Such unnatural behavior has lead to Aschenbach’s health problems and recent dissatisfaction with life. On the same token, Venice is an artificial entity – supported entirely by man-made beams and constantly battling the forces of nature that are trying to dismantle it. As a result of its prolonged and weary existence, darker and more unsettling traits lie beneath the glossy exterior of one of Europe’s most beautiful cities. When Aschenbach first arrives in the city, the skies are dark and “beneath the overcast dome of the sky the immense disk of the desolate sea stretched into the distance all around” (Mann 1524), with a fatigue inducing humidity permeating the atmosphere.
Disgusted by the weather, Aschenbach convinces himself to leave Venice shortly after arriving, but his encounter at the hotel with a beautiful young boy named Tadzio changes his mind later. Later in the story, the Venetian city officials struggle to handle the growing epidemic that is spreading through the streets. This alarming degradation of Venice mirrors the transformation that Achenbach himself is experiencing. He is aware of his growing obsession with Tadzio, yet deflects alarm away and tries to convince himself that it has not overtaken him. The city officials try to mask the seriousness of the disease to prevent people from panicking about becoming infected. The epidemic also corresponds to the growing decay of Aschenbach’s previous life, in that more and more his lust for Tadzio overtakes him and drives Aschenbach to follow Tadzio wherever the young boy chooses to go. In another extended metaphor, the beauty and ideal of Venice drew Aschenbach to visit it. Similarly, it is the beauty of Tadzio that Aschenbach is drawn to, but like in the case of Venice, Tadzio too is sickly upon closer inspection. Mann uses these parallel metaphors to reinforce the connection that Aschenbach and Tadzio have to the city and to each other, thus adding to the story a new level of depth. The movement of the characters is also critical in an analysis of Death in Venice, and all work towards the downward character arc of Aschenbach. The old author travels from the generally reserved, disciplined northern Europe to the more passionate, vivacious south. The shift in mentality provides the context and environment for change to occur. The movements of Aschenbach within the city help shed light on his mental state. When he is first taken to his hotel, the rocking of the gondola and serenity of the ride lull Aschenbach’s senses so there is little opposition to the illegal gondolier’s unusual actions. This lack of control over his destiny extends to the scene where he decides to leave Venice due to the disconcerting weather. Aschenbach’s slow ride back to the train station past the palaces and gardens of Venice and the thought of leaving Tadzio forces him to dwell on his decision. His conflicting rationales “were rising to the level of total disorientation”(Mann 1538)
until ultimately when discovering that his baggage was misplaced Aschenbach’s leaps at the chance to return. Later in the story, when he follows Tadzio around, his movement through the numerous alleys and backstreets demonstrate how far Aschenbach has strayed off the beaten path that he has both literally and figuratively been on for his whole life. The labyrinthine maze that comprises Venice vividly depicts what Aschenbach’s inner mind has become. While Death in Venice uses an entire city to make connections with its character, Kafka achieves the same using a single room as seen in The Metamorphosis.

Franz Kafka’s The Metamorphosis has enjoyed enormous popularity due to its shocking tale of a young man being turned into a monstrous vermin upon waking in the morning. Kafka dramatically shifts the perspective of the reader to revolve around a character who is quite literally not human. Kafka reinforces this change in perspective through the distinct awareness of the spatial dimensions of the story’s singular setting, which is the apartment flat of a middle class family. Gregor Samsa, the young man who is transformed, ends up being confined to the walls of his bedroom after his family, upon seeing his new form, becomes terrified of him and locks him in. His only avenues to the outside world include the door, opened when his sister comes to bring him food or clean his room, and the window. Sympathy for Gregor is evoked as Kafka describes how Gregor is slow in coming to terms to his harsh new reality. The condition of Gregor’s bedroom is used to reflect the slowly changing state of his mind. At first, the room is kept in a state of order and cleaned regularly, but as the story progresses, less and less attention is paid to Gregor by the family and the room falls into dilapidated disarray. Furniture is taken out of the room or re-arranged, signifying the increasing lack of control Gregor has over his surroundings. He stands up to this by ferociously defending a piece of artwork dear to him. Later on, the walls become grimier and trash litters the floor. The transformation of Gregor’s setting parallels his
mental devolution from human-like to animal-like, for his surroundings go from being a room to a lair. Gregor’s family undergoes a parallel metamorphosis as well. Before Gregor’s transformation into a vermin, he was the breadwinner for the family while the rest of his family was rather lethargic. After the change, however, his father becomes more attentive in matters, his mother finds work sewing underwear, and Gregor sees an industrious side of his sister that he had never seen before. The other living quarters of the Samsa residence also changes in response to his transformation. Boarders are taken in to help make ends meet and the family went from eating in the dining room to eating in the kitchen, mirroring their drop in social status as well. Ultimately however, after Gregor perishes, the family moves out of the apartment to a better place, and thinks that “their future prospects…were anything but bad”(Kafka 1672) and that “their jobs were all exceedingly advantageous and also promising”(Kakfa 1672). The bright setting of the future for the remaining Samsa family contrasts with the wretched ending of Gregor’s life and highlights the tragic nature of the whole metamorphosis. Great detail is provided to the reader concerning the movements of Gregor. Kafka describes both the limitations his vermin body imposes, such as the inability to quickly turn around, but also freedoms such as being able to walk on the ceiling. This latter idea refers to a much greater social theme in the story. There exists a duality in the spatial movement Gregor has after his transformation. On one hand, he is restricted to his bedroom for the rest of his life. On the other hand, he enjoys an extra dimension in movement inside this cramped space through being smaller and the latter ability mentioned above. Similarly, on a social level, when a person is outcast from society, though they may enjoy greater personal freedoms in not obeying all of cultural norms, they are still ultimately confined to the nether outside the rest of society. Kafka, being an outcast himself because of his religion, his ambitions, and choice of language, relates well to this idea. Woolf also relates to being an outcast because of her gender, and her work explores this issue in depth.
A Room of One’s Own, by early women rights activist Virginia Woolf, originally began as a lecture to women’s colleges and addresses the issue of literature in history and the plight of women authors. Written in the stream-of-consciousness style, A Room of One’s Own describes the state of awareness in remarkable detail, and the setting directly interacts with the narrator’s awareness and influences her train of thoughts. Beginning with the fictional and subtle satirical ‘Oxbridge College’, the narrator ponders of the educational divide in society. For ages men have had access to any topic of any field and subject, with numerous opportunities to learn a wide variety of skills and abilities. Women, the narrator observes, have not been given access to such opportunities and thus are incapable of advancing themselves in society. Woolf speaks of the unjust persecution of women when she recounts how she was “forbidden entrance to the [Oxbridge] library”(1618) because she was a women. In the next chapter of A Room of One’s Own, the narrator moves from the college environment to the British Library. Her physical movement also moves her mind from the disparity of education to general social discrepancies between men and women. Sparked by the luncheon she attended at Oxbridge, the narrator begins to think “why did the men drink wine and the women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor?”(Woolf 1619). While she is not confined in a particular setting, the narrator’s mind flows free to various thoughts and ideas. Her journey takes her through the streets of London to the British Museum. The library of the museum mels the narrator’s mind to the representation of women in literature. Woolf points out how men have dictated and maintained the role, the function, and purpose of women through the thousands of books published on the topic. She disgustedly points out that often these thoughts are contributed to society by “men who have no apparent qualification save that they are not women”(Woolf 1620). The male dominated setting even, of the library, works to fuel her criticism and At the end of the chapter, the narrator leaves the British Museum and again Woolf uses this transitional movement
to shift the focus of *A Room of One’s Own* to a different topic. Also described in detail is the time of day and new location. Woolf writes “lamps were being lit and an indescribable change had come over London since the morning hour” (Woolf 1627), and later describes the activities commencing on her little street. This shifts the mood of the story towards more personal and more introverted thoughts, much like the gondola rides in Mann’s *Death in Venice*. The narrator is moving out of the busy city and to the quiet of her own home. It is here that Woolf remarks at the sad reality that women lack of room of their own. This metaphor describes the fact that in the household, men have the parlor, the study, and command of the bedroom. A women’s only place is in the kitchen, and the kitchen is often the most public place of a household. Expanding this metaphor to the world at large, women lack a role that they define for themselves.

Because of her literary technique of stream of consciousness, Virginia Woolf crafts her settings and movements to directly interact and influence the narrator’s active thoughts. Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka on the other hand choose the settings and movements contained in their works to parallel and mirror the physical and mental transformations of their character. The setting is one of the fundamental elements of any narrative, but sometimes in literature it takes a back seat to powerful dialogue or mental imagery. Mann, Kafka, and Woolf in their respective works revived the setting to play an influential role in interacting with both the plot and with the characters in subtle and profound ways. As an extension of setting, these authors deftly structure the movements of their characters around the environments to add in social context and themes. The power of employing these literary techniques lies in the way they add entirely new dimensions to the mental frame of mind of the reader.
Works Cited –

