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The Importance of Time, Place, and Context:

Exploring the Use of Setting and References within John Cheever’s “The Country Husband”

and Edith Wharton’s “Roman Fever”

Certain literary elements are often looked at as more significant than others. While it is generally recognized that the setting, or the time and location that a story takes place, and allusions to historical events may aid in establishing a certain mood or theme, they are commonly considered less important than the main literary factors of plot and characterization. However, John Cheever’s “The Country Husband” and Edith Wharton’s "Roman Fever" show that setting and historical references are far from trivial literary elements.

Within John Cheever’s “A Country Husband,” the description of two distinct settings combined with references to war creates a compelling backdrop. The opening scene is a chaotic plane crash, where the air is “overheated and stale,” the exhaust fires are “blaz[ing] and shed[ding] sparks in the dark,” and the cabin has “an atmosphere of intense and misplaced domesticity” (Cheever 74). This brief yet violent setting, however, disappears quickly, and takes on the characteristics of another world, with the narrator noting that he has “no power that [will] let him re-create a brush with death—particularly…journeying through a sunny countryside” (75). This transition from disorder ends in the narrator’s home, which, although it appears to be “polished and tranquil” (75) with “nothing…neglected” (75), is often referred to as
a “battlefield” (77). This contrast between turmoil and perfection is also shown on a larger scale, where the neighbourhood and society seem rather strictly organized and structured, with phrases like “the atmosphere of Shady Hill ma[king] the memory unseemly and impolite” (79) and “in a community like this” (86) giving the impression of stern societal rules that are almost tangible.

The many references to Greek legends, such as the burden of Atlas (82) and the vision of the golden haired “sired” combing her hair (81) seem grossly out of with the “true colorlessness” (86) of the narrator’s world. Perhaps even more pervasive than the Greek references, however, are the references to war. While there are indeed a myriad of such allusions, such as the pilot singing a war tune and the comparison to the Marne (74), there is one reference that adds greatly to not only the characterization of the setting, but also to the story itself. The narrator notes that although the Second World War took place not even a decade ago, many people seem to make the “tacit claim that there ha[s] been no past, no war…no danger or trouble in the world” (79).

Therefore, although the war is considered “distant” (79), through the multiple references it may be inferred that, although everyone seems determined to ignore it, the war has indeed had a lasting effect upon the entire community.

There are also many historical references in the setting of Edith Wharton’s “Roman Fever.” Similar to the aforementioned story, “Roman Fever” also describes two settings. While New York is described comparatively little, its societal rules are quite persistent. Mrs. Slade, when thinking of her home, considers it so mundane and boring that she would “rather live opposite a speak-easy for a change” (Wharton 115). The alternate main setting is Rome, which is intricately embedded within the title although it is unclear whether it alludes to the “Roman Fever” of disease or the passion that seems to infuse Rome’s very atmosphere (113). By all accounts, it is a “stupendous scene” (113), yet when the ladies look "down on the
outspread glories of the Palatine and the Forum” (114), rather than admiring the view, the characters dwell in the past. Within this context, the beauty of Rome takes on the new, important role of the catalyst that leads to the final epiphanies of the characters. These realizations appear to have required the setting of Rome to surface; the conversation may have never even occurred had the ladies only met within their New York circles. These strict mores of upper-class society prior to the Second World War and the fierce stigma attached to illegitimate children provide an important impetus behind the plot and characterizations within the story. However, even the characters within the story note some changing societal views, with one noting “what different things Rome stands for to each generation of travelers” (117). The setting of Rome was a key part of the story.

While the elements of “The Country Husband” and “Roman Fever” may appear to be very different, they actually serve similar roles. First, the juxtaposition of settings provides a significant contrast within the stories, without which they would not be nearly as compelling. Second, the settings have a substantial role within each story, almost to the point where they appear to be directly participating. For example, within “The Country Husband,” the norms of the narrator’s society almost seem tangible, and appear to not only provide structure for the morals of the society, but also to actively restrict the narrator’s actions and thoughts. The sharp contrast between the plane crash and this strict society throws the narrator’s ostensibly immoral actions into a sharp relief with the projected proper way to act. In comparison, the morals of New York are also active within “Roman Fever.” While lavish descriptions can effectively draw one into the story, the underlying moral principles of the time are always present and active. Without the settings as they are, these respective stories would be different; in each case, the setting provides the variations of restrictions and freedoms that are the root causes of the conflicts
within the stories. Similarly, each setting and historical reference allows for individual interpretations of the story and characters; therefore, these seemingly small literary elements can be seen as the most crucial component of the story as they provide the basis for understanding the essence of the story.

Cheever’s “The Country Husband” by Wharton’s “Roman Fever” demonstrate that setting and historical references have a significant impact on the reader’s overall understanding of the story. In “Roman Fever,” Rome has a magical air that sharply contrasts with the principles of upper class New York society and serves as the spark for a life changing conversation. Similarly, in Cheever’s “The Country Husband,” the restrictions of the narrator’s normal life are juxtaposed against the harsh reality of war and a plane crash. Through these works it can be seen that a carefully built setting can prove to be a valuable asset to any story.
Works Cited
