

Setting and theme:
'this boy's life,'
'running in the family,'
and the link betwe...



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In literature, different settings are often used to explain the production of different types of characters with varied opinions, personalities, and morals. On top of this, the setting is often used to carry a specific idea or emphasize the goal of the characters. The rural locations of each of these books push towards a common theme of escape. In the memoirs *This Boy's Life* by Tobias Wolff and *Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje the element of setting is significant in that it aids with the reader's understanding of the writer's personal goals both at the time of the events as well as in writing their memoir through acting as a vehicle for theme as well as giving explanation to character's actions and feelings.

In both of these memoirs, a theme surrounding the idea of escape arises, rooting itself in the isolation that the characters experience in their current settings. *Running in the Family* takes place on the island of Ceylon and *This Boy's Life* in small-town Concrete, Washington. While Ondaatje himself may not have specifically tried to escape the island of Ceylon, he states that he "realized he had slipped past a childhood he had ignored and not understood." implying that his life in Ceylon has slipped past his fingers (22). It is seen that Ondaatje's father wants to escape Ceylon through his incessant drinking as well as his attempts to escape his parent's watchful eye in order to experience his own life after he arrives in England for school, as it is said "It was two and a half years later [...] that his parents discovered that he had not even passed the entrance exam and was living off their money in England." (31) Tobias Wolff describes similar wishes to run away when he states "Eighty dollars seemed a lot of money, more than enough for my purpose, which was to run away to Alaska." (155) The rural

and “trapping” settings of both of these memoirs aids with the reader’s understanding of the discontent that the characters experience and their want to escape. In this sense, the isolation the characters experience through their setting acts as a vehicle for the theme in these two memoirs.

Through the progression of these stories, it becomes more and more clear that each of the writers has used their imagination as a place of refuge from the settings of their homes. Ondaatje uses his imagination to construct the answers to past questions he could not answer himself, and Tobias Wolff uses his to reconstruct himself, for example when he steals his high school’s forms in order to fill out his own grades and letters of recommendations for boarding school applications. In the act of filling them out, he states, “That was what I thought I was writing – the truth. It was truth known only to me, but I believed in it more than I believed in the facts arrayed against it.” (213) Tobias is once again trying to escape from the setting in which he lives. Ondaatje similarly constructs “truths” throughout his memoir, such as when he describes the death of his grandmother, Lalla, as “Her last perfect journey.” (128) Although he was not present for Lalla’s death he describes it in great detail, therefore filling a gap in his search through his childhood. He is creating a reality for himself in order to escape from the unknown in his life and to try to piece together his life. Both character’s use of imagination speaks to how the setting acts as a way to explain the behavior of the characters and the author’s writing style as well, which continues to push the theme of escape in the books.

Despite the constant searching for a way out of their childhood places in

Running in the Family and This Boy’s Life, in the end, the characters find
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themselves bound to where they grew up because of the notion of home. While living in Concrete Tobias states, " I was bound to accept my home as a place I did not feel at home in." (105) and then again after he has gone to live elsewhere and joined the army he says, " I did not know that the word home would forever be filled with this place" (287) Even though Tobias has demonstrated an extreme desire to leave behind his home in Concrete, he is deeply rooted there. This is the paradox in the theme of escape in these two memoirs. Similarly, in *Running in the Family*, the fact that Ondaatje is revisiting his past at all is a sign that he is holding onto Ceylon. In the first section of the book, he states, " It was a new winter and I was already dreaming of Asia." (22) Ondaatje wishes to return to his home in order to rediscover his childhood and the truth about his family. The settings in both of these books are described as a home, a very relatable concept, which explains how drawn the authors are to them. Here the setting acts not only as character behavior explanation but also as a factor in allowing the reader to sympathize.

The setting is a significant element in literature in that it boosts the comprehensibility of the book by aiding in the reader's understanding of the character's actions and feelings as well as that it acts as a vehicle for the theme. In *Running in the Family* and *This Boy's Life* the rural settings of the island of Ceylon and Concrete, Washington are major players in each of the character's development and the major inclusion of these settings in the memoirs as a literary element is a tool the authors use to help the reader to understand the events of the book. The theme of escape in both books is also established by the location in which they take place, a theme that

without specified setting might be difficult to determine. For these reasons, the setting is an important literary aspect.