

An essential foundation: the role setting plays in american theatre



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For the sake of the audience, a theatre production relies on a well-designed and thematically relevant setting. This is because a setting is responsible for designating the audience in a particular time and place, in addition to creating a specific social or political environment. In some plays, the setting is so detailed and ornate that it becomes a character in itself. In others, particularly in modern theatre, the set is so bare that the audience has to work with their imaginations in order to orient themselves. The setting furnishes the shaping of the plot, as well as the motivations and sometimes the personalities of the characters. But most importantly, the setting of a theatrical production is crucial for demonstrating to the audience the overarching thematic message that the playwright is trying to convey. For Eugene O'Neill, his set in *Desire Under the Elms* proves the importance of a home and its relationship to an individual's identity. In Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, the set is vital to conveying the philosophical messages about the transience of natural life.

Something unique about *Desire Under the Elms* is that it is an adaptation of the Greek tragedy of *Phaedra*. In the legend, *Phaedra* falls in love with her stepson, *Hippolytus*, and thus incurs the wrath of her husband, *Theseus*. What O'Neill does is take the classic Greek tragedy and apply it to a rural New England setting in 1850. Currently, it is increasingly common with adaptations that a new setting ceases to bring the thematic impact of the original piece. However, being written in 1924 at the height of Freud's popularity and influence, O'Neill makes a play about essentially an Oedipal tangle relevant to the discoveries of modern psychology. The playwright's

fearlessness in uprooting the setting of the play and making it tangible to a modern time period shows how essential the role of setting is in theatre.

In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill establishes the setting of the play as a character itself, thus reflecting the character-driven nature of the plot. Included just below the list of characters in the set description is, "Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house on appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles" (O'Neill, 318). This meticulously detailed description not only personifies the set but also emphasizes the important role the set will play. O'Neill creates a gloomy tone to resonate throughout the rest of the piece, thus foreshadowing the tragic nature of the plot. The house itself is, "...in good condition but in need of paint. Its walls are a sickly grayish, the green of the shutters faded" (O'Neill, 318). Despite the threatening character of the setting, the main characters of the play will constantly be shown asserting the loyalty they feel towards their home.

In one of the most notable scenes of the play, Eben and his father's wife, Abbie, consummate their passions in the house's parlor, the location where Eben's mother died. O'Neill indicates that the parlor hasn't been touched since Eben's mother died there, and the setting is described as, "A grim, repressed room like a tomb in which the family has been interred alive"
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(O'Neill, 352). This description returns back to the “sinister maternity” of the elms over the house, thus symbolizing the colossal shadow that the spirit of Eben's dead mother has left over the house. Though clearly a sacred space to all in the house, particularly to Eben, he and Abbie desecrate the room by consummating their overwhelming desires there. By doing so in this place of death, their actions foreshadow the tragic future of their relationship, culminating in Abbie's murder of their infant son. The parlor is a significant setting in the play as it reiterates the tragic atmosphere that O'Neill is striving for.

Setting plays a key part in the idea of Patria for each of the characters in *Desire Under the Elms*. For the two supporting characters, Eben's half-brothers Simeon and Peter, their desired home is “Californi-a”. The play is set in 1850, just one year after the California gold rush, and the two brothers are eager to find their fortunes on the west coast. As Peter puts it, “...thar's the promise...Gold in the sky...”(O'Neill, 320). This quote represents the American promise of prosperity in the United States. However, it also shows that these particular characters do not feel a connection to their own farm as their “home”. Perhaps it is because of this that O'Neill casts of the characters by sending them to California and leaving the audience with the drama of the three main characters, who do feel the connection to the farm that Simeon and Peter lack.

Abbie's connection to the farm as her home, despite being there for so little time, shows an interesting revelation about her character as well as the idea of Patria for the female. From pages 338 to 339, Abbie describes her tragic life as a wanderer without a permanent home until meeting Ephraim. Now <https://assignbuster.com/an-essential-foundation-the-role-setting-plays-in-american-theatre/>

with a permanent residence, Abbie boldly proclaims to Eben, “ This be my farm – this be my hum – this be my kitchen!” (O’Neill, 339). Just like Hestia in Greek mythology, Abbie has the opportunity to tend to a hearth and refuses to give that identity up, knowing how it is to live without a permanent setting. Through Abbie, O’Neill shows how setting gives the character not only a home, but also an identity.

The farm as a setting proves especially important to the motivations and characterizations of Eben. Because the farm had originally belonged to his mother and it went to Ephraim upon her death, Eben shows particular hatred towards his father, believing that he deliberately worked his mother to death to get his hands on it. Defending his belief to his brothers, Eben declares, “... Ye’ve no right! She wa’n’t yewr Maw! It was her farm! Didn’t he steal it from her? She’s dead. It’s my farm” (O’Neill, 323). This attitude shows the particular faithfulness and protectiveness Eben shows toward his farm, and thus his home. With the farm used as the setting for the play, the audience is able to witness the dedication he has towards it, thus exemplifying to the audience the unbreakable connection to one’s true setting as their home.

It is perhaps in the character of Ephraim that we witness the most passionate desire for Patria in O’Neill’s play. Though he is absent for a while before he returns with Abbie, Ephraim expresses to her a massive amount of loyalty to the farm, going so far as to harshly work his sons and (according to Eben) drive his former wife to her grave. Ephraim explains to Abbie, “ They hated me ‘ cause I was hard. I hated them ‘ cause they was soft. They coveted the farm without knowin’ what it meant. It made me bitter ‘ n wormwood. It aged me – them coveting what I’d made fur mine” (O’Neill, <https://assignbuster.com/an-essential-foundation-the-role-setting-plays-in-american-theatre/>

349-50). Ephraim, perhaps through age, shows that he believes he knows more about what land means to a person. He understands that one shouldn't possess land out of spite or entitlement, such as Eben does. Ephraim represents that owning land doesn't necessarily mean it's your home; it is cultivating it and growing with it that makes it so. Through the three main characters' desires in *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill shows how the setting of a play represents the place of identity in the theatre.

Thornton Wilder's beloved play *Our Town* remains a classic in American theatre for a multitude of reasons, but especially because it is timeless. Though it takes place in specific years, Wilder presents a universal message about the appreciation of life that relates every audience member in a heartbreakingly individual way. Wilder presents an archetypical American town through an experimental theatrical set that would change the way an audience connected with the action onstage.

Wilder's *Our Town* is one of the earliest examples of experimental theatre. For example, Act I starts with these stage directions, "No curtain. No scenery. The audience, arriving, sees an empty stage in half-light" (Wilder, 5). A set up such as this is remarkably different from earlier American plays, O'Neill being a prominent example. Rather than making the plot and characters less accessible to an audience with a set such as this, Wilder instead seems to bridge the gap between the stage and the seats. By using minimal props and having characters mime regular activities, such as eating breakfast, the audience is forced to imagine the real setting for themselves. A technique such as this personalizes the action on stage to each audience member, thus creating a tighter connection to the universal, individualized

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message that Wilder attempts to convey. This element of *Our Town* is just the first of a number of production methods Wilder uses.

In the text of the play, it is easy to see that the stage directions rarely refer to the set itself, a clear contrast to O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*. Instead, the stage directions often refer to the actions of the character. The set is instead explained to the audience by one of American theatre's most beloved characters, the Stage Manager. Resembling a narrator in a novel, the Stage Manager exists in two worlds: the one presented on stage and the world of the audience. He is used to help the audience designate the town, Grover's Corners, as not only belonging to the characters on stage, but to the audience members as well. For example, he tells the audience, "In our town we like to know the facts about everybody" (Wilder, 9). It is the constant use of the words "we" and "ours" that begins to personalize the set for the audience, depending on each individual's imagination or personal experience. This written technique proves itself significant because it forces the audience members to recall the meaning in every moment of their own lives outside the theatre while at home.

The structure of the set in *Our Town* proves itself to be very important to the thematic message of the play. For example, in the morning of Act I there is a constant interchanging of the Webb and Gibbs households. The text shows one matriarch speaking right after the other, though clearly in the narrative they are speaking only to their households, not to each other. Because there is no physical wall or set piece separating them, the audience isn't limited to just one set. The entire theatre, not just the stage, encapsulates the entire town, once again reinforcing the significance of the term "Ours".

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Sung three times through the course of the production is the hymn, “Blessed Be the Tie That Binds”. It is sung in Act I during a normal day, Act II at a wedding, and Act III at a funeral. While mirroring the narrative’s relationship between Emily and George, the song is also used to reflect the never-ending circle of life. Through each moment of life, even on ordinary days such as the one seen in the first Act, Wilder reminds us that individuals are forever connected to each other in human nature. As an American audience becoming a part of a classic American town, the hymn indicates that all present in the theatre are collectively linked with their land.

Another unique element of the play essential to the setting is the frequent manipulation of time. Besides each act jumping forward in years, the Stage Manager is shown calling back scenes from the past, usually to explain the present. In Act II, the Stage Manager takes a curious audience to see the emergence of George and Emily’s relationship in Mr. Morgan’s soda fountain. In Act III, a desperate Emily is taken back to her twelfth birthday, which happens with devastating effects on the deceased young woman. Time is continually manipulated, but the setting of Grover’s Corners always remains the same with the exceptions of the natural changes time and life bring. Wilder uses this technique to remind the audience of how quickly their own lives pass, despite their presumably constant settings.

What makes theatre such a special artistic environment is that everything presented on stage is remarkable or special in some way. Our Town presents normal actions the audience does themselves, such as reading the paper or gossiping, yet the audience sees all of these things as extraordinary anyways. In Act III, the characters that have died are shown sitting on chairs

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on stage, representing their gravestones yet also resembling the perspective of the audience. It is when Emily returns to her twelfth birthday, a simple and normal day, that the audience realizes that their perspective is from the dead characters up on stage, who look back on life wishing that they had treasured every single moment of living. This is the heartbreaking theatrical device in the set that Wilder uses to present his universal message about the often-overlooked yet unintelligibly rapid pace of human life.

What both plays are able to do is take note of the artificiality of the theatre itself as a setting, but does so to reinforce the thematic elements of the piece. In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill seems to have decided that the medium of the theatre is a hateful one and seemingly starts to chip away at it. He does this by making the text of his play into a novelistic style, seen just under the character descriptions with the excruciatingly detailed set description as mentioned earlier. Though surely unrecognizable to an audience, a reader of the play notices elements such as these and recognizes how it adds to the bitter nature of the play. *Our Town* also recognizes the synthetic nature of presenting real life in a theatre, though in a considerably less pessimistic way than O'Neill. For example, the Stage Manager constantly disrupts scenes and moves time around to remind the audience that the normal activities seen onstage are not real life. The lack of props would also seem to indicate that what is being presented is not real life. However, it is through this structure of story telling and set design that Wilder brings the audience closer to the symbolic importance of the play. Therefore, though continually deeming the theatre itself as just an imitation

of real life, the set techniques that each author uses simply strengthen the message each attempts to convey.

Eugene O’Neill’s 1924 play *Desire Under the Elms*, through the use of setting, illustrates O’Neill’s sense that the connection an American has to their land is all encompassing and can lead to devastating conclusions. Thornton Wilder’s 1938 play *Our Town* utilizes an experimental theatrical environment to prove a point about the impermanent nature of human existence and the seemingly little value that people put into each day. To both productions, the set provides the foundation from which the playwright, the actors, and the crew give an audience something to truly contemplate as they leave the theatre to enter the real world once again. The setting in a theatre production changes with every play, playwright, and director, yet it’s importance in establishing a base for the audience makes it the key component for the medium of theatre.