

How Writers Write Fiction 2016: Storied Women

CLASS FOUR • Assignment

In this course, we are using the word immersion to talk about setting because we want to think about setting as a three-dimensional, full-world experience. Most truly immersive settings include careful construction of a physical place: small scraps of smell or taste, broad sweeps of color and sound; the room the characters stand in as well as the next room over and the city outside and the land beyond it. But most truly immersive settings are also built through use of the characters who occupy them. The description of a wave crashing over a pier succeeds not only because of the author's precise descriptions of the gunshot noise of the boards breaking and the cold pinprick shocks of water on a character's face, but also because of the access the author gives us to the character's psychological experience of this moment: the uneasy feeling of worry turning into fear, the isolation of hearing shouted messages in foreign languages, the urge to run. Consider the approaches that Lesley Jamison, Alisa Ganieva, Shenaz Patel, and Naomi Jackson have discussed regarding setting.

Write a story or scene in which you create an immersive experience of a setting or a world.

Make this a setting in which a disastrous or momentous change has recently happened. In your story, show the reader some glimpses of what this world the world is like now *and* some glimpses of how it used to be.

For example,

look at the first line of this week's reading assignment, which is an excerpt from Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*: "We slept in what had once been the gymnasium." That first line tells us that we are entering a world where something has probably gone wrong somehow: when all is well, people don't normally sleep in gymnasiums. Maybe there has been an evacuation of some kind, because of a tornado or a bombing.

Then look at the next line: "The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone."

That line confirms our sense of an uncertain or unstable world: when all is well, people don't normally sleep in disused gymnasiums either, where no renovations have been done, where no one even bothered to remove the nets. What happened to the school that used this gym? Where are the students?

Then a little later we come to these lines: "We folded our clothes neatly and laid them on the stools at the ends of the beds. The lights were turned down but not out. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts."



These lines confirm that all is not well in this world: the people sleeping in this gym, including our narrator, are watched by armed guards. These guards may be there to protect our narrator, or to control her, or both, but in either case, something disastrous or momentous has recently happened.

Throughout the excerpt, you'll notice that Atwood uses physical details to give the reader a sense of the contrast between the past and the present. ("We had flannelette sheets, like children's, and army-issue blankets, old ones that still said U.S."). Throughout, you'll also notice that Atwood uses psychological details to show us how this setting feels to the narrator. ("We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semidarkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space.") And through the narrator's descriptions of her setting – the places and people around her – you'll begin to get a sense of who she is.

Before you start writing,

consider how you can use physical details to create a setting, as well as details of your setting's history and its present-day culture. Consider how you could use different female characters to create an understanding of what it is like to live in this world, and decide which characters you want to show the world to the reader, and how you want them to show it – through dialogue, through internal narrative, through action.

Your disastrous or momentous change doesn't have to be on a large scale.

It could be something very large, such as the overthrow of a society, as in Atwood's novel. Or it could be something much smaller: a town that flooded, a house that burned down. Or it could be something internal to one of the characters, something, for her, that changes how the entire world around her feels and works: a death, a lost job, a vanished memory.

You can choose to focus on one female character or several, as you prefer. You can expand or revise one of your past assignments for this exercise, or you can write something new. And you are welcome include non-binary gender orientations in your application of the word "female."

If you're having trouble getting started on this assignment

and you want to read a complete story in addition to the Atwood excerpt, you might try one of the following: "[When My Wife Was A Shitake](#)", written by Kyoko Nakajima and translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori or "[The Yellow Wallpaper](#)", written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.