

In what ways does Jonathan Safran Foer utilize setting to manifest the narrators' characterization in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*?

The setting of a literary work is essential to the mentality and thought process of the characters within said works. Characters often are the products of the setting, affecting the tone, and the overall plot of the story. This can be noted through the way the characters interact with each other throughout the story, how characters would react if they were placed in a different setting, and the cultural, historical and financial upbringing of a character/narrator. If a character is situated in a dissenting and rejecting environment, then the character will evidently develop distinctly than one who was surrounded by a setting of pure contentment and prosperity. In the specific case of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, the plot looks at a psychologically scarred boy named Oskar's quest to learn how his Dad died on 11 Sep. 2001 in the World Trade Center, and weaves in and out the first-point-of-view narrations of Oskar's grandparents and their shared, universal themes of trauma and suffering based on their own experiences. The three settings of the utmost importance for the development of the characterization of Oskar, Thomas (Oskar's grandfather), and grandmother were New York City, Dresden, Germany and the airport.

The prominent stylistic technique of expanding the setting of New York City is necessary in emerging the personalities and emotional responses of each of the narrators, most specifically of the 9 year old protagonist Oskar. He is extremely imaginative and gifted, but following the death of his father, his confidant, his supporter, his favorite person in existence, he is forced to deal with a variety of fears, anxieties, worries and guilt out in the real world. The plot of the

Daniela Del Angel

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novel centers around his expedition to figure out the purpose of a mysterious key he found in his dad's closet, and his journey takes him through the five boroughs of New York City. In one of the initial chapters, Oskar begins his hero's journey when he ventures into his father's closet, which he hadn't gone into since he died, due to the nostalgia that was overcoming him during his sleep. As he was wandering through his dad's closet, he noticed a vase on the highest shelf and because of his curiosity, naturally climbed up on a chair and a stack of Shakespearean novels to reach for the vase. Oskar writes, "But then I had the tips of my fingers on the vase, and the tragedies started to wobble, and the next thing was that everything was on the floor.." (pg 37). This unique allusion to the Shakespearean tragedies serves as a comparison to the tragedy Oskar was facing with the terrorist attack on 9 September of 2001 which drives his character to begin his journey. By having him wobble under these tragedies, it clearly represents how he has similarly lost footing of his past and his suffering, but still given him the stability to reach for the key, reach for closure. When he finds the key, he is called to the adventure of discovering where the key leads, and does it not solely for the journey, but mainly as a way to ultimately receive closure from his dad's death and as a manner to deal with his own survivor's guilt.

In a similar manner in which Oskar's setting shapes his interactions and spontaneous flows of consciousness throughout the work, Thomas is another one of the narrators in which his past life in Dresden, Germany influences his characterization decades later as he writes a series of letters to his "unborn son" that he never delivers. Growing up in Dresden, Germany, Thomas was a sculptor, sensitive and artistic filled with great passion as he fell in love with his lover, Anna. However, a firebombing by the US and Great Britain near the end of WWII occurred in the city, which caused him to lose his entire family, including Anna, who became pregnant and

was killed, along with their unborn baby, in the conflict. Although he survives, he is forced to deal with a tremendous amount of post-traumatic stress disorder and survivor's guilt. As a result of this trauma and suffering, Thomas gradually loses the ability to speak and resorts to communicating mainly through gestures, writing notes, and the words YES and NO tattooed on his palms. As he articulates his complex reflections through his letters, he delivers a powerful line saying, "I could have released myself from the marble of myself, I could have released joy, but not nearly enough.." (pg 33) This is a vivid metaphor to his past career as a sculptor to show how just like he would sculpt marble into wonderful creations, he could have also recreated himself from his pain and endless suffering but he doesn't. He refuses to move on, as he remains in love with Anna, mourning her loss, and it follows through to the closed-off relationship he forms with Grandma when he meets her in New York City.

Furthermore, Oskar's grandmother is the third narrator in the novel and all of her chapters are entitled "My Feelings" and they're all segments of a letter she's writing to Oskar from the airport, another underlying, yet principal setting throughout the work. Due to both Grandma and Thomas' mutual sense of loneliness and mourning, they arrange an elaborate system of rules for themselves, one of which is for Grandma to never get pregnant. When she breaks this rule, Grandpa leaves her to return to Germany and abandons her until he returns forty years later after the death of Oskar's father. In an attempt to presumably run away once again, Grandma follows him to the airport and convinces him to live in the airport with her, a place where everyone is either coming or going, yet they're the only ones that stay. She writes, "They are announcing flights over the speakers. We are not listening. They do not matter to us, because we are not going anywhere." (pg 174) This conveys the ironic idea that both Grandpa and

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Grandma enjoy watching families reunite, yet they cannot do the same. They are metaphorically stuck in time, and because of the airport setting, the reader is able to characterize Grandma as a narrator who understands both her and Grandpa's limitations with their past, but nonetheless wishes to find comfort in his companionship.

Succinctly, through the different settings in New York City, flashbacks to Dresden, Germany, and letters written from the airport, the author is able to characterize Oskar, Thomas and Grandma into their complex characters. The universal themes of loss, suffering, trauma and guilt are evidently manifested through the work, which allows for the successful advancement of the plot.