**How Setting Affects Characterization and Conflict**

***From janefriedman.com***

It’s human nature to notice what’s changed—you might not notice an object on your mantel every day, but you do notice when it’s missing. If an object, like a beloved photograph, was foreshadowed earlier in the story, you can now show that it’s missing. Instead of starting such a scene with the character re-entering the living room, you show the reader that the first thing the character notices when she enters the living room is the gap on the mantel: the space where her mother’s photo was. *Bam!* We’re in that living room without spending a lot of time re-describing what the reader has already been shown.

Look at how Laura Anne Gilman (*Hard Magic*) orients the reader as to where the character is physically in space and gives a hint of the protagonist’s backstory, characterization of two different characters, and a hint of potential conflict between characters through her description of a room. All in only one paragraph!

The only way to describe J’s place was “warm.” Rosewood furniture against cream-colored walls, and touches of dark blue and flannel gray everywhere, broken by the occasional bit of foam green from his Chinese pottery collection. You’d have thought I’d have grown up to be Uber Society Girl, not pixie-Goth, in these surroundings. Even my bedroom—now turned back into its original use as a library—had the same feel of calm wealth to it, no matter how many pop-culture posters I put up or how dark I painted the walls.

Now let’s dissect that paragraph to see the power of the individual parts.

*The only way to describe J’s place was “warm.”*

[Subjective emotion from the POV character that gives a hint of her relationship with the home’s owner. Plus we are able to get a quick sense of the feel of a place; we know when we’ve been in a warm or cool room even if we don’t have too many details yet.]

*Rosewood furniture against cream-colored walls, and touches of dark blue and flannel gray everywhere,*

[Notice the pieces of furniture are not described because it’s not important to know there’s a couch or two chairs in the room. It’s more important to get a sense of the owner of the room by his choice of subtle and understated colors and the wood—rosewood is a world away from oak or distressed pine. We’re getting a glimpse into the world of the secondary character here.]

*broken by the occasional bit of foam green from his Chinese pottery collection.*

[Here, because collecting Chinese pottery is not the same as collecting baseball cards or stamps, the reader has another image of the wealth and refinement of the home’s owner.]

*You’d have thought I’d have grown up to be Uber Society Girl, not pixie-Goth, in these surroundings.*

[Now the reader is focused on the differences between the POV character’s sense of self and the home’s owner by use of contrast. This is (or was) her home, yet it’s clear she does not see herself as belonging.]

*Even my bedroom—now turned back into its original use as a library—had the same feel of calm wealth to it, no matter how many pop-culture posters I put up or how dark I painted the walls.*

[This hints at conflict and foreshadowing.]

Through her specific word choices and the objects she’s chosen to comment on, Gilman has deepened her world building between these two characters in the series. We are now seeing where the POV character came from and where her mentor still lives. The author’s word choices, pointing out the contrast between “calm wealth,” “pop-culture posters,” and dark-painted walls, reveals to the reader the sense of not belonging in the world in which she was raised, which is a key theme in this story.