

American Museum of Western Art – The Anschutz Collection
Writing the West: Season 5, November 2023
Heritage & Identity

[Story Map](#) pairing: **Setting**.

Setting is the external world of a story, which includes historical context, geography, language, economics, and more. In other words, a story's setting is its culture.



***Children of the Mountain* – Thomas Moran (1837-1926):**

The geography of a place has a profound impact on a character. Weather, elevation, plant life (forest vs. grassland), terrain (mountains vs. plains), water sources, natural beauty, and many more factors determine how a character navigates an area. Choose one of the national park paintings on this floor and imagine a character inside its landscape. How do they interact with the place? Is connecting to the environment easy for them? Difficult? Do they feel nostalgic, protective, overwhelmed, fearful? Do they feel a *national park heritage* growing inside them?



***The Pottery Maker* – Gerald Cassidy (1869-1934):**

Setting drives theme. Meaning, the best way to talk about thematic concepts (freedom, love, power, failure, etc.) is to describe a character's relationship to objects in the setting. For example, in *The Pottery Maker*, what is the potter thinking and feeling while he crafts his pot? Depending on the answer is how a story's theme is determined. If the potter is overly focused on his design, perhaps the theme is about ego. If the potter is a first-time instructor worried about how to teach the next generation the craft of pottery, perhaps the theme is about the challenges of cultural legacy. Choose a character from a painting on this floor. Describe their thoughts and feelings relative to their actions and notice how a theme or themes emerge.



***Wheat Threshing on the High Plains* – Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975):**

Another way a writer can explore theme is through motifs. A motif is a repeating object taken from the setting whose effect can be a deeper understanding of theme. For example, if a theme of *Wheat Threshing on the High Plains* is mid-western work ethic, it's through the motif of machines in operation where that theme is recognized. Choose a painting showing a repetition of types of objects (natural: rivers, lakes, rain; hand-stitched: blankets, robes, bandanas) and describe them. The more you focus on the chosen motif, the easier it will be to connect to a specific theme.