

Frank Jones

Dr. Lennie Irvin

English 1302-001

March 4, 20__

Sample Critical Essay (on Literature in MLA Format)

Leonard Bernstein creates a twentieth-century version of Romeo and Juliet in bustling New York City of the 1950s in his play West Side Story. The beautiful yet mysterious Mississippi River is the setting for many fantastic adventures for the young rascal in Huckleberry Finn, a wonderful novel by Mark Twain. Many rap stars describe in their lyrics life in the ghettos. These are three different medias, but all have settings vital to the work's theme. But does Gail Godwin also use the setting in her short story "Dream Children" to communicate the story's theme? Godwin is equally successful in giving life to the theme in her short story: the story's somber setting mirrors the troubled world of Mrs. McNair.

First, the ancient house the couple moves into is part of the setting that embodies many of Mrs. McNair's disturbed thoughts. Mr. McNair does not know how troubled his wife's mind truly is even when he comes "across a pile of her books, stacked in the alcove where, it was obvious, she lay for hour, escaping into science fiction, and the occult" (Godwin 439). This secluded area of the house is like a mystical bubble Mrs. McNair uses to float away to her other worlds of ghosts and magic. Another way the house reflects her thoughts is in her hallucinations. Her experience after the miscarriage was obviously so traumatic that she eventually creates an imaginary child. Significantly, she and the

imaginary child first encounter one another in the guest room that "lay above what had been the old side of the house, build seventy-five years before the new side, which was completed in 1753 (437). It seems appropriate that the child should appear where, as she says, "You'd think there's be a few ghosts around" (434). Within the spaces of this old house, we see expressions of Mrs. McNair's troubled thoughts and life.

In addition, setting is seen to communicate theme in this story because Mrs. McNair's internal distress connects to the season. Autumn, a time when life begins to die, reflects, as well as symbolizes, Mrs. McNair's disturbed world. She describe the season: "A rainy fall day. Too wet to ride. The silver dog asleep beside her in her special alcove, a padded window seat filled with pillows and books" (433). The season acts as a catalyst for Mrs. McNair to journey to her realm of dreams, forcing her to fantasize within the house rather than living the reality part of her double life outside her house. But the autumn season also symbolizes Mrs. McNair's infertility, as opposed to Victoria's fertility. Fall is when Victoria visits the McNairs and ignites the host's anger toward "that stupid stammering bitch [...] and her twenty-six year old lover" (432) after a discussion about deformed babies born to older women. Mr. McNair is quite protective of his wife who believes she can no longer have children. However, her thoughts change as she goes out into the Fall night: "For a brief instant [...] she feels something again. But once outside, under the galaxies of autumn-sharp stars, the intelligent dog at her heels like some smart gray ghost, she is glad to be free of all that" (433). Thus, the fall season has a way of slapping the reality of her fertility in her face. Autumn can mean fear, sleep, or death. But here, it is all that and more; it symbolizes Mrs. McNair's troubled world.

Finally, evidence supporting the significant role setting has in communicating theme can be seen in the way Mrs. McNair's disturbed life is reflected in the vast, open countryside itself. Early in the story, she describes the surrounding area: "There was no body here, in this quaint, unspoiled village, nestled in the foothills of the mountains, who could have [...] guessed taht anything out of the ordinary [...] happened to her" (430). Like the misleading tranquility and beauty of the countryside, nobody knows the secrets Mrs. McNair keeps to herself. The only clue to something unsettled is "her racing her horse in the early morning, when the mists still lay on the fields" (430). Even when Mrs. McNair is expressing her passions, as in this horse racing, she cannot escape her delusions: "She rode like the wind, a happy, happy woman. She rode faster than fear because she was a woman in a dream, a woman anxiously awaiting her child's sleep" (444). Her joy ironically fills the openness of the countryside with her deep pain. So the countryside is also reflective of Mrs. McNair's troubled life.

Mrs. McNair's devastating experience in the hospital forces her to find a way to cope with the trauma. She creates an imaginary world, but the story's setting clarifies just how disturbed this world is. In many ways, our own experience shapes our perception of our surroundings, and the author of "Dream Children" paints the setting with the brush of Mrs. McNair's broken reality. The setting in "Dream Children" truly reflects the story's theme of Mrs. McNair's disturbed life.

Works Cited

Godwin, Gail. "Dream Children." *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing, Compact Edition*. Ed. Edgar V. Roberts and Robert Zweig. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson, 2006. 429-445.