
UNIT 2 ATMOSPHERE

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2.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This Unit will introduce you to the concept of 'atmosphere' in a story. The **term** is used to describe the dominant mood as created by the setting, description and dialogue. You will see, after **attempting** the 'activities' that **both** physical and psychological effects can be created by evoking an appropriate atmosphere alone.

At the end of this Unit you will **be** able to

- identify the functions of atmosphere in a story, and
- create the desired **atmosphere** as well, **depending** on the theme and plot of **you**. story.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Atmosphere is a part of fiction, whether long or short. It **enables** a **writer** to **establish lifelikeness** and **win** the reader's willingness to accept the world created by the storyteller. Atmosphere is as necessary for fiction as it is for our planet. Life-forms and characters would not **be** able to survive without it. Atmosphere is, therefore, one of the basic elements in a short story. It creates the mood as well as the psychological and physical **effects** appropriate to the **theme of the story**. **By** setting a story in an appropriate time and place, you lend it verisimilitude and authenticity.

Atmosphere

- binds the story together;
- **sets** the **time-frame**—**past**, present or future;
- creates the psychological mood in the reader; and
- establishes the locale.

Thus, atmosphere helps the writer in creating the texture of his **imagined world**, with its characters, **locale** and **environment**.

2.2 THE IMAGINARY WORLD OF FICTION

Fiction basically **centres** around the lives of imaginary characters and **imaginary** situations. Some of the elements that contribute to making **this world** authentic and lifelike are **descriptions** of time-periods, of geographical allocations, of people, their actions and their conversations. However, one of the most **important elements** in a story is atmosphere. This, along with the theme and the plot, is what **essentially** makes up a story.

2.2.1 Setting it in time

Any work of fiction has to be set both in time and place if the story is to sound authentic. Most **fiction** nowadays deals with the present, the recent past or the imaginary future. In **all** stories, the time setting must immediately be **recognisable**, due to reasons of **space**. Take for example, the following passage:

Switching **off** the air-conditioner, he **leant** back and stared at the **blank** screen. Hopelessly, he even 'turned a few **knobs**, waiting for a picture, any **picture**, to appear. He rotated the antenna and pushed the set at a new angle. Now he had **missed** the opening of the Festival of Russia.

Do you need to be told that it is the very recent past that's being talked about? Again, read this:

The spaceship had taken off just a minute ago. **The** bushes were **still** shaking and the **dust** hadn't settled down. Now he was stuck, for good, on this unfamiliar red **planet** since **the** next **space-shuttle** would land there long after his energy tablets were finished.

Clearly, this deals **with** the future when interplanetary travel will become a reality.

Historical fiction, of **course**, requires its 'period setting', **costumery** and the use of language current in **that** period. The prejudices, modes of thought and beliefs of the time would **also** have to be given due consideration.

If the story deals **with** a futuristic era, its physical and **intellectual** realities **will** have to be spelled out. George **Orwell**, writing about an era thirty-six years ahead of him, gives us the **nuts** and **bolts** of life and a system of government as he envisaged in his novel 1984. (He, however, wrote the novel in 1948). There is a whole body of Utopian literature, starting with Thomas More, where writers have given a detailed setting to an **idealised** future as they see it. Thus, whether the **setting** of the story is in the past, the present or **the** future, 'atmosphere', invariably plays an important part.

2.2.2 Setting the locale

A fictional world always has to be set both in 'time and place. While a novel has considerable scope for creating 'atmosphere', the short story is, however, handicapped because of its length. A novelist can build up the **locale** at leisure and **give** his characters **lengthy** pasts, detailed ancestries and legacies, a description of their school-days, their **first** loves and even the emotional crises of their childhoods. But a short story writer **cannot** afford to linger on the past for too long. His brushstrokes **have** to be economical and yet evocative. All references have to be to the point **and revealing**. **Even** a cursory glance must reveal the place of action. The reader does not always **have** the patience to wait until the last page to be told that 'Delhi' or 'London' or 'Singapore' is where it all happened. For example, take *Balthazar* by Lawrence **Durrell**:

The lion-dust of **desert**: prophets' tombs turned to zinc and copper at sunset on the ancient lake. **Its** huge sand-faults like watermarks from the air; **green and** citron giving to **gunmetal**, to a **single plum-dark** sail, moist, palpitant: sticky-winged **nymph**. **Taposiris** is dead among its **tumbling** columns and seamarks, **vanished** the Harpoon Men... **Mareotis** under a sky of hot lilac.

You will notice how **the place-setting is evoked**—the desert, the **Mediterranean** and a ruined **civilisation**.

Activity 1

Read the following passage and **insert** details, in the spaces indicated by the blank lines, that would help the reader to instantly **locate** its geographical setting:.

The midday sun blasts **everything** in the _____ **summer**: it _____ the earth; it **sets** fire to the water. . . it bums into one like red pepper . . . **till** one **spends** **one's time** looking for some _____ spot for even the most precarious shelter . . . There was not **much comfort** in the _____ atmosphere, but after the _____ of the open, **Mangal** felt that this **comparative shade** was a blessing.

(Use some of the **words** from the **following** list: English, Indian, shady, dry, scorches, airy, sunny, **cools**, **airless**, comfort, heat)

(Check your **answer** with that given at the end of the Unit)

2.3 FUNCTIONS OF ATMOSPHERE

The atmosphere of a story, as we understand it, could, with a little stretching, perform the following functions:it

- binds the story together,
- sets the time-frame,
- creates the mood,
- provides the background; and thus
- makes for economy and authenticity—two essential **qualities** of every **good** short story.

2.3.1 It binds the story together

Let's consider a situation. A number of people, from different places, find themselves in a haunted house. No matter what each one does, the prevailing atmosphere will colour his emotions and actions. This may explain how atmosphere can bind a story together.

2.3.2 It sets the time-frame

The same group could have been trapped in Bhopal, in December 1984, when the gas-leakage killed thousands. The atmosphere of panic, fear of the unknown, and lack of antidotes would set the time-frame more effectively than pages of statistics.

2.3.3 It creates the mood

Read this passage:

... and then the sights and scenes they passed on the streets, the congestion and racket of the varied traffic, the virulent cinema posters, the blazing colours of women's clothing, the profusion of toys and decorations of coloured paper and tinsel, the radios and loudspeakers never tuned to less than top volume, and amongst them flower sellers, pilgrims, **dancing** monkeys and performing bears...

Don't you notice that the mood of the person observing the above scene is critical? Now read another version:

... and then the sights and scenes they passed on the streets were so new and exciting. The eager crowds, the profusion of colour and sound and then the lovely, unusual flowers, the sedate pilgrims, the dancing monkeys and the performing bears...

Now we confront a different mood—of joy, eagerness and excitement.

2.3.4 It establishes the locale

Fishing boats and nets, the **smell** of the sea and, above all, the smell of **fish**—and you know that it is a story about the sea-coast. Smoke, flashing lights, **throbbing** music and dim figures—there's the atmosphere of a **discotheque**, of course.

2.3.5 It makes for economy and authenticity

The atmosphere, **once** established, clears the way for the writer to go ahead with his story.

Mulk Raj Anand is a down-to-earth story-teller who, on the face of it, has no **time** for redundancies like atmosphere in his short stories. Nothing is put in obtrusively. Take, for instance, the story 'Birth', about a stone-breaker's wife delivering on the road. Right in the beginning we have an image of **kikar** trees which look like **jinn**s in the early morning. It is a cane-thorn tree he has referred to and not a **flowering gulmohar** or a **laburnum**. The flashbacks are to the point—her husband **Ramu** putting his ear to **her** belly to **hear** the child stir, and her dying mother-in-law holding her ill-omened daughter-in-law guilty of every **ill** that has visited the family. Her sufferings end **in** triumph, for she delivers a son on the roadside. An entire way of life of a **stone-breaker's** family is evoked here in a few pages, the **mood** stark and unsentimental, **though** human, and the atmosphere authentic.

The atmosphere **creates** the **overall** background and gives authenticity to the tale. However, it must be **remembered** that a single false note in the narrative cannot only destroy the **atmosphere** but also the reader's willingness to accept an imagined world on which the structure of fiction rests. A small detail like an incongruous **name** can create **disbelief** in the story. For instance, in the short story 'The Moment of Eclipse', **Brian W. Aldiss** has a Parsi woman called **Sushila**. Again, in **Aldiss's** story 'Orgy of the Living and the Dying', **Tancred Frazer's** Muslim mistress is named **Sushila Nayyar**. A story loses credibility immediately when such mistakes are made.

Activity 2

Here is a passage from a story about the **Freedom** Movement that led to Indian independence. List **details** about the dress, the mood and the locale that give it **authenticity**.

Khadi was the **uniform** that all wore with pride, notwithstanding its weight and its **shapelessness**. At the very first sight of the tricolour, a lump came into their throats and they **vowed** that it should one day fly at the ramparts of the Red Fort in **Delhi**. **Leela** and her brother had already forgotten what having a comfortable bed and a retinue of servants was like. The Indian summer was at its peak when **the first stirrings** of . . .

(Check your answer with the list given at the end of this Unit)

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2.4 SOME STORY TYPES WHERE ATMOSPHERE IS IMPORTANT

There are some kinds of fiction in which atmosphere is everything: the period novel, and the ghost story.

2.4.1 The period novel

In certain types of fiction, atmosphere plays a very strong role—for instance, in the late-18th century **English** novel, the ghost-story and fiction was **sited** in exotic lands. This novel, **known** as the Gothic novel, depends **for its** interest mainly on atmosphere—moss-covered **castles** and abbeys, **pointed gothic** arches, wild torrents thick forests, desolate **heaths**, **mouldering** chapels and sepulchres. The atmosphere of the novel is often **full** of a sense of danger, and a threat hangs over **everything** and

everybody. A ruined castle with its dark corridors and vast rooms, rotting woodwork and ancient servants—such an atmosphere **often** engenders, a feeling of fear and mystery **peculiar** to this kind of novel.

Again, fiction set in the Renaissance **period** in Europe would have to take notice of the Anglo-Spanish rivalry on the high seas, the obsession with voyaging and discovering new frontiers, the supremacy attached to man and his capacity for **reason**, the historical consciousness, the intensive cultivation of the arts, the **idealistic** vision of man and society, the hatred of papacy among Protestant nations, inquisitions, **and burning** at the stake, etc. All this, or much of it, has to be brought **into the story** either through light, **suggestive** touches or through heavier **brushstrokes**, in order to **construct** that **minimum** framework of credibility which passes under the name of lifelikeness.

2.4.2 The ghost story

The ghost story is another **form** where much effort has to go into the evocation of the mood—a lonely house, strong winds and rattling shutters. And, of **course**, you should have some mist around because ghosts are supposed to look like wisps of mist, aren't they?

Not many Indian writers have attempted the ghost story. **Khushwant Singh's** 'The Memsahib of **Mandla**' is about Dyson and his family staying at a forest resthouse **formerly** owned by Jean **Memsahib**. In the evening

the tropical jungle was hushed into an eerie **stillness** as the twilight **sank** into night. . . . Now the jungle was alive with a different variety of noises, the croaking of frogs and the calls of jackals and hyenas.

At night Mrs. Dyson sees the footprints of the ghost, Jean Memsahib, leading **almost** right to her grave. A jackal cries out each time her ghost is seen. The atmosphere is built up 'howl' by 'howl'. On the final night, when Dyson fires at the ghost and accidentally kills himself, one comes across the usual accompaniment of lightning, **thunder** and a downpour.

2.4.3 The abstract or the dreamlike story

Indian short stories have not branched off into the abstract and the dreamlike. One **needs** to study the stories of such masters of modern fiction like Jorge Luis **Borges** to see how they manage to create a particular 'atmosphere' in their stories, mainly by **giving** the minutest of details in regard to the most fanciful of **fictionalised** places and eras. For instance, in **his** story 'The Immortal', **Borges** sets out to turn a **concept** into a story, namely that immortality is a desiccated existence **which** has lost thought and speech. To prolong life is to **prolong** agonies. The river of immortality lies in the deserts inhabited by Troglodytes, Serpent devourers who are ignorant of verbal speech, and Garamants who hold their women in common and give them the flesh of lions to eat. The effects that **Borges** conjures up through his descriptions of weirdly-styled architecture, labyrinths, deserts and exotic places need close study.

Activity 3

You must be familiar with the following ghost story:

There are two men sitting in a train compartment. After some **time** the first **man** asks the second, 'Do you believe in ghosts? Yes', he replies, and vanishes.

Now expand this into a short story of about 200 words.

(Check your answer with the **hints** given at the end of the Unit)

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2.5 HOW ATMOSPHERE IS CREATED: SOME EXAMPLES

Atmosphere can be **created** through detailed description of the setting, through economical touches in which the tale and the setting blend, or through piling up of details.

2.5.1 Detailed description

Take for example, this **passage** from *Balthazar* by Lawrence Durrell

Summer : buff **sand**, hot marble sky.
 Autumn : swollen bruise-greys.
 Winter : **freezing** snow, cool sand,
 clear **sky** panels, glittering with **mica**;
washed delta greens.
magnificent starscapes.

And spring? Ah! **there** is no spring in the Delta, no sense of **refreshment** and renewal in **things**. **One** is plunged out of **winter into: wax effigy** of a **summer** too hot to breathe.

Note how the author **has created** the atmosphere of the Delta **and** the starkness of it all.

2.5.2 Economical touches

Re-read our discussion of Mulk Raj Anand's story 'Birth' (2.3.5). **The** writer desires to create an atmosphere of pain and **deprivation**. He **does** so, with the **minimum** use of words, only because **he** highlights **those** details which build up the necessary tension. There is no **contrasting** picture, i.e. of anticipated joy, to dissipate the feeling of depression.

2.5.3 Piling up details

Atmosphere can be created through piling up of details. While a **particular** kind of atmosphere **can** be conjured up **just** by a touch, the same effect can also be produced by the **piling** up of detail. Take Anita **Desai's** story 'Scholar and Gypsy' which peals with an **American** sociologist, David, **and** his wife Pat, who allows the Indian heat to beat her, **The** glazed eyes and the drooping head tell us in the first two sentences how **she** feels. **Bombay** takes over **from** here—coconut shells, betel-stained walls, fish **scales** and lepers' stumps. She finds the people 'so large and vital **and** forceful in their brilliant clothes and **with their** metallic voices and their eyes **that** flashed over like barber's shears, cutting and exposing . . .' that she feels crushed rather than revived.

2.6 SUMMING UP

In this Unit you were told about one of the basic elements of a short story, namely atmosphere. Atmosphere has five major functions in a story, It

- binds the story together,
- sets the time frame,
- creates the overall mood,
- establishes the locale, and
- makes for economy, lending an air of lifelikeness or authenticity to the story.

Thus, when you write a short story yourself, pay great attention not only to the events in it but also to an appropriate atmosphere. This is because most stories derive their strength from the atmosphere evoked by the writer.

2.7 ACTIVITIES: AIDS TO ANSWERS

Activity 1

This is the order in which the words should occur: **Indian**, scorches, shady, humid, airless, heat.

Activity 2

Your list should look somewhat like this
 dress: **khadi**, heavy and shapeless
 mood: a) lump came into their throats (pride)
 b) they vowed. ... (determination)
 locale: **Red Fort, Delhi**, Indian summer

Activity 3

Hints

You may add details of atmosphere like:
was it day or night,
 were there other people in the compartment,
was the train **passing** through a jungle, a ravine, a mountain,
was it raining outside or not, and so on.

2.8 GLOSSARY

You will find in the glossary, a short list of the literary terms used in this Unit.

Atmosphere is a term used to describe the overall effect of a creative work of literature. It is created by setting, description and dialogue.

Authenticity: See Course 1, Block 1, Unit 3.

Gothic novel is highly a dramatic novel, set in areas remote in time or space, and populated by heroes, heroines, ghosts, vampires, werewolves and similar creatures. Such novels create an atmosphere of gloom, violence and abnormality.

Period novel is one in which the dress, the behaviour, the architecture and the setting are peculiar to the period in which it is set.

Some stories (listed below) have been referred to in this Unit:

Mulk Raj Anand	:	<i>Birth</i>
Brian W. Aldiss	:	<i>The Moment of Eclipse</i>
		<i>Orgy of the Living and the Dying</i>
Khushwant Singh	:	<i>The Memsahib of Mandla</i>
Lawrence Durrell	:	<i>Balthazar</i>
Jorges Luis Borges	:	<i>The immortal</i>

You are now advised to go to any university or college library closely and read as many of these stories as possible.