

Student's Name

Professor's Name

Course

Date

The Use of Setting in Theater

The setting is one of the essential tools that playwrights use to give their plays more significant impact. It refers to the interaction that authors create between space, the period within which a play is set, the views on gender, class, and even the diction of language used that period to create a better feel of the themes and messages which the play seeks to convey. The plays *Marriage A La Mode* by John Dryden, and *The Country Wife* by William Wycherley are literary classics. Published in 1673 and 1675 respectively, these two pieces of literature have withstood the test of time to remain relevant in modern society more than three decades since they were published. Set during the reign of King George II, both plays share in the themes of love and restoration. The following is an analysis of the use and impact of setting in both plays. The author posits that setting is one of the main factors that made the two plays so indulging and which have allowed them to retain significant relevance in literary discourse.

Marriage A La Mode

The play, *Marriage A La Mode*, by John Dryden follows two separate and quite distinct storylines. The first is that of romance that plays out between Palmyra and Leonidas. The two were estranged from their parents from a very tender age and were brought up together under the

care of Hermogenes. Their pasts were kept from them by the latter. Later, Polydamas is recognized as the usurper king of Italy, and Hermogenes declares that Leonidas is the new king's son (Dryden and Crane 39). Leonidas' new position as a prince, however, forbids him from seeing Palmyra, which brings them both a world of misery. When Palmyra is sentenced to death as the two of them insist on seeing each other, Hermogenes steps forward and declares that she is indeed the new king's daughter and that Leonidas is his son. He explains that he had lied in the hope of giving his son a better life, and provides proof of his claims. Palmyra's position as a princess, however, still forbids the two young lovers from being together. Hermogenes again reveals that Leonidas was indeed royal blood, being the son of the overthrown king (Dryden and Crane 77). Upon learning this, Leonidas mounts an army and quickly overthrows Polydamas from the throne. The second is a love story. It is the tale of two couples that had grown weary of each other's partner and fallen for the spouse of the other. After many trials, they later realize that they were better off with their first partners.

Setting played a significant role in making the play captivating. The play was set in Sicily during the restoration period when the throne was returned to the true king after 18 years of usurping. It is, therefore, befitting that the theme of power plays, seizing, and restoration dominate throughout the play. John Dryden was very keen on using space in his performance to convey an aura of freedom. In Act II Scene I, for example, the author sets the scene in a court (Dryden and Crane 1). Courts, especially in the 7th century, were known for their tall walls and spacious nature. However, Dryden does not place too many people in the court at a time, especially in Act II Scene I (Dryden and Crane 3). It is always three or four people holding a conversation, with other exiting almost as soon as their replacements enter. This situation gives

the audience a sense of openness, which is contradictory to the nature of the play, as secrets, deceit, and betrayal mar it. Dryden's story is also representative of the gender roles of the period. Women were left to the confines of the home and inward courts while men were often engaged in the travails of providence and the troubles of power search. The higher a woman would socially be, the less she seemed concerned about herself, while it was the contrary for the men, who had to worry themselves with dangerous power plays among other things.

The Country Wife

William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* was published and first acted two years after Dryden's play; in 1675. Much like the first play, this author remained faithful to the concepts of love and restoration. In this play, Wycherley brings forth the ideas of promiscuity, deceit, and betrayal. It was criticized for being too sexually explicit, even for an audience of its time. It has many plots that play out subsequently, which is one of the main reasons why it has remained a literary classic to this day. However, the main plot involves Margery, a country woman who has been married to a city man, Mr. Pinchwife. Weary of his wife's naivety to the conniving ways of the city, Mr. Pinchwife sequesters her at home so that she does not fall prey to the gnawing teeth of London men. She, however, encounters Mr. Horner during an outing to the theater. The latter is as conniving as they come, having started a rumor that he is a eunuch to earn the trust of suspicious husbands around their wives. Margery soon, inevitably, learns the art of deception and the country wife ultimately becomes a city woman.

Similar to John Dryden's performance, William Wycherley is keen to use space to create impact in his play. For instance, in Act I, he sets the scene in Mr. Horner's house, which is a

small enclosed space. This situation would depict the place where one would be with a person that they do not fear may cause them harm. It is also a place where one would expect secrets to be shared and passed with little fear. For this reason, Quack has no qualm explaining to Horner that he has indeed spread the rumor that he is a eunuch as, presumably, agreed upon (Wycherley 2). This pleases the conniving Horner immensely as he is now assured access to all women that his heart may desire with little concern or fear of either their guardians or their husbands. Gender roles come clearly into play in this show as in the last. When Sir. Jasper Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and Lady Fidget decide to take their leave; it is evident that women are not prominent participants in essential matters (Wycherley 4). Sir Jasper offers to leave the women in the company of the hapless eunuch as he goes to attend the council which is convening. Social stratification also depicts itself clearly, as the responsibilities accorded to Sir Jasper differ from those conferred to Mr. Horner, as their titles may indicate.

Conclusion

To conclude, setting is one of the most important tools for the playwright. It can be used to depict freedom, confinement, urgency and even times and periods. Setting is also used to set the mood for a play and prepare the audience for the scenes to come. In the two plays *Marriage A La Mode* and *The Country Wife*, the authors use setting for numerous purposes. The first is to show freedom and confinement in the manner that the characters depict their sexuality and the views of the society of the time of sex and fidelity. The settings are also used to show gender rules and gender norms in the manner in which the characters are dressed and the matters that they attend to. Dressing and choice of activity is also used to show social stratification in society and

the positions of the different characters. Thus, the authors' use of setting contributes to the captivating nature of the two literary master pieces and cements them strongly in the annals of literary greatness.

Works Cited

Dryden, John, and David Crane. *Marriage A-La-Mode*. A&C Black, 2014.

Wycherley, William. *The Country Wife*. Dover Publications, 2018.