

Bernard MacLaverty's short story *Father and Son* is one where the setting takes on an importance beyond that of simply providing the characters with a background against which to act out their lives, but also affects the action. This is clearly shown through the writer's use of setting, characterisation and style.

By placing the characters against the sympathetic background of Belfast city, the author exacerbates the violence within the characters' home as it creates a parallel with the tension in the city. It is no mistake that the current political situation in Belfast is mirrored within the characters' lives. The fact that the situation in Belfast allows no communication is reflected by the lack of communication between father and son. The setting of the house is also significant in the impact of the short story. The house itself is never described in great detail but the sounds within it are, for example, the "click" of shows and the "snap" of a switch. These sounds mimic the sounds of the sniper and incendiary and thus the violence within the house is heightened by these references to Belfast. The radio and television are also referred to, and those sounds drown out the father's fear of Belfast while also providing him with a means of knowing his son's whereabouts. The setting of Belfast is referred to within the house, also as sound:

"The sound of the ambulances criss-cross the hours of the dark"

The emotions of the characters are transferred to the house, as we are told the door "shudders". The setting of the doorstep is also significant to the action of the short story as it represents the divide between the safety of the home and the dangers of Belfast. It is ironic that it is here that the son dies. The only time there is any descriptive setting is when the characters recall the past, when the mother was still alive. She represents a gentler, more carefree time when the father:

"grew vegetables and flowers for half the street"

The author's style is also affected by the setting, and so affects the action of the short story. There is a clear division between the prose passages which represent the thoughts and feelings of the characters and the indented speech passages. The prose passages are fluid and coherent, and it is obvious that both father and son know what they want and want to say to each other. In juxtaposition to this, the speech of the character is curt and deliberately hurtful. This is reflective of the political situation in Belfast, where both sides cannot express their feeling in any way other than through violent response. That narration of the short story is mainly split between the two characters but occasionally, there appears an omniscient narrator. These narratives are written in a reportage style, thus the omniscient narration represents the news, the one objective voice that ricochets throughout the city of Belfast and throughout the characters' lives. This is evident when the plot comes to its tragic climax and it is clear that the son's death will be "the news" headlines that night, through the phrase:

"The news begins"

Imagery in the short story is kept to a bare minimum. I feel that this is appropriate, as the bleakness and stark impact of the story does not allow any joy or happiness. The short story conflicts many symbolic ideas, for example the "blood knot" tying the father and son together and, in effect, the people of Belfast together.

The characters in the short story are profoundly affected by the setting of Belfast, as it is reflective of the tension between them. The father is a man driven by fear, fear of rejection, fear of Belfast and fear for his son's life. He is disappointed in his son,

and although he tries to instigate a conversation, his every remark reproaches his son and reminds him of his weaknesses. This is evident in the remark:

“Here lies my son, who let me down”.

The son is also driven by fear. There are veiled references to night-time activity which make the father (and the reader) suspicious of paramilitary activity in Belfast. The son is disgusted by his father and sees him as a “old woman” because, through the death of his wife, the father has been forced to take on the role of a single parent, a role which makes him uncomfortable and makes his son despise him. The father’s language consists of short, accusative questions:

“early tonight?” “with who?”, “about what”

Whereas the son’s language contains expletives which grow in stature as his frustration with his father grows. Both know what they want to say, but are prevented from doing so by the many barriers that are created. The son creates physical barriers such as doors, bedclothes and a newspaper, whereas I feel the father’s main barriers are procrastination and fear of rejection. Although the characters are radically different, they do have several, important similarities. Both live in fear for the son’s life amid the violence of Belfast city; both conceal a weapon near their beds; both use or have used drugs to help them cope; both miss the mother and it is her absence that creates the rift between them. The father shows his qualities as the “perfect parent” in the final scene where he assumes the role of the Pieta, cradling his son in his arms. The son has been killed by the manly expectation that his father did not live up to. All the barriers are broken as the son’s death allows the father to communicate his love:

“My son, let me put my arms around you”

This tragic climax to the short story holds a message of hope for the sympathetic setting of Belfast city; that one day, barriers will be broken and communication between the two sides of the divided city will become possible.

In conclusion, Bernard MacLaverty’s short story “Father and Son” is one where these is a perfect example of how the setting of a short story becomes part of the action and is more than a simple back drop against which the characters act out their lives. I believe that the writer’s setting, characterisation and style are entirely central to the development of this idea. The tragic circumstances of this story are beautifully and sadly entwined with the fate of Belfast, and we can only hope that the same barriers are broken there as are broken in the short story.