

Creating Context

by Monica Wood



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Sometimes a story demands more than just a plot to move its emotional content forward. When a story becomes very complicated, or a little too crowded with characters, or stretched over a long period of time, you may want to create a context. Context is the descriptive background in a story that sheds light on its meaning. Context is larger than plot; it gives the characters a larger arena in which to hate or love each other, to discover or destroy themselves, to fall under or triumph over adversity.

Contexts can be large: World War II, the Catholic Church, death. Contexts can also be small: winter, a wedding, a hometown. Context provides forward motion at the emotional level, using symbols and metaphors that reinforce emerging themes in a story. It also can serve the practical purpose of organizing the physical movement of a story into beginning, middle, and end. For example, a story told in the context of weather can follow a season or seasons for its beginning, middle, and end: the beginning unfolds during planting, the middle during harvesting, the end during the dormant winter. At the same time, the context reinforces developments in character: a woman's suntanned face gives way to winter-bitten skin that reflects her gathering bitterness.

In Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, the plot follows Ethan's doomed affair of the heart with Mattie Silver, the "companion" of Ethan's sickly and querulous wife. It is a dark story told in the context of the cruel New England winter. After a brief prologue, the story opens this way:

The village lay under two feet of snow, with drifts at the windy corners. In a sky of iron the points of the Dipper hung like icicles and Orion flashed his cold fires. The moon had set, but the night was so transparent that the white house-fronts between the elms looked gray against the snow, clumps of bushes made black stains on it, and the basement windows of the church sent shafts of yellow light far across the endless undulations.

This descriptive passage sets up a context that will be carried through the novel—the characters cannot escape the literal and metaphorical cold. And yet the shafts of yellow light sent undulating over the snow deliver a hint that warmth is possible even in this unforgiving place. The love that develops between Ethan and Mattie is that drop of warmth, but the landscape literally and figuratively becomes their doom. As the story progresses, Wharton softens the landscape a bit when Ethan begins to imagine himself and Mattie together:

They finished supper, and while Mattie cleared the table Ethan went to look at the cows and then took a last turn about the house. The earth lay dark under a muffled sky and the air was so still that now and then he heard a lump of snow come thumping down from a tree far off on the edge of the wood-lot.

Even though the landscape is softened here—the domestic quiet implied by the cows and the muffled sky—Wharton preserves an unrelenting sense of foreboding with that disquieting, far-off thumping of snow. The context remains steady throughout, with repeated images of sterility and starkness and frozen ground, as the physical and emotional lines of the story culminate in a toboggan accident that destroys Mattie and Ethan in different ways.

The plot of Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres* unfolds in the huge context of land—the family-owned, generations-old "thousand acres" of the title. The land is something that must be reckoned with at every turn in the book, for the land is the characters' livelihood and also their prison. It is both beautiful and menacing. The context provides an irony that resonates throughout this story of a multitude of family betrayals set into motion by the patriarch's dividing of the land. (It's a retelling of *King Lear*.) Because the land must be tended to in all its seasons, the context provides a blueprint for moving the plot along. Ginny, the narrator, begins and ends her story by describing the land:

...you could see our buildings, a mile distant, at the southern edge of the farm. A mile to the east, you could see three silos that marked the northeastern corner, and if you raked your gaze from the silos to the house and barn, then back again, you would take in the immensity of the piece of land my father owned, six hundred forty acres, a whole section, paid for, no encumbrances, as flat and fertile, black, friable, and exposed as any piece of land on the face of the earth....

...I thought it appropriate and desirable that the great circle of the flat earth spreading out from the T intersection of County Road 686 and Cabot Street Road be ours. A thousand acres. It was that simple.

The ensuing story is anything but simple, and ends with another view of the same land:

Let us say that each vanished person left me something, and that I feel my inheritance when I am reminded of one of them. When I am reminded of Jess, I think of the loop of poison we drank from, the water running down through the soil, into the drainage wells, into the lightless mysterious underground chemical sea, then being drawn up, cold and appetizing, from the drinking well into Rose's faucet, my faucet. I am reminded of Jess when I drive in the country, and see the anhydrous trucks in the distance, or the herbicide incorporators, or the farmers plowing their fields in the fall, or hills that are ringed with black earth and crowned with soil so pale that the corn only stands in it, as in gravel, because there are no nutrients to draw from it.

The poison beneath the land echoes the poison beneath the family relationships. The context of land reinforces every lie and betrayal the characters inflict on one another.

Not all contexts are this large. The breadth of the story should dictate the breadth of the context. ■