

THE FUNCTION OF SETTING IN DEVELOPING DRAMATIC TENSION IN D. M. LARSON'S "THE WAITING ROOM"

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the function of setting in developing dramatic tension in D. M. Larson's The Waiting Room. The study uses a qualitative descriptive method because the data are presented in the form of dialogues and stage directions found in the drama script. The analysis focuses on how the setting, including the waiting room itself and the changing atmosphere of the ceiling, contributes to the development of dramatic tension throughout the play. The data were collected by reading the script carefully, identifying descriptions related to setting, and interpreting their relationship with the characters' emotions and the progression of the story. The findings show that the setting in The Waiting Room is not only used as the physical background of the story but also functions as an active dramatic element. The mysterious waiting room creates uncertainty from the beginning of the play, while the changing light of the ceiling reflects the emotional condition of the characters and increases the dramatic tension. The setting also supports the gradual revelation of the characters' memories and leads the audience toward the climax of the story. Therefore, the study concludes that setting has an important role in building suspense, creating emotional atmosphere, and strengthening the overall dramatic effect of the play.

Keywords: drama, dramatic tension, setting, english drama, the waiting room

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis fungsi latar dalam membangun ketegangan dramatik pada *The Waiting Room* karya D. M. Larson. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif karena data berupa dialog dan petunjuk pementasan yang terdapat dalam naskah drama. Analisis difokuskan pada bagaimana latar, termasuk ruang tunggu dan perubahan suasana langit-langit ruangan, berkontribusi terhadap perkembangan ketegangan dramatik sepanjang cerita. Data dikumpulkan melalui pembacaan naskah secara mendalam, identifikasi deskripsi yang berkaitan dengan latar, serta interpretasi hubungan antara latar, emosi tokoh, dan perkembangan alur cerita. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa latar dalam *The Waiting Room* tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai tempat berlangsungnya peristiwa, tetapi juga sebagai unsur dramatik yang aktif. Ruang tunggu yang misterius menciptakan ketidakpastian sejak awal cerita, sedangkan perubahan pencahayaan pada langit-langit mencerminkan kondisi emosional para tokoh dan meningkatkan ketegangan dramatik. Selain itu, latar mendukung

pengungkapan bertahap terhadap ingatan para tokoh dan mengarahkan penonton menuju klimaks cerita. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa latar memiliki peran penting dalam membangun ketegangan, menciptakan suasana emosional, serta memperkuat efek dramatik secara keseluruhan.

Kata Kunci: drama, ketegangan dramatik, latar, drama berbahasa Inggris, *The Waiting Room*

A. Introduction

Drama is one of the oldest forms of literature that presents stories through dialogue, action, and performance. Unlike novels or short stories, drama is intended to be performed on stage, allowing audiences to experience the story through actors, settings, lighting, and other theatrical elements. Because drama combines textual and visual components, each intrinsic element contributes to shaping the audience's understanding of the story. According to Kennedy and Gioia (2020), drama communicates meaning through performance, making both dialogue and stage elements equally significant.

Among the intrinsic elements of drama, setting plays an important role beyond indicating the time and place of the events. It helps create atmosphere, reflects the characters' emotional conditions, and supports the development of dramatic tension. Abrams and Harpham (2015) state

that setting may also function symbolically by representing ideas, emotions, and conflicts that cannot always be expressed through dialogue. Dramatic tension, which refers to the audience's feelings of curiosity, uncertainty, and anticipation, is essential in maintaining engagement throughout a play (Esslin, 2001). Therefore, examining the relationship between setting and dramatic tension provides a deeper understanding of how dramatic effects are constructed.

D. M. Larson's *The Waiting Room*, a dramatic scene from *Death of an Insurance Salesman*, offers an interesting example of the active role of setting in drama. The story takes place entirely in a mysterious waiting room where three characters—Max, Pete, and Gil—gradually uncover the truth about their situation. The changing atmosphere of the room, particularly the ceiling that becomes brighter or darker in response to the characters' emotions, creates

suspense and intensifies the dramatic tension. Although previous studies have discussed setting in literary works, research specifically examining how setting develops dramatic tension in short drama scripts remains limited, with greater attention often given to characterization, plot, or theme.

Based on this gap, the present study aims to analyze the function of setting in developing dramatic tension in *The Waiting Room*. Specifically, it examines how the physical setting, symbolic atmosphere, and stage directions contribute to building suspense and strengthening the dramatic effect of the play. It is expected that this study will contribute to a better understanding of setting as an essential dramatic element and encourage further research on intrinsic elements in English drama.

B. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze the function of setting in developing dramatic tension in D. M. Larson's *The Waiting Room*. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the data consisted of dialogues, stage directions, and narrative descriptions

in the drama script. The study focused on interpreting how these textual elements contribute to the development of dramatic tension throughout the play.

The primary source of data was *The Waiting Room*, a dramatic scene from *Death of an Insurance Salesman* written by D. M. Larson and accessed through Scribd. The data included dialogues and stage directions related to the setting, particularly descriptions of the waiting room, the changing ceiling, lighting, and other environmental details that influence the dramatic atmosphere.

The data were collected through close reading of the script. Relevant dialogues and stage directions were identified, highlighted, and classified according to their dramatic functions, such as creating atmosphere, building suspense, reflecting emotions, and supporting the climax. The collected data were then analyzed descriptively by interpreting their contribution to dramatic tension and relating the findings to theories of drama, setting, and dramatic tension proposed by Abrams and Harpham (2015), Aston and Savona (1991), Esslin (2001), and Kennedy and Gioia (2020). The analysis was based on textual

evidence from the script to ensure that the interpretations were supported by the primary source.

C. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Findings

Based on the analysis of D. M. Larson's *The Waiting Room*, the researcher found that setting performs several important functions in developing dramatic tension. Rather than serving only as the physical

background of the story, the setting actively creates atmosphere, reflects the characters' emotional conditions, and supports the progression of the plot. The findings indicate that the setting functions as (1) a source of mystery, (2) a reflection of the characters' emotional conditions, (3) a symbolic element, and (4) a dramatic device that leads the audience toward the climax.

Table 1 Functions of Setting in Developing Dramatic Tension

No	Evidence from the Script	Function of Setting	Dramatic Effect
1	<i>The mysterious waiting room with no explanation</i>	Introduces uncertainty and mystery	Creates audience curiosity
2	<i>The room has no visible entrance or exit</i>	Builds confusion and suspense	Encourages audiences to question the situation
3	<i>The ceiling becomes darker during conflict</i>	Reflects emotional tension	Increases dramatic suspense
4	<i>The ceiling becomes brighter during peaceful moments</i>	Reflects harmony and hope	Temporarily reduces tension
5	<i>The room becomes completely dark in the ending</i>	Symbolizes judgment and unresolved conflict	Strengthens the climax and dramatic ending

As presented in Table 1, the setting contributes significantly to the dramatic development of the play. The mysterious waiting room creates uncertainty from the beginning of the story, while the changing ceiling reflects the characters' emotions through shifts in light and darkness. In addition, the setting conveys symbolic

meanings and continuously builds suspense, leading to the dramatic climax. These findings demonstrate that setting functions not only as the background of the story but also as an active dramatic element that strengthens the overall dramatic effect.

3.2 Discussions

3.2.1 Setting as a Source of Mystery

The play begins in a mysterious waiting room where Max, Pete, and Gil have no memory of how they arrived. The absence of a receptionist, sign-in sheet, or visible exit immediately creates uncertainty for both the characters and the audience. Rather than explaining the situation, the playwright gradually reveals information throughout the story, encouraging the audience to continue following the events. As Abrams and Harpham (2015) suggest, setting can shape audience expectations and contribute to dramatic meaning. In *The Waiting Room*, the mysterious setting establishes dramatic tension from the opening scene.

3.2.2 Setting as a Reflection of Emotional Condition

A distinctive feature of the play is the changing ceiling, which reflects the emotional atmosphere of the characters. The room becomes darker during moments of conflict and brighter when the characters cooperate or show understanding. This relationship demonstrates that the setting functions as an active dramatic element rather than a

passive background. According to Aston and Savona (1991), theatrical space can participate in creating dramatic meaning. The changing atmosphere allows the audience to understand the characters' emotions without relying solely on dialogue.

3.2.3 Setting as a Symbolic Element

The setting also carries symbolic meaning. The waiting room represents more than a physical location, gradually revealing itself as a place where the characters confront their past and discover hidden truths. Likewise, the contrast between light and darkness symbolizes emotional states such as hope, fear, guilt, and revenge. As Baldick (2015) explains, literary settings often represent abstract ideas beyond their literal functions. Therefore, the setting enriches the dramatic meaning of the play through its symbolic role.

3.2.4 Setting in Building Dramatic Tension

The setting plays a significant role in maintaining dramatic tension throughout the play. The mystery surrounding the waiting room, together with the changing atmosphere, keeps the audience

curious about the characters' identities and experiences. The tension reaches its climax when the characters remember Ralph and prepare to confront him, followed by the complete darkness at the end of the play. Esslin (2001) argues that dramatic tension develops through uncertainty and expectation, and this concept is clearly reflected in *The Waiting Room*. Instead of relying only on dialogue or conflict, the play effectively uses setting to strengthen suspense and create a memorable ending.

D. Conclusion

This study examined the function of setting in developing dramatic tension in D. M. Larson's *The Waiting Room*. The findings reveal that setting serves not only as the physical background of the story but also as an active dramatic element that creates atmosphere, reflects the characters' emotional conditions, and strengthens the progression of the plot. The mysterious waiting room and the changing ceiling effectively build suspense and maintain the audience's interest until the end of the play.

The study also demonstrates that setting contributes to the symbolic meaning of the drama by interacting

with the characters and supporting the overall dramatic effect. Therefore, setting should be understood as an essential element that helps construct dramatic tension rather than merely indicating the time and place of events.

This research is limited to the analysis of one short drama script and focuses only on the relationship between setting and dramatic tension. Future studies are encouraged to examine other dramatic elements, such as characterization, plot, or symbolism, or to compare the use of setting in different drama scripts to provide a broader understanding of dramatic construction.

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