

More Than A Place: Regionalism and Setting in the Short Stories of Andre Dubus II

by

Pierre Gerondeau

A thesis presented for the B. A. degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Winter 2014

For my parents: to my mom for teaching me how to write
and to my dad for encouraging me to keep writing.

Acknowledgments

This thesis represents the culmination of a year's worth of dedicated research, writing, and revisions. Throughout the year, many individuals provided assistance and insight for which I am very grateful. First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Eileen Pollack, for her immense knowledge of fiction and setting and never failing to review my work and lend expert advice. Her insightful comments and critiques helped me delve deeper into the material and her continuous encouragement helped me push forward. My thesis would not be what it is today without her input and guidance.

Over the summer when I mentioned that I wanted to research setting and my home state of Massachusetts, Eileen suggested that I read Andre Dubus II. I had never read Dubus before but I was immediately hooked, not only because I saw the potential for in-depth research and learning, but also because I was fascinated by Dubus' writing style and craft. As someone who loves creative writing, Dubus has become my newest inspiration, and I cannot thank Eileen enough for opening my eyes to his work.

I also want to thank Gillian White and Jennifer Wenzel for their unending support and helpful feedback throughout the year. I also thank Lucy Hartley for pointing me to a few sources that frame the first chapter of this thesis. Many thanks to all of the English instructors at the University who have helped me grow and develop as a writer over the last four years.

Finally, thanks are due to my friends and family for their words of encouragement during the writing process.

Abstract

Literary critics frequently laud Andre Dubus' skill as a realist. Set against the backdrop of New England towns or cities, Dubus' stories portray the hardscrabble lives of working-class people who must endure hardships and persevere within their cities and towns. This is a study of the regional aspects of Dubus' stories, but more important a study of setting. Setting is examined in both a geographical sense and a social sense. How does a character's environment shape his or her behaviors and motivations? How do we analyze changes in relationships and identities as characters move from setting to setting within a story?

This thesis considers setting and regionalism in five of Dubus' short stories: "Townies," "The Winter Father," "Killings," "Rose," and "Miranda Over the Valley." The first chapter considers an expanded definition of setting and regionalism as a way to analyze and comprehend Dubus' work. After introducing the idea that Dubus is usually considered a realist, I offer definitions of regionalism as an extension of realism and a viable method of interpreting Dubus' stories. Then, setting is considered in geographic terms as the narrative space where the story takes place. Setting is also considered as the world or worlds in which characters interact throughout a story. As characters move from space to space (world to world) in a story and encounter new situations, their interactions also change. The movement from narrative space to narrative space can be both literal and figurative, with relationships and interactions changing as physical and imaginary boundaries change.

Chapter Two provides in-depth close readings and analyses for five of Dubus' short stories, exploring the physical and invisible boundaries that separate characters and the ways in which this separation contributes to the characters' identities. This chapter examines the implications of analyzing Dubus' work from a regionalist point of view and looking at setting as the area in which Dubus lived and wrote his stories, or expanding setting to include different social factors that influenced Dubus' characters' thoughts and actions and contributed to their identities. Ultimately, I contend that setting is more complex and nuanced than its traditional definition and that this expanded view of setting allows for a greater variety of literary interpretation.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1	14
<i>Components of Setting: Establishing Narrative Space and Character Worlds</i>	
CHAPTER 2	26
<i>Regionalism and Setting in Dubus' Short Stories</i>	
CONCLUSIONS	66
WORKS CONSULTED	70

INTRODUCTION

He kneeled on the snow and with his unglowed hand he touched her cold blonde hair. In sorrow his flesh mingled like death-ash with the pierced serenity of the night air and the trees on the banks of the pond and the stars. He felt her spirit everywhere, fog-like across the pond and the bridge, spreading and rising in silent weeping above him into the black visible night and the invisible space beyond his ken and the cold silver truth of the stars.

—Andre Dubus II, “Townies”

Reading the short stories of Andre Dubus II, one is first struck by the style of his writing, the flow of his sentences that seem to have just the right amount of words to describe a scene, words that reveal the compassion he shows for his characters, some down on their luck and some hoping that their luck continues, searching for their identities and significance to society. From a stylistic point of view, it is no wonder that Dubus’ work is often taught in MFA programs around the country, for he truly was a master of his craft until his life was cut tragically short by a heart attack in 1999.

In addition to his strong writing style, Dubus is often lauded as a realist for his ability to distill the lives of everyday, working-class Americans in his short stories. In the preface of his book *Andre Dubus: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Thomas E. Kennedy opens with a description of Dubus as a writer of realism. Dubus, Kennedy states, does not just use words for the sake of using them, but to create a realistic—and possibly disturbing—image of the world or worlds that his characters inhabit by “tracing the everyday tragedies of ordinary Americans today to the moral blindness, isolation, and severed social, familial, and behavioral roots from which they develop” (Kennedy xii).

Dubus started publishing his stories in the 1960s, “a decade whose fictional spearhead in America declared war on realism” for a number of reasons (Kennedy ix). As Kennedy states,

Overloaded perhaps with the sociopolitical gore being spewed out daily from newspapers, television screens, and radios concerning foreign war and domestic strife, many American fiction writers began to retreat to more purely imaginative realms, to an overt contemplation of the technical implements of their craft...[such as]...Latin American magical realism (Kennedy ix-x).

Dubus set himself apart by continuing his pursuit of realism despite the changing literary landscape at the time that he started writing. While Dubus was good friends with Kurt Vonnegut—Vonnegut raised money to help with Dubus’ medical expenses after Dubus was paralyzed in a car accident—authors such as Vonnegut and Joseph Heller thought that other forms of writing would better depict the horrors of war, or even the horrors of everyday life. Instead of using realism, both Vonnegut and Heller utilized satire to juxtapose the violent or the crazed with the darkly humorous. Part of Dubus’ literary longevity no doubt stems from his writing style and structure—his craft—but my work will explore other strands of Dubus’ storytelling style and, I hope, inspire new perspectives and interpretations of Dubus’ work.

According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, realism is defined as “a mode of writing that gives the impression of ‘reflecting’ faithfully an actual way of life” (Oxford Dictionary). This faithful depiction is “based on detailed accuracy of description” and “rejects idealization, escapism, and other extravagant qualities of romance in favor of recognizing soberly the actual problems of life” (Oxford Dictionary).

Whether Dubus' characters are struggling parents, students, regular townspeople, or murderers, they all have flaws and they all have problems that threaten to ruin their everyday lives. Dubus expertly renders the multi-faceted lives of his characters and the moral consequences of their action or inaction as they encounter different life challenges.

Setting takes on an important role in Dubus' stories. Obviously, setting is an important component of most stories, but Dubus' use of setting reveals the complexities of describing specific areas on the page not as a means of escape, but as a way of learning about the harsh truths and problems of characters through detailed, faithful, and sometimes uncompromising reflection. Examining the use of setting in Dubus' stories asks readers to rethink their preconceptions about setting and its role in literature. Is setting purely geographical, a mere backdrop to the plot and the changes that the characters undergo throughout the story? Can multiple settings serve as the location for the same plot, or must a single setting be particular to a given story? If an author repeatedly utilizes a specific setting in his or her work, what does this say about the story and the significance of the setting?

Eileen Pollack, a fiction writer and a professor in the MFA Program at the University of Michigan, helps us contemplate many of these questions in her recent essay "The World of the Story." In her essay, Pollack examines the ways in which characters interact in different environments as they move in and out of different settings, or worlds. Pollack states, "For the purposes of a given story, the writer might consider each major character to be at home in a single world. Then, something happens to disrupt that equilibrium...the world in which the main character feels most at home collapses in an instant, or it disintegrates over time" (Pollack 7-8). Pollack advocates for the importance

of setting in works of literature, as many factors, both geographical and social, can disrupt the equilibrium that a character feels in one situation and influence the character's decision-making in another situation. We can delve deeper into Pollack's ideas about setting and character worlds to learn about the ways in which characters from particular regions adapt to different relationships and changes within the region that they call home. Pollack analyzes setting's ability to create tension and increase action in a story:

Setting is integral not only to character, but also to plot and theme. The conflict that propels the story's main action arises from some upset to the protagonist's world. The rupture or dissolution of the culture in which a character feels at home, or the friction that arises as the story's protagonist moves from one world to another, exposes and calls into question some set of values that until now has been taken for granted (Pollack 8).

Setting is integral to stories because it provides the space within which plot, theme, and character development arise. When the status quo of the main character is interrupted, by way of a change in scenery (setting) or inclusion of new characters that alter the way the main character acts, the plot moves forward and the story's themes become apparent.

Setting is important in a literal and a figurative sense. Characters can physically move from one place, or world, to another, with the transition somehow altering their values or beliefs. In the stories of Andre Dubus II, this physical transition from world to world can be seen in the unnamed cop in "Townies" (see epigraph and Chapter 2) who happens upon a deceased college girl and starts to reconsider his place in society, or Miranda in "Miranda Over the Valley" (see Chapter 2) who confronts differing opinions on abortion

when she returns home to her parents in California versus living independently as a college student in Massachusetts, as well as many other stories.

Dubus often set his stories in parts of the United States in which he lived. He was born in Louisiana, and many of his stories depict the Bayou country, from religious influences to minor league baseball games. Dubus then lived in Massachusetts for many years, leading him to also feature prominently the Merrimack Valley region between Massachusetts and New Hampshire in his stories. Although authors do not need to necessarily experience what they write about, Dubus' experiences help make his work more realistic. Setting is not simply a backdrop, an insignificant component that fades into the background of stories while plot, characterization, and other themes take more prominent roles. Setting is a more complex world, or worlds, with multiple factors contributing to the plot and the themes of the story, which in turn affect the characters. To understand the importance of setting in the works of Andre Dubus II, one needs to understand the world in which Dubus operates, the areas of his life that resonate with him and influence his fiction. These areas might be the places in which Dubus lived, as incorporating specific details about a place would seem to add to the realism and believability of the story, yet this does not always have to be the case. For Dubus, setting is paramount because of his realistic and uncompromising depictions of everyday life. On a general level, readers can empathize with Dubus' characters and how they persevere in these tough conditions, but readers can gain deeper insight into the characters by understanding Dubus' connection with the regions that he describes and the other outside components that influence Dubus' characters as they interact in different settings.

We have started to consider the significance of setting in Dubus' short stories and the ways in which setting serves as the foundation to discuss other aspects of literature such as plot and description. Dubus' descriptions of setting are known for being realistic and graphic representations of the natural world, often focusing on the characteristics of a particular region. Can we then describe Dubus as a regionalist writer, occupying a subgenre of realism? How does defining Dubus as a regionalist expand or limit interpretations of his work? As both Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse state in their book, *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture*, "Regionalism [is located] alongside realism and naturalism as a parallel tradition of narrative prose written roughly in the second half of the nineteenth century and at the turn into the twentieth" (Fetterley and Pryse 4). What does it mean to be a regionalist? How is setting elevated or marginalized with this critical viewpoint? If we are to examine the regionalist qualities of Dubus' work, what does that add or take away from a literary interpretation of his stories? At first glance, it would seem that aspects of regionalism are tightly woven into the fabric of Dubus' stories, but in fact, the answer is more nuanced.

According to *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, regionalism is defined as the "term applied to literature which emphasizes a special geographical setting and concentrates upon the history, manners, and folkways of the area as these help to shape the lives and behavior of the characters" (Oxford Companion). Dubus' stories privilege setting and its impact on the lives of the people who inhabit the setting. Dubus seems to draw on the historical ideologies of these regions, weaving references to the textile and mill history of New England into the tapestry of his writing. Throughout its history, the cities and towns in the Merrimack Valley region were known for their shoe,

hat, and other textile factories. In the time of Dubus' writing, around the 1960s to the 1980s, the "area was...in decline as manufacturing moved elsewhere and jobs became scarce. With poverty came social upheaval, which manifested itself in drunkenness, concomitant violence, chronic emotional depression, and broken families" (American National Biography). All of these social and societal factors contribute to Dubus' writing, as he is able to incorporate the history of the region and explore the ways in which past decisions influence the present lives of his characters. The people that came before them shaped the beliefs and ideologies of characters in the present.

Dubus illustrates the complex social structure and cultural components of the Merrimack Valley region as the setting for many of his stories. As Fetterley and Pryse state, "Regionalist texts call into question numerous cultural assumptions about literary history, poetics, thematics, genres, and reading strategies that their authors probably would recognize and that...[we]...in effect argu[e] they anticipated" (Fetterley and Pryse 2). Thematically, regionalist texts exemplify cultural and social problems of specific areas and provide an up-close account of characters dealing with the struggles and consequences of inhabiting a specific region. Regionalist texts can utilize the history of a region to explain the present situation of characters and how they have been affected over time.

And yet, regionalist texts have held a precarious position throughout literary history, sometimes well-received and other times deemed inferior for supposedly not exploring far-reaching, important themes. As Fetterley and Pryse note in *Writing Out of Place*, "historians have minimized, ignored, and disparaged these [regionalist] writers, either relegating them to the category of 'local color' or describing them as a subset of

realism by the phrase ‘regional realists’” (Fetterley and Pryse 4). Part of the problem in determining regionalism’s place in literature is the fact that the term ‘regionalism’ has often been used synonymously with the term ‘local color.’ Donna M. Campbell, an Associate Professor and Vice Chair of the English Department at Washington State University, explores the use of these terms in her chapter that was published in *A Companion To The Regional Literatures of America*. Campbell states,

Later cast by its detractors as a lighter, more comforting version of realism, one in which descriptive detail and the humorous depiction of quaint customs painted over its lack of serious themes, local color or regional fiction faced a different sort of struggle for acceptance as the public first embraced the genre and then dismissed it as irrelevant (*A Companion To The Literatures* 93).

The term local color implies that the author is merely channeling the dialect, customs, and characters of a specific region and does not need to be taken seriously. Campbell also describes the importance of setting and characters as they relate to regionalism. In a section of her class website titled “Regionalism and Local Color Fiction, 1865-1895,” Campbell states that in terms of setting, “[t]he emphasis is frequently on nature and the limitations it imposes; settings are frequently remote and inaccessible. The setting is integral to the story and may sometimes become a character in itself” (Campbell, “Regionalism and Local Color”). In terms of the characters, Campbell states,

Local color stories tend to be concerned with the character of the district or region rather than with the individual: characters may become character types, sometimes quaint or stereotypical. The characters are marked by their adherence

to the old ways, by dialect, and by particular personality traits central to the region (Campbell, "Regionalism and Local Color").

Campbell asserts that in realist works of literature, authors try to represent real life by writing about regular, ordinary people; writing in an objective, straightforward perspective; including a sense of morality; and providing a glimpse into the socioeconomic conflicts between the rich and poor in urban and rural areas (Campbell, "Regionalism and Local Color"). Campbell describes regionalism as a subgenre of realism that includes a particular setting in which the author tries to create believable character interactions that represent everyday life. In contrast to the negative connotations of local color, Fetterley and Pryse's new definition of regionalism can be described as a broader category that examines the "philosophical or sociological distinctions" of an area that "the writer often views as though he were a cultural anthropologist" (Oxford Companion). This improved definition of regionalism distances the term from local color and highlights the fact that regionalism can be thought of as a "more serious, more sympathetic, and less stereotypical way of writing about region" (*A Companion To The Literatures* 93).

From this perspective, Dubus can be seen as a regionalist writer. Economic, educational, and religious factors are just some of the social and societal issues that combine to form the identity of a particular region, and, consequently, are some of the factors that must be considered when examining the setting of a story. However, the relationship between regionalism and setting is more complex and sheds light on the importance of the outside factors that shape Dubus' characters as they interact in different settings. At first glance, it seems that describing a writer as a regionalist gives the

impression that setting is only important in a geographic sense. Dubus set many of his stories in Massachusetts and other parts of New England. Having lived in these areas, he was probably able to understand and portray the lives of the everyday working-class people who lived in these regions. However, he was also brought up a devout Catholic in the South, and his religious beliefs pervade his works regardless of regionalist setting.

In her book *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction*, Jane P. Tompkins attempts to re-center and redefine the American literary canon. As she mentions in the introduction to her book, her work “involves in its most ambitious form, a redefinition of literature and literary study, for it sees literary texts not as works of art embodying enduring themes in complex forms, but as attempts to redefine the social order” (Tompkins xi). In redefining the literary canon, Tompkins attempts to save writers not thought of as aesthetically rich or compelling. While others might have approached regionalist and other marginalized works of literature with a narrow mind and considered them inferior, Tompkins sees inherent value in the social work that these less appreciated writers accomplish in their fiction. For example, writers of local color were not valued as highly as other types of fiction writers because they wrote about stereotypes, yet Tompkins believes that the social implications uncovered in works of local color enhance the value of the texts. Dubus is not a writer of local color nor does he need to be saved under Tompkins’ guidelines, but under a redefinition of regionalism, an analysis of his work can include social issues and implications in addition to analysis of his writing style and mastery of his craft.

Fetterley and Pryse take another important stance by thinking about the essence of regionalism not as a landscape, or nature, but as the changing relationships among people

in a certain place. While the landscape might be important to regionalist writers, even writers that “[privilege] the natural world” still “focus on the relationship between the world and human consciousness” (Fetterley and Pryse 4). This seems to be one of the most important distinctions between regionalism and local color and exemplifies the complexities of setting in literature, not only in geographic terms, but also in terms of the relationships among characters and religion and other factors that form parts of their identity. Looking at works of literature through a regionalist lens sheds light on not only physical boundaries between people and between characters, but also, and more importantly, the relationships among characters and the ways in which they come to terms with the moral consequences of their decisions. As Fetterley and Pryse articulate, “Regions...have boundaries, but those boundaries that separate regional from urban or metropolitan life highlight relations of ruling rooted in economic history and the material requirements for everyday livelihood rather than in physical and ‘natural’ borders” (Fetterley and Pryse 4). While the space or landscape of the region is important, it is more important to look at the relationships and struggles among the people living and interacting in that region. The descriptions of these relationships take on added interest when the author examines a particular area instead of examining humanity. According to Fetterley and Pryse, regionalism

is not a feature of geography, though topography may play some part in changing economic conditions. Rather, regionalism asserts that the regionalizing premise concerns the consolidation and maintenance of power through ideology and is therefore a discourse...rather than a place (Fetterley and Pryse 7).

Redefining regionalism opens up a discussion about the various elements that influence the behaviors and beliefs of characters in a given story. It is not only the physical region, but also the changing economic conditions and power dynamics of the region that influence the relationships among characters.

Examining Dubus' stories sheds light on the socioeconomic, cultural, familial, and gendered problems of the region's inhabitants. However, even as Dubus focuses many of his stories in distinct regions, he also draws from his other life experiences to help shape the ideologies and behaviors of his characters. My work will primarily focus on Dubus' stories that take place in New England and how the stories illuminate the struggles and relationships among New England regional characters. These relationships suggest that Dubus chose the New England setting for its geographical significance, but other factors also influence his main characters. Dubus was brought up devoutly Catholic and served in the military, and his religious beliefs and beliefs about man's role in working for and protecting his family are also prevalent in his works.

I will be working in the twentieth century of literary studies and examining the use of realism and regionalism in Dubus' works. I will analyze Dubus' use of setting in various works and examine the advantages and disadvantages of categorizing Dubus as a regionalist writer. I will utilize the term 'regionalism' to describe the work of Andre Dubus, not the term 'local color,' although the two terms are often used interchangeably, to represent the fact that Dubus examines more than just the physical aspects of place in his settings. Dubus does not necessarily feature exaggerated regional dialects in his short stories, unlike authors of local color, nor is Dubus considered an inferior writer by employing stereotypical tropes in his works. He is well known as a realist, but, as I have

mentioned, he can also be thought of as a regionalist, occupying a subgenre of realism yet focusing on more particular settings.

In Chapter 1, I will explore various theories concerning community creation and the boundaries that separate regions and help define regional identities.

In Chapter 2, I will utilize these theories to analyze a number of Dubus' short stories from a realist and regionalist perspective. Specifically, I will investigate Dubus' use of setting and the relationship between the setting and themes such as self-identity, violence, and gender relations.

Finally, I will review the importance of setting in literature, and consider the advantages and disadvantages of categorizing Dubus as a regionalist.

CHAPTER 1

Components of Setting: Establishing Narrative Space and Character Worlds

Before we delve deeper into setting, it is important to consider some theories of regionalism and identity creation. Setting is often thought to be merely the physical space where a story takes place, but there are a multitude of factors that authors utilize to craft this narrative space. A story's setting also helps create boundaries and suggests other spaces. But how are these spaces defined, and what effects do these spaces have on the characters that occupy them?

Benedict Anderson, a professor at Cornell University, reflects on the ideas of boundaries and multiple spaces in *Imagined Communities*. In his book, Anderson traces the creation of communities throughout history. While he mainly considers nationalism, Anderson's definitions also seem to work to describe the ways in which groups of people construct a regional identity and a regional consciousness. This is important because in order to see how regions function as specific settings, we have to consider the factors that define regions. Whether we are discussing nations as Anderson does or discussing regions, as is pertinent to the work of a writer such as Dubus, we are considering the boundaries of an area and the effect that these boundaries have on the area's inhabitants.

Anderson defines the term "nation" early in his work, stating, "In an anthropological spirit...the nation...is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 7). The nation is "imagined" because the nation's "members...will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion"

(Anderson 7). The nation is “limited” because “even the largest of them . . . has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations” (Anderson 7). The nation is “sovereign” because “the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm . . . nations dream of being free, and, if under God, directly so” (Anderson 8). Finally, the nation is a “community” because it is “always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 8). I am not as concerned with Anderson’s claims about the sovereignty of nations and the idea of nations dreaming of being free, but, nevertheless, these concepts seem to connect with Anderson’s other main points that ask readers to think about boundaries and borders, both imaginary and real. Anderson’s concept of community creation illustrates the strong bonds that incite people to come together and fight for their nation even if they do not agree with everything that is going on within the nation. The innate yet imagined similarities among the nation’s citizens will always bring them together. Despite the fact that communities lead to togetherness, Anderson seems to allude to the imaginary boundaries that people create within the nation by comparing themselves to other nations.

By taking Anderson’s definitions of nationalism and applying them to smaller-scale communities, we can see how regional identities are formed. Cities and towns often have their own unique identities, such as the famous textile factories in the Merrimack Valley region or sports teams that unite an area. The inhabitants of these places feel a strong sense of togetherness and camaraderie, and, even if they do not agree with everything that is going on politically or socially within their region, they will still have a deep affinity for their hometown community. Francesco Loriggio makes similar claims

about the unity and togetherness in his essay “Regionalism and Theory.” Loriggio discusses some of the themes in “Provincialism,” an essay by American philosopher Josiah Royce that was important in articulating many of the key ideas of regionalism. Like Anderson, Royce does not specifically mention regionalism by name, but Royce’s perspective on provinces echoes the concept of the nation and the idea of boundaries. Royce describe a province as “sufficiently unified to have a true consciousness of its own unity, to feel a pride in its own ideals and customs, and to possess a sense of its distinction from other parts of the country,” while he describes provincialism as “the tendency of [a] province to possess its own customs and ideals” and “the love and pride which leads the inhabitants of a province to cherish as their own these traditions, beliefs, and aspirations” (qtd. in Loriggio 19). Within these areas, the inhabitants might stick by either physical boundaries or borders, or even imagined borders to separate their city or town from another city or town. On another level, inhabitants can create imaginary boundaries based on their economic, social, or educational standing that separates them from other inhabitants. Depending on the point of view, this distinction can be empowering or demoralizing.

David Jordan helps us consider this distinction and brings us closer to discussing setting. In the introduction to *Regionalism Reconsidered: New Approaches to the Field*, Jordan says that regionalism is

Born of a sense of identity and belonging that is shared by a region’s inhabitants; this sense of community springs from an intimate relation to the natural environment; and since a region is by definition a small part of a larger whole, a regional community is necessarily a marginal community (Jordan xvi).

Jordan alludes to the physical connection that a region's inhabitants share with their natural environment. The regional community is a small part of a larger community, such as a state or a country. In either case, Jordan describes the idea of physical borders separating the regional community from other communities. Similar to Anderson, Jordan also evokes the idea of imaginary boundaries that heighten not only the connection that inhabitants share with their environment, but also the more subtle components that form a character's identity. Jordan refers to a regional community as marginal to convey the idea that a regional community is a small part of a larger community, but the regional community's marginality does not suggest the region's marginal importance. In fact, this marginality seems to suggest that it is not only the physical relationships between spaces or communities that define characters, but also the unseen relationships based on economic, social, and educational factors that define a character's connection with his or her environment and form his or her identity.

In his fiction, Dubus often focuses on the harsh realities of the working class and often sets his stories in the "fraying towns of the Merrimack Valley" (American National Biography). The city of Haverhill, Dubus' home for many years, is located in the Merrimack Valley of northeastern Massachusetts. Other cities such as Lowell and Lawrence comprise the Massachusetts portion of the Merrimack Valley, which is "widely known as the Birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution" (Merrimack Valley Planning). All of the Massachusetts cities and towns within the region are considered part of the Greater Boston area, where many of Dubus' characters attend college and experience life in the city. Yet his characters also identify themselves in part by their relationship to their natural environment, such as the woods where they hunt or the

woods where they plan to dispose of a dead body. The stories' settings in Massachusetts are important in a geographic sense, as the layout and history of the land contribute to the behaviors and motivations of the main characters.

Shaun O'Connell illustrates the importance of change over time throughout the history of New England and the ways in which this change contributes to the identity of the region's citizens, or characters. In his book *Imagining Boston: A Literary Landscape*, O'Connell states, "The region stretching from the Merrimack Valley to [Robert] Frost's southern New Hampshire has long been transformed from a pastoral retreat into a region of industrialization, immigration, and economic depravation" (O'Connell 220).

O'Connell quotes John Updike, Dubus' contemporary and another author known for incorporating the New England experience into his works, to articulate Dubus' ability to render the immense struggles of the region on the page. Updike says, "The Merrimack Valley was the New World's first real industrial belt, and has been economically disconsolate for decades; the textile mills moved south, and then foreign imports undermined the leather and shoe factories. But life goes on" (qtd. in O'Connell 220).

Dubus' characters emblemize the ability to endure economic strife and carry on despite unfavorable conditions and moral ambiguities. Dubus' characters share a connection with their natural environment, echoing Jordan and O'Connell, yet they also attain a seemingly imaginary, and possibly stronger connection, as introduced by Anderson, in that the characters form a community in a region of Massachusetts with a variety of components that bring them together. Within this region, it is the beliefs and shared suffering of the region's inhabitants, not just the geographic location, which creates boundaries and separates them from other groups of people.

Eileen Pollack also describes the idea of an “insider vs. outsider” mentality that results when characters interact in unfamiliar situations or worlds. Pollack says that the ways in which characters interact within these different worlds and settings says something important about their identities. She states, “A much more interesting way to conceive of setting is to imagine the world—or worlds—that its main characters inhabit, the cultures that produced them, the communities within which they do—or do not—feel at home” (Pollack 20). A character might feel at home in one world, such as his community or, on a more specific level, inside his own house. However, when the character is displaced from this world, this comfort zone, he has to alter his actions in such a way as to contemplate questions concerning his identity. Why does the character feel at home in one world? Does the character have the support of the community and share the same ideologies as the people around him? Does the character possess strong family values and make decisions like his parents? Where is the character most comfortable? It is at school, at church, or outside playing sports? What is the character’s weakness, and how does venturing away from the familiar world exploit this weakness? As we can see, there are numerous boundaries that separate the character from his comfort zone, from other worlds or spaces. Some of these boundaries are physical, such as the character interacting differently when he is inside his house or outside in the community, the house being the physical barrier or separation. Yet many of these boundaries are imaginary; that is, they have been created over time in the character’s mind and influence the character’s decisions.

Again, this brings us back to the complexities of setting in the works of Andre Dubus. Now that we have established a few ways of thinking about regional communities

and the varied factors that influence regional identities, we can delve into the relationship among setting, plot, and description, before analyzing specific examples in Dubus' short stories. Loriggio also describes the importance of plot, description, and setting in works of literature. He cites the work of Jurij Lotman, who, as Loriggio states, was known for "reconceptualizing...narration directly by way of topology rather than chronology, in terms of space rather than time" (qtd. in Loriggio 12). Loriggio describes Lotman's ability to articulate the difference between what Lotman calls unplotted and plotted works of literature. Loriggio cites Lotman, stating,

For it to have plot, a narrative must comprise at least two spaces. The event, the basic unit of plot, occurs when there is a 'shifting of a persona across the borders of a semantic field,' when a character goes beyond a set of rules, a world picture, a delimited (and hence culturally bound) topography (qtd. in Loriggio 12).

When Lotman describes narrative spaces, he does not only mean that physical spaces or boundaries can separate characters and create different places of interaction, as plot relies on semantic fields, not literal fields or borders. While a shift in narrative space can be signified by a character moving from one place to another, such as walking from the kitchen to the dining room, a shift in narrative space can also include cultural topography, or societal and social factors that, when disrupted, indicate a change in the way a character acts or thinks about their identity. By mentioning the "culturally bound topography," Lotman alludes to the regionalist aspects of the narrative, as regionalist narratives are rooted in history, culture, and tradition. The culture and mannerisms of a region can come into question depending on the new characters that interact in the region.

To achieve Lotman's definition of a plotted text, a story needs to occupy different spaces or settings. Using Pollack's terminology, these spaces can be described as the worlds the main characters inhabit. Disrupting these worlds reveals the behavior and motivations of characters because it shows how the characters adapt to new and unfamiliar situations. Thus, setting is crucial in complicating the story and helping to drive the plot forward. As the main characters interact in different worlds and occupy different settings, the narrative changes from an unplotted text with only one narrative space to a plotted text with two or more narrative spaces that add to the complexity of the story. These narrative spaces are settings, different worlds that characters inhabit, worlds that have distinct rules that help define the parameters of character interaction within each world. For example, a character will talk differently when he talks to his mother, his sister, his girlfriend, or his buddies. He may adopt a more formal tone when speaking to his mother, a lax tone when speaking with his male friends, and occupy the middle ground when speaking to his sister or his girlfriend. However, the character's interaction can also change based on his surrounding. The "world picture" seems to indicate the status quo, or the main setting of the story, but this world picture can be disrupted. Maybe the character is formal when he talks with his friends in class and adopts a more casual, even childish tone when he talks with his mother when he is home for the holiday break because there is nobody to negatively judge their interaction inside their home.

While a character's outside behavior can be changed or disrupted, a character's innermost values can also be disrupted. For example, if a character has a special bond with his father that includes traditions such as attending sports games or going out to dinner together and the character's father dies, the character must reassess not only his

habits (going to sports games or restaurants), but also the value that he places on these interactions with his father. The disruption unmask or unveils the character's inmost values and challenges the character to reexamine his time with his father. Maybe the character and his father established a tradition of going out to eat at the same restaurant in the North End and then attending Boston Celtics games before the character went to college. If the character's father dies, the character will no longer be able to continue this tradition; his outside behavior is changed, but the disruption is more complex. What does it say about the character if he continues to eat at the same restaurant, or better yet, eat at the same restaurant and attend a Celtics game on the same night? The character must reassess whether continuing the tradition somehow carries on his father's memory or if continuing the tradition suggests that he is not affected by his father's death.

Loriggio interprets Lotman's work as a "vindication of description," and it would seem that Pollack would advocate for the importance of description as well (Loriggio 13). Authors do not simply describe random settings without any connection to other settings or the main characters. Authors do not describe narrative spaces just to "fill in the background" (or the setting, the landscape, etc.), but to provide an important look into the lives of the characters and their connection to the particular setting. Obviously, all narratives need to have some type of setting, but Loriggio seems to say that regionalist narratives give more power to the setting or backdrop of the story because the characters embody the identity of an entire region. He states, "This amounts to saying that regionalist writing exposes the ordinary plotlessness... Generally, narratives do not do much with the specificity of a site, which—left inert, unthematized—stands for all space, serving merely to testify of the existence of a backdrop" (Loriggio 13-14). On the other

hand, “Regionalist writing accentuates that specificity by encrusting it over the characters and on their actions” (Loriggio 14). In this way, the regional setting can become a character in and of itself within a story.

Loriggio also describes the ways in which regionalist literature invites a sense of exclusivity into the conversation. He writes that the idea of regionalism “is usually taken in the univocal, unequivocal, straightforward sense of enclosure,” meaning that when authors like Andre Dubus decide to write about a particular part of Massachusetts, they separate their setting from other parts of Massachusetts and in effect parts of the world (Loriggio 17). Loriggio says, “But by the mere act of cutting off, separating, boundaries also evoke, bring into play, other spaces” (Loriggio 17). Remember that Loriggio and Lotman state that two or more narrative spaces are necessary for a text to be considered plotted. It appears that Loriggio is arguing that in regionalist texts, authors are able to portray two narrative spaces by evoking both the region and the outside world as a whole. In other words, authors are able to evoke a sense of regional identity in one space and a sense of “the other” in the other space.

If a character’s connection with his environment is important in identifying character relationships, how best to examine the works of authors who employ this particular writing style? Is there something different and significant about this regionalist literature that sets it apart from the rest of the literary canon? If so, in what ways does a regionalist view add to critical theory, and in what ways is regionalism a limiting method of literary interpretation? As Fetterley and Pryse state, “Canonical American literature and culture almost exclusively tell the stories of boys growing up; bonding between young men (sometimes across racial lines); men’s travels, interests, obsessions, hopes,

and dreams for America; and men's images of what women want and what the 'American girl' should become" (Fetterley and Pryse 30). However, regionalism is able to "provide an alternative vision of what American culture might look like if the stories we chose to pass on to the next generation of readers reflected a broader spectrum of values" (Fetterley and Pryse 30). The broader spectrum of values is evidenced in the ways in which a character's values and beliefs are exposed or called into question as the character moves in and out of different worlds or settings. In this way, stories not only portray boys and girls growing up or young men and women bonding, but also portray the importance of setting in these interactions. Setting is more than just a backdrop. An author's choice of setting provides insight into the variety of factors that influence the lives of the characters. An author's decision to incorporate a regionalist setting provides insight into the unique factors or values that influence characters in a specific region. For example, regionalism might force an author to describe the misfortune and lack of rights afforded to women and blacks within a region.

Yet characters do not always base their morals on the region in which they live. Their geographic location might play a role in their mindset, as they could be influenced by different groups of people and the history of the region, but geography is not the only component that factors into a character's decision-making and the ways in which he or she grapples with the consequences and fallout of his or her actions. Pollack's view of setting expands on other critics' definitions of a character's world. While Lorrigo and Lotman describe the importance of characters occupying different physical spaces or settings, Pollack describes the many outside factors that contribute to a character's thought-process and help define his or her moral compass. In addition to the disruption of

physically moving from one setting to another, Pollack contends that factors such as a character's family situation and parental influences, socioeconomic status, educational opportunities, and religious beliefs all comprise a character's world. A disruption in the character world challenges the character to rethink his or her habits, beliefs, and values in the same way that inhabiting a new physical setting alters the ways in which a character interacts with his or her new environment. The issue of defining the influences on a character is further complicated when these outside factors contrast with the customary beliefs and traditions of the geographic region.

CHAPTER 2

Regionalism and Setting in Dubus' Short Stories

Olivia Carr Edenfield's *Domestic Space in the Short Fiction of Andre Dubus* sheds light on familial relationships and families interacting in new environments in the short stories of Andre Dubus II. By focusing on a few particular examples in Dubus' short stories, I will examine the ways in which domestic space is seen as the norm, or the main point of comparison between changing familial relationships, as well as the ways in which deviations from the norm alter character interactions and conversations. When characters are forced to inhabit unfamiliar places or worlds, their interactions with other characters necessarily change. How the characters deal with these changes, and how the characters come to recognize the different ways to best inhabit these new worlds, eventually leads to the formation of their character identity and point of comparison against other characters.

Edenfield cites a 1993 interview with Dubus at his home in Haverhill, Massachusetts that I have also discovered in Thomas E. Kennedy's work and analysis on Andre Dubus's short stories. When asked for his thoughts on character motivation, Dubus states, "We are all shaped by our environment. I don't get beyond that. Within that, we are morally responsible" (qtd. in Edenfield 3). It seems as if the environment, or interplay between multiple environments, is integral to character development and growth throughout a work of literature. If characters can be shaped by their environments, then characters can also be shaped by their interactions in unfamiliar environments.

As Edenfield later states, “In all of his short fiction, characters are ‘shaped,’ limited, or motivated by their respective environments. Some are able to break through their limitations, to go beyond their conflicts to reshape their lives” (Edenfield 3). When characters are thrust into an unfamiliar situation, they have to learn how to pick up the pieces and adapt to their new surroundings. Edenfield returns to an Ernest Hemingway line from *A Farewell to Arms* to describe Dubus’ process of creating characters and detailing the ways in which the characters interact with different environments, noting that the characters are “strong at the broken places” (qtd. in Edenfield 3). This seems to be an apt comparison, as Dubus continually portrays characters in the middle class and lower middle class, exploring the ways that characters struggle with their identities in relation to both other characters of different social classes as well as new environments. Dubus’ characters definitely seem to be “strong at the broken places” because they are continually trying to piece their lives and identities together in relation to characters that might be more privileged (either in terms of education, the economy, or both) and not have to face the same stressful situations each and every day. Instead of being distraught or broken by their misfortune, Dubus’ characters rally behind their communities to continue to define and redefine their identities and understand how they fit into the picture when they occupy not only familiar, but also new and unfamiliar character spheres or worlds.

Edenfield describes the ways in which Dubus’ characters have to redefine themselves when they are forced to interact in new and unfamiliar environments. Citing author Kenneth Mitchell, Edenfield says, “‘Geography,’ or ‘landscape,’ has a profound influence in shaping any society...Literature, like all art, is ultimately a reflection and

illustration of the landscape that produced it” (qtd. in Edenfield 7). The context of the term “landscape” determines if a work should be looked at from a regionalist point of view or broadened to include the other influences of the author. Literature can be a reflection of the landscape where the author writes, such as Dubus utilizing the Merrimack Valley in his works, or the landscape can be a reflection of the area that played a role in producing the author’s line of thinking, such as Dubus’ Catholic upbringing and his time in the military. How can readers think about Dubus’ incorporation of specific aspects of the New England as well as outside influences? If Dubus’ literature is shaped by the landscape where he lives and writes his stories, what conclusions can readers draw from the behaviors and motivations of his characters that represent the region?

It seems that inhabitants of certain regions develop a particular identity based on the region that they reside. In *Regionalism in a Global Society: Persistence and Change in Atlantic Canada and New England*, Stephen G. Tomblin and Charles S. Colgan explore the elements that make up the identity of New Englanders, such as history, tradition, and the economic disparity between the upper and middle class. As the authors state,

New England is well known for its colonial past, its prominent higher education institutions, its tradition of technological innovation and new product development, its hard working and hardy residents (overcoming limited natural resources and difficult weather conditions), and the unique character of its landscape (Tomblin and Colgan 134).

The editors portray New England as a region well known for its institutions of higher education, which adds to the region's culture and identity, yet also touch on the growing divide between urban and rural education.

At their core, all regions or communities have unique identities. As we saw earlier in Anderson's work, these communal identities can be formed by both physical borders between states or towns or by imaginary boundaries that divide the mindset of different groups of people. In this project, I have mainly focused on Dubus' relationship with New England and the ways in which his characters represent the New England region by embodying regional traits. Dubus' descriptions firmly set his stories in various parts of New England. Often he references the Merrimack Valley, but other times Dubus references the city of Boston and famous Massachusetts landmarks, such as Fenway Park, the Charles River, and the Boston Public Garden. Dubus' realistic representations of New England are heightened by his regional knowledge and lend credence to the importance of setting in his stories. As Dubus reveals the lives of his characters on the page, it is hard to imagine his characters living in a region other than New England. However, the themes in Dubus' stories, such as love, sacrifice, family, and struggle, suggest that setting is more complex than simply the geographic area where the story takes place. These themes are not merely indicative of the New England region, but are more universal. Perhaps Dubus' ideas concerning love and religion are drawn from his own experiences and from the different places in which he lived, but he does not need to necessarily incorporate his own experiences to create his characters. As Dubus' characters interact in the worlds that he has created for them, they must learn to adapt to disturbances in their environment that challenge their habits and deepest values.

The ways in which characters wrestle with the implications of these disturbances is especially evident in “Townies.” Dubus utilizes two distinct points of view to help describe the murder of Robin, a New England college girl. The story starts from the point of view of the unnamed security guard who discovers Robin’s body in the snow before shifting to the point of view of Mike, Robin’s former boyfriend and murderer. The setting is a small town in northeastern Massachusetts, not unlike where Dubus lived. The college used to be an all-girls school but has recently started to accept boys. Dubus describes the school as wealthy and preppy, establishing the contrast between Robin’s world and the worlds of the two men in the story, her boyfriend Mike and the security guard who finds her dead body in the snow.

Dubus’ writing explores not only the physical boundaries that separate his characters, but also the relationships and socioeconomic struggles that separate the fates of his characters as they live in the New England region. Early in the story, the security guard laments the change over time within the northeastern Massachusetts community.

He had lived all his life in this town, a small city in northeastern Massachusetts; once there had been a shoe industry. Now that was over, only three factories were open, and the others sat empty along the bank of the Merrimack. Their closed windows and the dark empty rooms beyond them stared at the street, like the faces of the old and poor who on summer Sundays sat on the stoops of the old houses farther upriver and stared at the street, the river, the air before their eyes (Dubus 360).

He contemplates how both the physical features of the town and the behaviors of the town’s inhabitants have changed over the years. Dubus’ language highlights the decline

and decay of the town. When describing the girls who roam the college campus, the security guard remarks, “They looked like the girls he had grown up knowing about: the rich girls who came from all parts of the country to the school, and who were rarely seen in town” (Dubus 361). From the beginning of the story, it is clear that Dubus will examine the contrast between the socioeconomic class of the female college students and the other inhabitants living in the unnamed New England town. Dubus heightens the idea of the interiority and exteriority of the town, exemplifying the stark differences between the town and the outside world. Dubus’ work sheds light on the cultural and social disparity between the upper and lower classes. While this method or style of writing can be useful in examining a wide variety of works of literature, it takes on an added importance and significance in Massachusetts, a state known not only for its system of higher education, but also for its textile factories and working-class towns throughout the state, especially in the Merrimack Valley region of northeastern Massachusetts.

While Dubus’ story only encompasses one general space (the town), it presents the world of the town in opposition to the world of the college. The town seems cut off and separated from the rest of the country. Loriggio says, “But by the mere act of cutting off, separating, boundaries also evoke, bring into play, other spaces” (Loriggio 17). Within the town, there is a separation between the world of the working class townies and the high class, intellectual world of the college campus. While the utilization of a physical boundary is not always necessary to evoke ideas of regionalism, here the boundary created by the college campus heightens the divide between the town’s inhabitants. Dubus also suggests that the “townies” can feel distanced from their own town if they try to inhabit the world of the campus, an unfamiliar territory where they do

not have the economic or educational means to seamlessly fit in. The security guard is only able to inhabit the college campus when he is working, and even then he recognizes that his background prevents him from fitting in; his interactions with the students are unnatural and he can never belong to their community. As we will later see when Dubus shifts the point of view, no matter how much Mike tries, he can only inhabit the campus for a short period of time before his metaphorical disguise wears off and his true identity as a charmer, not someone who is charming, is revealed.

Dubus details the everyday life of the security guard, an older gentlemen who does not carry any weapons and in many ways seems to be a spectator to events taking place at the college. The death of Robin leads the security guard to reminisce about other girls on the campus. Dubus describes a particular past encounter, writing,

There were perhaps six of them. As he approached, he looked at their faces, their hair. They did not look at him. He walked by them. He could smell them and he could feel their eyes seeing him and not seeing him. Their smells were of perfume, cold fur, leather gloves, leather suitcases. Their voices had no accents he could recognize. They seemed the voices of mansions, resorts, travel (Dubus 361).

The security guard is an outsider in his own environment, his own town. He cannot even recognize the accents of the college students, exemplifying his feelings as an outsider in a region known for its unmistakable lack of R's, with where words like "car" are pronounced "cah" and "Harvard Yard" becomes "Hahvahd Yahd." Pollack mentions the ways in which an author can "disrupt the equilibrium" of main characters by thrusting them into unfamiliar situations (Pollack 7). In this case, the security guard is familiar with

the town, as he has lived there his whole life, but his sense of familiarity is disrupted because he views himself as almost a foreigner in his own hometown. The security guard identifies the girls by their material wealth, suggesting that he belongs to the opposite socioeconomic class. He might not be as impoverished as Mike, the man responsible for Robin's murder, but the security guard recognizes his inferiority—perhaps insignificance or invisibility—in the minds of the rich college girls. From a regionalist perspective, part of Dubus' literary value stems from his ability to distill the philosophical, sociological, and psychological problems of his characters on the page. Pollack also mentions the importance of “[calling] into question some set of values that until now has been taken for granted” by the main character (Pollack 8). The security guard seems to identify with the communal ideas of his town, and perhaps he has taken advantage of his own self-identity until he views his identity in relation to others around him. The security guard could attempt to rise above his deprived social condition, but the working-class mentality of the region leads him to stay and continue to face the hardships.

Later, the security guard thinks back to girls that he knew in his youth, the trees on the college campus providing the memory link between the present and the past:

He imagined the girls of 1941 standing in a circle as one of the maintenance men dug a hole and planted the small tree. The girls were pretty and hopeful and had sweethearts. He thought of them later in that year, in winter; perhaps skiing when the *Arizona* took the bombs. He was certain that some of them had lost sweethearts in the war, which at first he had followed in the newspapers as he now followed the Red Sox and Patriots and Celtics and Bruins. Then he was drafted ...[but]...He was glad that he missed combat and when he returned he did

not pretend to his wife and family and friends that he wished he had been shot at (Dubus 363).

The descriptions of the tree scene serve as a form of flashback to the security guard's memories of the girls in 1941 during World War II. Remember that Lotman's work "[vindicates]...description," meaning that the details that authors choose are not used to make the story longer, but to provide an important look into the lives of the characters and their relationship to a setting and other characters (qtd. in Loriggio 13). The security guard did not seem to fit in with the culture of violence during the war, judging by his lack of desire to partake in combat. The security guard prefers to remember peaceful times, both in the present and in his memories. The flashback allows the security guard to escape the present world of violent men who might harm a woman such as Robin. Fast-forward to the present day, and the security guard still does not fit in with the town's culture because of his perceived inferiority to the educated elite.

Loriggio remarks, "One's affinities with, one's dependence on a particular environment or a particular community" as well as "one's independence or one's departure," are important in identifying character relationships. This is readily apparent when Dubus shifts the point of view to Mike, the boyfriend who murders Robin. Mike seems to take out his frustration on Robin because he cannot cope with his rundown world and his inability to make a clear entrance into Robin's privileged college lifestyle. In describing the murder scene, Dubus writes, "He kicked her side...He knew she had died while he was kicking her. Something about the silence of the night, and the way her body yielded to his boot" (Dubus 364). Like the security guard, Mike comments on the change of the small New England town. He describes the college that Robin attends,

noting “the old brick and the iron fence with its points like spears and the serene trees,” physical and historical (in terms of the old brick) boundaries that separate his life from Robin’s life (Dubus 365). Mike seems to associate the town’s constant change with death, becoming master of this cycle of change when he causes Robin’s death. He says, “All his life this town had been dying. His father had died with it, killing himself with one of the last things he owned: they did not have a garage so he drove the car into a woods and used the vacuum cleaner hose” (Dubus 365). Mike’s backstory resembles that of other families in northeastern Massachusetts, working-class families who despite hard work and sacrifice could not make ends meet and may have viewed death as their only option.

Even more so than his father, Mike is economically crippled, leaving him to feel out of place, as he does not belong on this college campus full of privileged girls who have been afforded more opportunities in life. Dubus unravels Mike’s displacement through Mike’s thought process:

Seeing Robin on the bridge over the pond he saw the dormitory beyond it, just a dormitory for them, rooms which they crowded with their things, but the best place he had ever slept in. The things that crowded their rooms were more than he had ever owned, yet he knew for the girls these were only selected and favorite or what they thought necessary things, only a transportable bit of what filled large rooms of huge houses at home (Dubus 366).

Unlike Robin and the other college girls, Mike comes from a poor family without sufficient economic and financial resources that he believes would better set him up for success. Mike constantly compares himself to the girls, obsessing over their lavish

possessions and decorative rooms. He knows that he will never own as many material objects as the girls, that he will never attain their high societal status. He is only able to enter the girls' world for a brief period of time, when he spends the night in one of their rooms. The rooms might just be dorms for the college girls, but to Mike, the dorms represent the confines of a world that he is not privileged enough to fully enter. He can charm and sweet-talk his way to a room for the night, but when morning comes and the inebriated illusions wear off Mike's inferiority once again sets in. When it appears that Mike has had enough of scraping by to make ends meet, he believes that murder is his only option.

Critics often describe Dubus as a realist, noting his ability to accurately render the struggles of the middle and lower working class on the page. Dubus deals with real-life problems such as economic standing and self-identity, and is careful not to create an idealized or romanticized version of life as he explores the relationship between characters and their changing environments. Dubus portrays the harsh realities of Mike's lifestyle, how Mike goes to the employment office to pick up his checks and steals from the girls that he sleeps with to get some extra money on the side. Mike is smart and resourceful about his theft. Dubus writes, "Through the years he had stolen from them: usually cash from the girls he slept with, taking just enough so they would believe or make themselves believe that while they were drunk at Timmy's they had spent it" (Dubus 367). Later, Dubus describes the day when Mike recruits another girl to help him steal a stereo. Since Mike does not have enough money to own a car, the girl drops him off at his house when the deed is finished. "In the car he was relieved but only for a moment, only until she started the engine, then he thought of the street and the building

where he lived, and by the time she turned on the heater he was trying to think of a way to keep her from taking him home” (Dubus 367). Mike is ashamed when the girl drives down his poor, rundown street to drop him off at his building. He lives in a cramped neighborhood, the opposite of the college girls in the other world that he tries to interact in. Dubus writes, “He meant to get out at the corner but when she said Here? and slowed for the turn he was awash in the loss of control which he fought so often and overcame so little, though he knew most people couldn’t tell by looking at him or even talking to him” (Dubus, 368). When the girl questions if she is dropping him off at the right street, Mike is forced to question or reexamine his position in society. Even though Mike mentions that people might not realize that he thinks poorly of himself and his social standing, the closer he gets to his personal space or territory the more closely he realizes that he does not have the economic resources to fit in with certain groups in his town.

Dubus continues to describe Mike’s state of mind: “The worst was that he was so humiliated he could not trust what he felt, could not know if this dumb rich girl was even aware of the street” (Dubus 368). Dubus portrays the inferiority complex between the rich and poor neighborhoods in and around the small college town. Mike is not sure if the girl recognizes the downtrodden state of the street, as if the street is inferior to the point of invisibility to those that pass by. Either the rich girl will ridicule the vastly underdeveloped area, or will not recognize the problems because they are beneath her.

At the conclusion of the story, Mike accepts that the police will discover his crime and he will go to jail. Similar to the security guard, he understands the consequences of his actions and that he must accept his punishment. He seems to have an almost out-of-

body experience in regards to his name. It is as if, in the process of taking Mike's identity from him, the town becomes a character in and of itself. Dubus writes,

The girls would speak [Mike's] name. His name was in that room, back there in the dormitory; it was not walking up the hill in his clothing. He had two joints in his room and he would smoke those while he waited, lying dressed on his bed.

When he heard their footsteps in the hall he would put on his jacket and open the door before they knocked and walk with them to the cruiser. He walked faster up the hill (Dubus 370).

Mike grapples with his position as a murderer and takes the first steps to accept his fate and punishment. No matter how fast Mike walks, he knows that he cannot escape his crime. Mike's opinion of his low status in the town adds to a feeling of inevitability surrounding the crime. The drastic economic and social divide between Mike and the members of the wealthy upper class were in some ways bound to converge with violence.

Neither the security guard nor Mike seem to fit into the high class culture of the college town; they both feel out of place in a world based on Dubus' experiences in working-class Massachusetts. In many ways, Robin seems to fit with the sense of elitism and wealth of the campus portion of the town. Robin's wealth probably makes her feel accepted in the college community and also allows her to channel this acceptance into the rest of the town, where she is viewed as upper class. Yet Robin also does not fit with the other college girls because of her relationship with Mike. While the other college girls date and eventually marry men of the same social class, men who have the same concept of material wealth, Robin breaks the unwritten rules and chooses to associate with a known derelict. Yet because she does not appear as a live character in the story, it is

unclear exactly how Robin views herself in relation to the other college girls. In contrast, it is evident that for various reasons, the security guard and Mike feel marginalized and unaccepted on the college campus, and become further alienated because they view this marginalization and foreignness as the mindset of the rest of the town, painting themselves as outsiders.

As Edenfield states, “Just as the realism that Dubus uses in his short fiction has been a tendency in American fiction since the mid-1800s, his concern with the place in society of his characters and their struggles to fit into their changing environmental circumstances has been a consistent theme of the canon” (Edenfield 6). In “The Winter Father,” Dubus describes Peter Jackman’s struggles to cultivate relationships with his children after he divorces his wife. Like “Townies,” Dubus’ “Winter Father” is set in the resolute and hardworking Merrimack Valley region, as evidenced on one of Peter’s morning runs.

He ran two and a half miles down the road which, at his corner, was a town road of close houses but soon was climbing and dropping past farms and meadows; at the crest of a hill, where he could see the curves and trees on the banks of the Merrimack, he turned and ran back (Dubus 28).

Dubus’ descriptions exemplify the differences between Peter’s winter and summer parenting styles. Peter changes his styles of parenting based on his environment or his setting. He takes his children to the movies around town or in Boston when he has them for the weekend because he does not feel that he can adequately talk with or relate to them after his divorce with their mother. He deems this predicament a “base of

cowardice,” and sometimes he also needs the false confidence of gin to talk to his children about important and ponderous subjects (Dubus 25).

Later Dubus describes Peter’s new ideology about women and his peculiar thought process in potentially revealing this misogynistic ideology to his two young children. Dubus writes, “Planning to tell all this to David and Kathi, knowing he would need gin to do it, he was frightened, already shy as if they sat with him now in the living room” (Dubus 29). Peter contemplates the consequences of the end of his marriage and the reasons for him to have women in his life. For the most part he has become celibate since his divorce, and his new ideology about women is part misogynistic and part selfish. He realizes that he misses the comfort of his wife at the end of the day, when “the clock’s hands [move] through their worst angles of the day” (Dubus 29). Interestingly, Peter does not seem to necessarily miss his wife purely as an object for his sexual gratification. He seems to be moving toward a sort of rebirth, where slowly but surely he sees the divorce from his wife’s perspective. He seems to contemplate the problems that have befallen his wife, not from a misogynistic and selfish perspective where he only worries about the problems that have befallen him.

Dubus’ descriptions also suggest that Peter’s town is separate from Boston, despite being part of the Greater Boston area. As Dubus writes,

[Peter] went to a bar for a sandwich and stayed. Years ago he had come here often, on the way home from work, or at night with Norma [his ex-wife]. It was a neighborhood bar then, where professional fishermen and lobstermen and other men who worked with their hands drank, and sometimes brought their wives. Then someone from Boston bought it, put photographs and drawings of fishing

and pleasure boats on the walls, built a kitchen which turned out quiche and crepes, hired young women to tend the bar, and musicians to play folk and bluegrass. The old customers left (Dubus 31).

By describing the geographic distance between Peter's town and Boston, Dubus also reveals the metaphorical distance between Peter and his family, especially his children. Peter's old family life, represented by his previous visits to the same bar with his wife, is separated from his new family arrangement in which he rarely sees his wife and only sees his children on the weekends. Even though Peter returns to a bar that he used to frequent, a place where he should still have insider status, he feels like an outsider. Similar to the bar's old, longstanding customers who are driven away by the new-age additions (quiche and crepes) that cater to a young crowd, Peter feels as if he is being driven away from his town because of his changing family dynamic. As he adjusts to the physical separation from his children, Peter must also confront his previous relationship with his family and reexamine his beliefs and values about what it means to be a father.

As Edenfield states, "Within the confines of their domesticity, male characters struggle to find their place. As roles shift, families break apart or come together, depending on each character's ability to reconcile himself to the conflict in his life" (Edenfield 220). In "The Winter Father," Peter Jackman moves from one place to another, leaving his old house for a new apartment after he divorces his wife. Their familial roles shift as the Jackman family comes apart, especially concerning Peter's changing relationship with his two young children. Peter struggles to grasp the fact that he has altered his relationship with his children and the fact that he no longer seems able to speak freely with his children without their conversations sounding cliché for divorced

family members meeting for their regularly scheduled days. Peter's struggles exemplify the northeastern Massachusetts culture of trying to transcend or cope with problems even in the most trying of times. Peter is not able to reconcile this conflict until he recognizes the differences between his relationship with his children in different seasons: winter and summer.

As Kennedy suggests, Peter "misses the natural closeness with children that comes of living together, merely being together" (Kennedy 73). It seems that Peter is becoming more and more out of touch with his children with the divorce. Even though he has a schedule to meet with them, Peter still does not feel that he is interacting with his children to the best of his ability. He is out of touch, out of practice, with these everyday father-children interactions. These interactions might seem minute and unimportant in a normal family life, but they seem to cast a pall over Peter's visitation day interactions with his children. Yet ironically, even while Peter longs for these natural interactions that come with living together, he remarks that he needs alcohol to be talk about certain things with his children. Perhaps as he becomes more and more out of practice with natural conversation, Peter runs out of things to say.

The Peter Jackman stories are stories about the magnified struggles of fatherhood after the disruption of divorce. In addition to ideas of marriage, social class, and tradition, the physical setting is significant in revealing Jackman's character. Peter believes that he can talk to his children more freely when they interact in the summer. In the summer, their interactions and conversations are not forced. As Dubus writes,

For on that day, a long Saturday at the beach, when he had all day felt peace and father-love and sun and salt water, he had understood why now in summer he and

his children were as he had yearned for them to be in winter: they were no longer confined to car or buildings to remind them why they were there. The long beach and the sea were their lawn; the blanket their home; the ice chest and thermos their kitchen. They lived as a family again (Dubus 39).

The summer is fast-paced and the family is ever changing and ever moving to different activities, so there is not enough down time for Peter to fully contemplate his situation and worry about what he is going to say to his children or what he should say to his children. In the summer, Peter and his children are no longer confined to particular places (such as the car, the apartment, or the movie theatre) that heighten the tension and exemplify the idea that the only reason the three of them are interacting at this place and time is that it is Peter's weekend to spend time with his children. In the summer, Peter and his children have more freedom, whereas in the wintertime their interactions and visits are constrained to only a few places or spheres of influence.

Later in the story, Dubus portrays a conversation between Peter and his two children at the beach that shows the differences between the parent-children relationships in married families and the parent-children relationships in divorced families. As Peter says,

“‘Divorced kids go to the beach more than married ones.’

‘Why?’ Kathi said.

‘Because married people do chores and errands on weekends. No kid-days.’

‘I love the beach,’ David said.

‘So do I,’ Peter said...

‘I wish it was summer all year round,’” [Kathi] said (Dubus 39).

Edenfield writes, “The men in Dubus’ fiction who expand into betrayal or obsession with work ultimately come to see that their widen[ed] sphere has in fact reduced their ability to find peace with themselves or with the people whom they claim to love” (Edenfield 220). By focusing on their work and not their children, these characters strengthen the invisible boundaries or barriers and further divide their families. Edenfield references Doreen Massey, who states, “The disorientation of present times is giving rise to a new...search for stability through a sense of place” (qtd in Edenfield 220). This comes in relation to the domestic space and place in the short stories of Andre Dubus. While Peter Jackman is not necessarily a man obsessed with his work as a radio broadcaster, he does begin to notice that by widening his family sphere it is harder to connect with his children, and in turn he seems to contemplate how this failure to connect or communicate says something negative or detrimental about his status as a good father.

When his family was whole and normal, the house was the only sphere or world of influence; the house was the main location where the behaviors, actions, and motivations of Peter, his wife, and children, were visible. By moving into his new place as a divorced father, Peter increases the number of spheres of influence in his children’s lives. His apartment is a new character world, a world that is not only unfamiliar to Peter but also (and more so) to his children. On the visitation weekends, Peter and his children have to learn how to interact with each other. They can no longer operate by the same rules that grounded and governed their relationship in their old house. They are out of their comfort zones and must redefine their relationships as they redefine their new setting and landscape.

As Peter begins to think more about his changing relationship with his children, he seems to think that he has betrayed them in a way, causing them to behave differently—perhaps unnaturally—when they are with him. The increase in narrative space disorients natural interactions between the family members, replacing the stability of the old home and old family life with awkward visitation weekends and interactions that no longer seem completely organic. Dubus describes this stability and familiarity succinctly, stating, “Already the snow-plowed streets and country roads leading to their house felt like parts of his body: intestines, lung, heart-fiber lying from his door to theirs” (Dubus 22). Peter recognizes the closeness that he and his children feel for their regular home when he picks them up for one of his weekend visits. By metaphorically describing the house and the surrounding landscape as parts of the human body, Dubus seems to suggest that by taking his children out of their familiar environment, Peter is somehow destroying the already-established family structure and culture.

As Edenfield notes, “[Peter’s] greatest fear is that his former bond with his children will be severed by his displacement, and so he desperately wants to create a domestic space that works as a positive place of containment for himself and his children” (Edenfield 240). Peter and his children search for stability through their sense of place and their surroundings. It is not until summer comes along and presents another place or setting where the family can seemingly forget their problems and live more like they used to live in the past: the beach. Dubus’ incorporation of the beach allows Peter and his children to interact in the same character world similar to the ways in which the three of them used to interact when their family was whole.

As Edenfield also suggests, “The winter months also metaphorically suggest the cold outside the containment of house and car, the bleak landscape a reflection of a possible fallowness in the relationship between father and child” (Edenfield 241). This is in contrast to the summer months when Peter is able to speak freely and connect with his children. The landscape is more open and expansive, inviting more meaningful interactions and conversations. As Peter Jackman inhabits another world outside of the old family world that he used to know, he must change his behaviors to adapt to new conversations with his children.

Interestingly, Kennedy mentions, “The thread that connects their segments of time [the time that the children spend with Peter or Peter’s wife] is the car. [Peter] picks them up by car, drives them where they’re going that day, back to his apartment, home again, every Saturday and Sunday” (Kennedy 73). The car also becomes a narrative space, a character world that presents an outlet for character interaction. In fact, the car is the bridge between the world of Peter’s children, that of their home life with their mother and that of their weekend visitation days with their father, thus making the car its own world that heightens the differences between character interaction and conversation in both worlds. When Peter and his children get in the car, they begin to embody the family dynamics of their destination house. As Peter drives his children to his new house, their interactions feel counterfeit. Everyone is uncomfortable and this feeling of discomfort and coldness is enhanced with the onset of winter. The story then not only becomes a comparison between domestic narrative spaces, but also a comparison between the seasons and other elements that influence the characters’ surroundings.

In “Killings,” Dubus utilizes a variety of narrative spaces to convey a family’s anguish after a loved one is murdered in cold blood. Matt Fowler’s world is shattered when Richard Strout murders his son Frank. Frank had been dating Strout’s ex-girlfriend, Mary Ann. While Mary Ann and Strout were both unfaithful to each other and rumored to have slept around, Strout still considered Mary Ann his wife and could not cope with another man stealing her away. Matt’s wife, Ruth, constantly sees Strout around town while he is out on bail, and it infuriates Matt that the killer’s continued presence in society forces him and his wife to relive the crime multiple times and never gain closure. When seeing the murderer walk free every day becomes too much, Matt hatches a plan to kill Strout and make it seem as if Strout disappeared trying to jump bail.

Dubus incorporates both physical places and invisible boundaries to portray the complex setting of his short story. In a geographical sense, Dubus’ setting is Massachusetts, particularly the Merrimack Valley region and the city of Boston. Dubus immediately situates the setting in these areas with his references to Massachusetts. For example, Frank is buried near the Merrimack River. As Dubus writes, “The grave was on a hill and overlooked the Merrimack, which [Matt] could not see from where he stood; he looked at the opposite bank, at the apple orchard with its symmetrically planted trees going up a hill” (Dubus 47). In a later conversation with a friend, Matt contemplates a previous murder where a woman “shot her husband and dropped him off the bridge into the Merrimack with a hundred pound sack of cement” (Dubus 49). By setting the story in a working-class town, Dubus heightens the struggles of a family that toils during the day only to have to endure the constant pain of their son’s death when they return home in the evening.

Dubus features more references to Massachusetts as part of Matt's murderous scheme to enact revenge. Before Frank's murder, Matt attends a Red Sox game at Fenway Park with his son in order to talk to Frank about his relationship with Mary Ann, further placing the story in Massachusetts. Dubus writes,

There had been other talks, but the only long one was their first one: a night driving to Fenway Park, Matt having ordered the tickets so they could talk, and knowing when Frank said yes, he would go, that he knew the talk was coming too. It took them forty minutes to get to Boston, and they talked about Mary Ann until they joined the city traffic along the Charles River, blue in the late sun (Dubus 52-53).

The excursion to Fenway Park provides a time for Matt and Frank to talk about matters that they would not have discussed at home. As Dubus opens up the worlds within his story, he opens up opportunities for his characters to interact, often presenting his characters with unfamiliar situations where they have to react based on their changing environment. Like Peter and his children in "Winter Father," Matt and Frank utilize the car as the starting point for their interaction; the car becomes another setting that brings father and son together, the close quarters facilitating necessary conversation.

Dubus utilizes Fenway Park later in the story as Matt's alibi when he and a friend dig a hole in the woods, which will become Strout's final resting place:

Beyond the marsh they drove through woods, Matt thinking now of the hole he and Willis had dug last Sunday afternoon after telling their wives they were going to Fenway Park. They listened to the game on a transistor radio, but heard none of it as they dug into the soft earth on the knoll they had chosen because elms and

maples sheltered it. Already some leaves had fallen. When the hole was deep enough they covered it and the piled earth with dead branches, then cleaned their shoes and pants and went to a restaurant farther up in New Hampshire where they ate sandwiches and drank beer and watched the rest of the game on television (Dubus 56-57).

The lie about going to Fenway is crucial in Matt accomplishing his revenge. Normally, Matt would not lie to his wife, but out in the woods his mindset changes; he realizes that he has passed the point of no return and must continue his plan. The woods are a new world of interaction, a place where Matt does not act like his former self. Because this trip to Fenway is a cover story, it serves as an invisible barrier that separates Matt not only from his former self, but also from his wife who does not suspect his true actions. The dynamics of the scene also reveal Matt's meticulous planning. If the Red Sox were not playing at Fenway that weekend, Matt would need a different alibi. Matt still needs to be cognizant of the baseball game, listening to it on the radio and then watching it at the restaurant, for if he does not time everything correctly, his wife will realize that he had other plans for the day and probably suspect that he killed Strout.

But the setting is more complex than simply a father grieving over his son's murder in Boston: the setting also includes the different worlds, or spheres of influence, that Matt Fowler moves in and out of as he grapples with the implications of his son's death on his family and his next course of action to enact revenge. While Dubus' undoubtedly explores physical settings and geographical boundaries, he also examines invisible boundaries and the ways in which characters can feel separated or cut off from their environment when they encounter new and unfamiliar situations. Dubus portrays

Matt's feelings of isolation in his town now that his son is dead. His family used to be whole, but now Matt and Ruth must carry the burden of their son's death. The Fowler family is most comfortable in the world where they are together. Matt and Ruth are forced to deal with the consequences of their shattered world when Frank is killed. If we think about life with Frank as the Fowler family's main world, than Dubus' story is in some ways about their assimilation into another reality, another world, where Frank does not exist. Dubus writes, "A month after the funeral Matt played poker at Willis Trottier's because Ruth, who knew this was the second time he had been invited, told him to go, he couldn't sit home with her for the rest of her life, she was all right" (Dubus 47). Matt has trouble continuing his daily routine that he established before Frank passed; he has trouble learning how to relive his life. He is alone with himself, isolated in his own thoughts and mind, not knowing how to reintegrate himself into society. While Ruth probably feels the same way, she seems to recognize that a father and a son have a different type of connection, and thus Matt will need more time transitioning to his former life.

Matt's inability to reintegrate himself into society becomes an invisible boundary within the narrative space, represents a separation between the physical events of the story and the psychological buildup of Matt's anger and the implications of his actions. We learn that Frank's death has caused Matt to reflect on the importance of fatherhood. Dubus describes Matt's thoughts after the poker game:

It was a cool summer night; [Matt] thought vaguely of the Red Sox, did not even know if they were at home tonight; since it happened he had not been able to think about any of the small pleasures he believed he had earned, as he had earned

also what was shattered now forever: the quietly harried and quietly pleasurable days of fatherhood (Dubus 48).

Matt's world is changed. He still goes about his life the same way he always has in a physical sense, going to work and completing other daily chores, but he is still separated from the uninterrupted life he used to know. This invisible separation is evidenced in Matt's changing psychological state, as he thinks about his family's pain and revenge and eventually decides to kill Strout. Matt feels as if he is in his own world leading up to his killing of Strout. He and a friend direct Strout into the woods on the pretense that Strout will jump bail and live somewhere far away because Matt's wife cannot stand looking at him anymore. However, Matt plans to kill Strout and dump his body in the previously dug hole in the woods. As Strout slowly begins to recognize Matt's ulterior motives, Matt's psychological state similarly transitions. Up until he actually kills Strout, Matt is not sure if he can follow through with the act. He is isolated, cut off from everything that is transpiring in the woods around him. These invisible boundaries situate the reader firmly in Matt's mind. Dubus describes the scene as Strout tries to escape:

The gun kicked in Matt's hand, and the explosion of the shot surrounded him, isolated him in a nimbus of sound that cut him off from all his time, all his history, isolated him standing absolutely still on the dirt road with the gun in his hand, looking down at Richard Strout squirming on his belly, kicking one leg behind him, pushing himself forward, toward the woods. Then Matt went to him and shot him once in the back of the head (Dubus 62).

Physically, Matt is on the dirt road, but mentally he is separated from reality. He has entered into an unfamiliar world—the world of the killer—crossing the threshold and committing acts he would have never committed before.

Matt used to feel isolated when he and his wife contemplated the potential consequences of Frank seeing Mary Ann despite the fact that Mary Ann was still married to Strout. As Dubus writes, Matt “felt vaguely annoyed and isolated: living with [Ruth] for thirty-one years and still not knowing what she talked about with her friends” (Dubus 51). There are rumors within the community that Strout and Mary Ann both sleep around, yet despite their supposed infidelities, there is potential cause for concern in Frank’s case if Strout caught him and Mary Ann in the act. A known athlete and hot-head, there was no telling what kind of violent tirade Strout would launch if he thought his woman was being stolen away. Ruth is against Frank’s relationship, while Matt is cautious but does not seem as bothered, leaving him to feel “as disembodied as he sometimes did in the store when he helped a man choose a blouse or dress or piece of costume jewelry for his wife” (Dubus 51).

Dubus also explores the marriage dynamic between Matt and Ruth and how it changes as their environments change. By killing Strout, Matt enters an unfamiliar world, but so too does Ruth because she is the only person who Matt eventually confides in. Kennedy explores the dichotomy between violence and isolation. As he states,

The final irony occurs when they realize they will be unable to tell their other children about it, that the children will believe their brother’s murderer has escaped trial and punishment and has run off. Thus, we see the first consequence of Fowler’s unnatural act, the profound isolation he must suffer for it...Victim

and killer are united and isolated, one in death, the other in the ultimate breach of respect for human life (Kennedy 39).

Dubus describes the intimate connection that Matt and Ruth have at the beginning of the story. He writes, "Ruth's arm, linked with Matt's, tightened," as they walk together at the funeral (Dubus 47). In the beginning, husband and wife are physically linked; in the end, they are linked by their shared secret of Strout's true demise.

Dubus also explores narrative space and landscape with his female characters as they move in and out of different and unfamiliar worlds. Edenfield writes,

Many of Dubus' characters are women who find themselves at moments of crisis. Some are able to break through to positive change; others remain trapped within their environments, unchanged and unable to see any possible hope for a better life; still others conclude that they alone are to blame for their circumstances and punish themselves without hope of forgiveness. Within Dubus' stories, women from all levels of life struggle to exist within the confines of their domestic environments with varying degrees of success (Edenfield 5).

Like the men in Dubus' stories, the women are faced with moments of crisis where they grapple with not only their difficult circumstances but also their culpability in facing their problems.

In "Rose," Dubus creates two main settings, or narrative spaces: the bar where the unnamed narrator talks with Rose, and Rose's house. As with his other stories, Dubus establishes the setting of Massachusetts early on and uses the setting to chart Rose's difficult experiences during her moment of crisis. Dubus' narrator recounts the time he first saw Rose and became intrigued by this strange new woman at Timmy's, the town

bar. Dubus writes, “She appeared in our town last summer. We saw her on the streets, or slowly walking across the bridge over the Merrimack River. Then she found Timmy’s and, with money from whatever source, became a regular, along with the rest of us” (Dubus 206). Keeping with the working-class New England mentality of the region, someone at the bar mentions that Rose works in a leather factory in town, but rumors abound about her mysterious backstory. After watching Rose from afar for a few nights, the narrator speaks with her and learns her story:

It was long ago, in a Massachusetts town on the Merrimack River. Her husband was a big man, with strongly muscled arms, and the solid rounded belly of a man who drinks much beer at night and works hard, with his body, five days a week (Dubus 211).

Rose’s ex-husband, Jim was violent and abusive towards their children, one boy and two girls. When his rage finally reached its breaking point, Jim tried to burn down the family’s house. Rose barely escaped with the children, wrapping the two girls in damp blankets as she rushed out of the house, before running over and killing Jim as she drove to the hospital.

It is clear that Rose wants to finally be able to tell someone her tragic story. The bar is the only place where Rose feels comfortable enough to talk and tell her story. Although she is an outsider to the community by virtue of being new to the town, Rose finds that the bar is the only place where she feels comfortable enough to speak freely. Over the course of several nights Rose opens up to the narrator because she feel more free, still pained from the events that have transpired, but freer than she has felt in a long time. The narrator learns that while Rose’s children are all alive in the present, she is no

longer able to care for them; she obsesses over her past parenting mistakes, wondering if she even “deserve[d]” her children at all (Dubus 230).

In contrast to the bar, Dubus establishes Rose’s home and family life with Jim as the narrative space where she is not free and not powerful enough to stand up for herself and her children. Jim is aggressive and abusive, and although Rose seems to sense that Jim will harm, if not actually kill their children because his violent outbursts intensify each time he becomes irritated, she does not take action to stop him. Dubus portrays Rose as a “silent partner,” too hesitant to act on her instincts (Dubus 212). While Rose is silent, her children are nameless characters, simply referred to as “the boy” or “the girls” in the story, suggesting that like Rose, the children’s true identities are suppressed by Jim’s abuse and power (Dubus 218). In this way, Dubus’ descriptions of the house serve as “physical markers of the emotional worlds” of his characters (Pollack 17). When she is within the confines of her home, Rose’s sense of inferiority is heightened. Similarly, her children are both physically and emotionally trapped within the house’s walls, so much so that they are not identified with their actual names.

Dubus describes Jim’s increasing use of violence on the children and Rose’s attempts to justify Jim’s violence as typical for all families:

Perhaps her knowledge of her own failures dulled her ears and eyes to Jim after he first struck the boy, and on that night lost for the rest of his life any paternal control he might have exerted in the past over his hands, finally his fists. Because more and more now he spanked them; with a chill Rose tried to deny, a resonant quiver up through her body, she remembered that her parents had spanked her too. That all, or probably all, parents spanked their children (Dubus 219).

Rose is in a state of denial, denial over the severity of Jim's actions and her reputation as a mother who is not powerful enough to fight for the safety of her children. The more violent Jim becomes, the more hesitant Rose becomes. On another night, Rose is cleaning the dishes when she senses another outburst but does nothing to stop the violence before it happens:

At the kitchen sink Rose's muscles tensed, told her it was coming, and she must go to the living room now, take the children and their blocks and cars and trucks to the boy's bedroom. But she breathed deeply and rubbed a dish with a sponge (Dubus 221).

Deep down, Rose realizes that she should have taken preemptive measures to ensure the safety of her children, but the atmosphere of the house causes her to act differently than she hopes she would normally act. When she is with Jim she feels weak and inferior and the setting of the house heightens her inferiority complex. She seems to be confined by the house's walls. She recognizes the abuse and the violence that Jim inflicts on their children, but she can do nothing to stop him. The contrast between the bar and the house allows Dubus to present a case study in human nature. While Rose desires to help her children and be a positive influence on the family, her constant hesitation suggests that she is innately weak and passive. It takes Jim to break the boy's arm and set the house on fire, trapping the two girls inside, for Rose to become the savior. Yet in saving her children, Rose also loses them. She runs over Jim with the car as she leaves the house, and while the judge states that her actions were justified given the abusive situation, the judge also states that Rose is unfit to continue to raise her children.

Dubus also utilizes minor spaces to reveal Rose's family situation. In one scene, Rose takes her children to the supermarket as they do every Friday after Jim gets paid, "look[ing] at the price of everything she took from a shelf" because they do not have excess money to spend (Dubus 218). The trip to the supermarket heightens the family's poverty, as they have to salvage every last dollar to make ends meet. When her children try to help her pick food from the shelves, Rose

[scolds] them, [jerking] the can or box from the cart, [bringing] it back to its proper place; and when she did this her heart sank as though pulled by a sigh deeper into her body. For she saw. She saw that when the children played with these things whose colors or shapes drew them so they wanted to sit on the floor and hold or turn in their hands the box or can, they were simply being children whom she could patiently teach, if patience were still an element of her spirit (Dubus 218).

Rose knows that she should try to help her children, to teach them or praise them for trying to help her, but she is a defeated woman. The family does not have enough money to buy fancy snacks and gaze at other food items that they cannot afford, and it seems as if Rose's tight money conditions and harsh living conditions drive her to the breaking point, even drive her away from her children, the only people she loves. Rose crosses into another narrative space, or world, when she shops at the supermarket. While Rose feels inferior around Jim at the house, she is the authority figure in the presence of her children. Rose plays the role of Jim with her supermarket scolding, but while her verbal aggression might help her momentarily forget her hesitation at home, she still feels inadequate. Dubus presents Rose with a chance to provide motherly guidance for her

children, to positively impact their lives despite the misfortune that has befallen the family. Rose has a chance to rise above her family crisis, but her decision to scold her children exemplifies her degraded state and the extent to which she is removed from her original intentions as a mother.

Dubus' descriptions also suggest the invisible distance or narrative space between the characters on the page and the reader. The narrator acknowledges that he is writing Rose's story down for the reader, stating, "Finally I know why I write this" (Dubus 231). Earlier in the story the narrator states his thoughts on Jim, saying, "So I hate Jim Cormier, and cannot understand him; cannot with my imagination cross the distance between myself and him, enter his soul and know how it felt to live even five minutes of his life" (Dubus 213). The narrator cannot imagine crossing the invisible boundaries that separate his honorable lifestyle from Jim's deplorable and unethical lifestyle. By evoking the ideological and moral differences between the narrator and Jim, Dubus also evokes the contrast in character worlds that prevent the narrator from understanding Jim's actions. The narrator does not have to contemplate these problems in his own world; he can continue to follow his daily routines without worrying about others' problems. It is only when the narrator exits his own world and enters the worlds of other characters that he thinks about others' struggles. The bar brings multiple types of people together, shattering physical boundaries because people are brought together, yet also invoking invisible boundaries as different mindsets clash.

A more complete understanding of Dubus' use of setting comes from examining the other factors that influence Dubus' writing and the actions of his characters. Dubus opens the story with a short anecdote about a student from the University of Chicago who

attended basic training for the Marine Corps. The student is an intellectual, an academic, and deemed too weak to complete the training. The officers berate him and hope that he quits, which the student eventually does. But what the officers do not know is that the student sleepwalks at night, and one night the other trainees witness the supposedly weak student lift a locker in his sleep. The student never realizes his own strength in the daytime and quits the Marines thinking he is a failure. On one hand, the opening anecdote allows Dubus to portray military life, as he was in the Marine Corps for six years. We can also view the opening as an introduction into Dubus' mindset about the military and about families. Dubus describes the narrator's experience as a Marine:

Many of us who went to college sought commissions so our service [in the Marines] would be easier, we would have more money, and we could marry our girlfriends; in those days, a young man had to provide a roof and all that goes under it before he could make love with his girl (Dubus 200).

Dubus' narrator hearkens to an olden time, potentially a time where family structure and ethics were valued more than the present reality where Rose and her family exist on the page. A man needs to be strong and provide for his family, but a man who abuses his family and considers violence akin to strength is actually a weak man.

Dubus also incorporates elements of spirituality within the story. Additionally, when Dubus portrays Rose as a silent partner, he examines the morality of Rose's family life. He writes,

If there is damnation, and a place for the damned, it must be a quiet place, where spirits turn away for each other and stand in solitude and gaze haplessly at eternity. For it must be crowded with the passive: those people whose presence in

life was a paradox; for, while occupying space and moving through it and making sounds in it they were obviously present, while in truth they were not: they witnessed evil and lifted neither an arm nor voice to stop it, they witnessed joy and neither sang nor clapped their hands (Dubus 212).

This passage raises questions about spirituality, morality, and ethics. The place for the damned suggests a Hell for the hesitant, a place of damnation for people who do not seem inherently evil on the outside, but by failing to eradicate evil are just as bad as the criminals who cut themselves off from society. Which characters are strong and which characters are weak? Is Jim's physical prowess enough to label him as strong, and is Rose's initial hesitation enough to permanently label her as weak? Can heroic action make amends for past failure and past silence? Does she deserve to speak with her children, who were too young to remember or comprehend the situation at the time?

Dubus invites readers to consider the meaning of forgiveness and his descriptions allude to Rose's penance as she grapples with the fallout of losing her children years after the horrible events transpired. Would her children forgive her, and do they have to? The use of multiple settings allows the reader to ask these types of questions. Rose is living in a hell on earth without her children. She has nobody to confide in until she eventually is comfortable enough to speak with the narrator at the bar; she is isolated and alone. The narrator offers the possibility that Rose's heroic actions make her a savior, that she has "redeemed herself with action" (Dubus 231). He likes to remember Rose not as a failure or resident of Hell, but as the woman who was "touched and blessed by flames," rushing into the burning house to save her children only to lose the right to be their caretaker in the end (Dubus 232).

In "Miranda Over the Valley," Dubus establishes two main spaces of character interaction and examines the consequences of characters interacting in both environments. Miranda, a college student at Boston University, must decide whether she wants to have an abortion and continue attending college in Massachusetts or keep the baby and marry her lover Michaelis after dropping out of school. At first, Miranda does not want to have the abortion. When she is at college in Boston she is independent, in her own world, and feels powerful enough to stick by her decision. Miranda professes her love for Michaelis, if only to herself in this scene, and decides that the two of them could get married and make the relationship work even though they are still young. As Dubus writes,

She walked to the corner and then up the dead-end street and climbed the steps of the walk that crossed Storrow Drive. As she climbed she held the iron railing, but it was cold and she had forgotten her gloves. She put her hands in her pockets. She stood on the walk and watched the cars coming and passing beneath her and listened to their tires on the wet street. To her right, was the Charles River, wide and black and cold. On sunny days it was blue and in the fall she had watched sailboats on it. Beyond the river were the lights of Cambridge; she thought of the bars there and the warm students drinking beer and she wanted Michaelis with her now. She knew that: she wanted him. She had wanted him for a long time but she had told him no, had even gone many times to his apartment and still told him no, because all the time she was thinking (Dubus 6).

However, Miranda acts differently when she leaves the confines of her independent environment to discuss her situation with her parents in California. Her parents do not

want her to throw her youth away, to throw her life away. Dubus describes a conversation with her father:

“‘You see,’ her father said, ‘we don’t object to you having a lover. Hell, we can’t. What scares us, though, is you being unhappy: and the odds are that you *will* be’”
(Dubus 10)

Soon after Miranda’s mother joins the conversation, saying,

“‘Both of you. You have three years to grow. You can go back to school—’
‘To be what?’ [Miranda] said. ‘To be what,’ and she wiped her eyes.
‘That’s exactly it,’ her mother said. ‘You don’t know yet what you want to be but you say you’re ready to get married’” (Dubus 11).

At home, Miranda loses her independence, her ability to make her own decisions. She has a lot to grapple with: the prospect of having a child and getting married at the age of eighteen or aborting the child. Either way, Miranda will have to live with the consequences, and she is not really sure what she wants. As she says, “Perhaps she wanted nothing. Except to be left alone as she was in Boston to listen to the fearful pulsations of her body; to listen to them; to sleep with them; wake with them” (Dubus 11). She misses the friendly confines of the familiar world of Massachusetts, a place that also represents her innocence, or at least past innocence. Eventually, Miranda’s parents persuade her to abort the baby, demonstrating their influence and Miranda’s lack of power when she interacts in her parents’ world. Even though Miranda is a college student and normally lives away from her parents, when she enters her parents’ house she reverts to her childhood family dynamics and defers authority to her superiors.

Dubus' descriptions reacquaint Miranda with her old world after she leaves California to return to college. As Dubus writes,

In late afternoon Miranda left the lighted apartment and a paper she was writing and walked up Beacon Street. The street and sidewalks were wet and the gutters held gray, dirty snow. She walked to the Public Garden where there were trees and clean snow, and on a bridge over a frozen pond she stopped and watched children skating (Dubus 14-15).

Interestingly, Miranda does not seem to be a complete insider or outsider in either of the main spaces that she inhabits throughout the story. Whereas many of Dubus' characters that we have already seen fall into either the category of insider or outsider—the security guard is an outsider to the privileged world of the college girls and Rose is an insider to the world of poverty—Miranda straddles both the world of her college campus and the world of her parents without clearly being a member of either world. She is originally from California, as evidenced by her parents' home on the West Coast, but she attends school in Boston. She is a Massachusetts transplant yet her freedom and independence is more readily available in the state that is not necessarily her own.

Miranda even acknowledges the idea that she interacts differently when she enters a new narrative world. On a larger level, Dubus' story exemplifies the divide between Massachusetts and California as they relate to Miranda's decision-making and independence. On a smaller level, Miranda is interested in how she will react when faced with the prospect of sleeping with another man now that she is no longer in a relationship with Michaelis. Miranda is presented with an opportunity to see how she will react when

her roommate Holly leaves for the weekend and her roommate's boyfriend visits the house. Dubus writes,

He [Brian] followed her to the kitchen. While she cooked they talked and he had another beer and she drank wine. She wasn't hungry anymore. She knew something would happen and she was waiting for it, waiting to see what she would do (Dubus 15).

Miranda recognizes that her interactions change as she moves from room to room inside the house; the girl who was once strong and independent knows she will inevitably have sex with Brian yet the sex is in some ways not her choice, but a product of her environment and her unraveled emotional state.

Miranda also acknowledges that she feels as if she has many different identities.

Dubus describes the scene a few days later when Holly returns:

[Miranda] lit a cigarette. Holly came over and took one from the pack. Miranda did not look at her: she closed her eyes and smoked and felt the sour cold of the lie. Holly was back in bed, talking into the distance of the lie, and Miranda listened and answered and lay tense in bed, for she was so many different Mirandas: the one with Holly now and the one who made love with Brian...and beneath or among those there were perhaps two other Mirandas, and suddenly she almost cried, remembering September and October when she was afraid, but she was one Miranda Jones (Dubus 17).

Miranda takes on a new identity for each character world that she inhabits. There is the Miranda who is with Holly in the present, the Miranda who had sex with Brian, the Miranda who wanted to marry Michaelis, and the Miranda who allowed her parents to

convince her to abort the baby. Yet, as she says, physically she is only one Miranda Jones. The changes in setting cause her to feel as if she is multiple Mirandas; the settings in effect helps create her character.

CONCLUSIONS

If we examine setting as the world or worlds in which characters interact throughout a story, we can see that as characters encounter other characters or other worlds, their behaviors and beliefs are constantly redefined. Dubus is often lauded as a realist, and his stories are faithful, sometimes graphic or disturbing reflections on the everyday problems of ordinary, working-class people. Yet Dubus' realistic descriptions of working-class life reveal the intimate connection that characters can have with their environment and the ways in which a character's environment can shape his or her behaviors and motivations, inviting a regionalist examination as an extension of realism in his stories. The succinct nature of the short story highlights this intimate connection, as Dubus establishes his characters and their environment in approximately thirty pages, sometimes fewer.

In a regionalist sense, characters can form a strong bond with their hometown or home city, and their connection with the area helps create their regional identity. Regionalism is closely related to both realism and local color, and as I have mentioned, the terms local color and regionalism have usually been used interchangeably. Local color is thought of as a more stereotypical and less serious form of literature, as local color authors utilize exaggerated dialects and other stereotypes to describe a region. Fetterley and Pryse's new definition of regionalism differentiates the terms and designates regionalism as a more complex category that includes not only geography, or physical spaces, but also the socioeconomic, religious, and other cultural factors that describe a region and a region's inhabitants. Regionalist texts exemplify the cultural and

social problems of a specific area and provide a descriptive account of characters dealing with the struggles and consequences of inhabiting the particular region.

The term regionalism also suggests the act of physical separation; that is, by affirming allegiance to a home region, characters cut themselves off from other regions and other groups of people. For example, Massachusetts-based characters might be conditioned to express their distaste for New York, as the cities' sports teams, cuisine, and tourist attractions are portrayed as fierce rivals. For Dubus, this could mean that a small town in northeastern Massachusetts is cut off from the city of Boston. In this way, setting is important in a geographic sense, as the author privileges one area over another and invites contrast among the people of different areas.

However, when we start to compare the people of different areas, we see that setting is more complex than it appears. A variety of factors, among them socioeconomic, educational, and religious, can influence the identities of characters. Sometimes, these factors are directly related to the setting in a regionalist sense, such as a character toiling in a textile factory in the Merrimack Valley, but other times these factors comprise the views of multiple regions and combine to form a new identity. For example, Dubus utilizes many religious references throughout his stories, such as Rose's purgatory as she grapples with her culpability in the loss of her children or Matt Fowler deliberating good and evil as he decides to take the life of his son's murderer. In "A Father's Story," Dubus' religious influence is more overt. Luke Ripley wrestles with doing what is right for his family or doing what is right for society. After his daughter drives drunk and kills a man, Luke chooses to cover up the crime and tries to convince himself that his daughter is still the same sweet girl that he has always known. The story is set against Luke's

relationship with a local priest and his love for God and family. In each of these examples, the characters' Catholicism is not born of the New England region where they reside, but born of an informed and contemplative view of Catholic teachings regardless of region. While Dubus lived the latter part of his life in Massachusetts, his Catholic upbringing in the South also influenced the mindsets of his characters. Yet, these stories demonstrate the connection between religion and the environment. Luke Ripley delves deeper into his Catholic beliefs after his daughter is in a car crash that takes the life of another man; the change in Luke's environment—his relationship with his daughter— influences his introspection.

Setting can be broken down even further, to the relationships among characters as they come together and interact in unfamiliar environments. Imaginary boundaries also come into play as characters move in and out of different worlds. Each character is comfortable in his or her own world, but a character's world is disrupted when he or she interacts with a character from another world or moves to a new environment. The other character may come from a different socioeconomic or religious background. The new environment of interaction can be the new actions that take place when a character such as Miranda Jones live in Boston versus visiting her parents in California, or when Peter Jackman brings his children to his new house after divorcing his wife. For Miranda, a change in states (East Coast to West Coast) causes her to reexamine the ways in which she lives her life and the value she places on her life and others. For Peter, the disruption is on a more domestic level, as his interactions with his children change from house to house, from their old, familiar family environment to their new, awkward family environment. Moreover, Rose's sense of inferiority shifts from room to room inside her

house, and it is only when she is removed from her home and her family that she is able to ponder the implications of her past struggles and share them with the narrator (and consequently the reader).

Looking at a text through a regionalist lens allows readers to examine the ways in which the environment shapes the habits, beliefs, and values of characters. Regionalism is not a one-dimensional method of literary interpretation, but an extension of realism. Dubus uses realism to distill the struggles of the working class, yet he often does so in a specific region, such as the Merrimack Valley. Regionalist texts demonstrate the importance of setting and ask readers to reconsider their preconceived definition of setting. Instead of utilizing regional stereotypes and geography, regionalist texts utilize a variety of social and cultural factors to portray the lives of characters. In a similar sense, setting does not have to be solely geographical. Setting signifies boundaries, and, as Dubus' stories demonstrate, setting can be both the physical boundaries that characters encounter when they move from place to place or world to world and the imaginary boundaries that characters face when their world is disrupted and they interact with other characters in an unfamiliar environment. With each disruption, characters must reconsider their deepest values and what constitutes their identity, suggesting that a character's behavior, motivations, and beliefs are derived from his or her environment.

Works Consulted

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006. Print.
- Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- Campbell, Donna M. "Chapter 6: Realism and Regionalism." *A Companion To The Regional Literatures Of America*. Ed. Charles L. Crow. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003. 92-110. Print.
- Campbell, Donna M. "Regionalism and Local Color Fiction, 1865-1895." *Literary Movements*. Dept. of English, Washington State University. 21 July 2013. Web. 30 Sept. 2013.
- Dubus, Andre. *Selected Stories*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996. Print.
- Edenfield, Olivia Carr. "Domestic Space in the Short Fiction of Andre Dubus." Diss. University of Georgia, 2002. Print.
- Fetterley, Judith, and Marjorie Pryse. *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2003. Print.
- Hart, James D., and Phillip W. Leininger. *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*. New York: Oxford Univ., 2006. Print.
- Jordan, David. Introduction. *Regionalism Reconsidered: New Approaches to the Field*. New York: Garland Pub., 1994. Print.
- Keene, Ann T. "American National Biography Online: Dubus, André." *American National Biography Online: Dubus, André*. Web. 10 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.anb.org/articles/16/16-03576.html>>.

- Kennedy, Thomas E. *Andre Dubus: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988. Print.
- Loriggio, Francesco. "Regionalism and Theory." *Regionalism Reconsidered: New Approaches to the Field*. Ed. David Jordan. New York: Garland Pub., 1994. 3-28. Print.
- O'Connell, Shaun. *Imagining Boston: A Literary Landscape*. Boston: Beacon, 1990. Print.
- Pollack, Eileen. *The World of the Story*. 2013. MS 1. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- Tomblin, Stephen G., and Charles S. Colgan, eds. *Regionalism in a Global Society: Persistence and Change in Atlantic Canada and New England*. New York: Broadview Press, 2004. Print.
- Tompkins, Jane P. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985. Print.
- Weisbrod, Glen, Margaret Collins, Karen Hamilton, and Lisa Petraglia. *Economic Development Strategy for the Merrimack Valley*. Rep. Merrimack Valley Planning Commission, Sept. 2000. Web. 10 Dec. 2013.
<<http://www.edrgroup.com/pdf/mvpc-econ-devel-strategy.pdf>>.