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ENGL 112B
05/07/2013

*Putting Literature in its Place:
Literature, Location, and Environment*

Place is an important, and often overlooked, aspect to life and literature. The places we are born, raised, and live help to define how an individual sees the world. This can most clearly be seen in the parable of the country mouse and the city mouse. Both are defined in some way by where they live. Even individuals who have moved around a lot tend to associate with a particular location on the map. Maybe it's where she went to high school, or college, or maybe it's a place where her family went for vacation. What is sometimes unrealized is that place has a way of finding its way into literature.

Most stories take place somewhere. Whether the place is a made up city or town, or it actually exists on a map, the bottom line is that people exist in space and time, and a compelling story cannot be told without a setting. Sometimes the setting plays little to no role in the story being told; it's just a place where stuff can happen. Other times, the location of the story becomes a character itself, directly influencing the outcome of the story. This unit of study is concerned primarily with the latter, especially as it relates to poetry.

Poetry is often the ugly step-sibling in K-12 language arts classrooms. It has to be there, but since it can be difficult to understand, it becomes difficult to teach. The key to understanding, and therefore teaching, poetry is to find a point of connection. Some are able to connect with the metaphysical poetry of seventeenth century England, others with the, often cerebral, poetry of New England poetry. And there are others, like myself, who

aren't able to connect with a poem until it is connected with a place. This unit of study will use the poetry of Carmel poet Robinson Jeffers as mentor poems as students work to assemble their own anthology of poetry comprised primarily of their own poetry as well as other poems exploring the idea of place.

NOTE:: The class will have hopefully explored the more technical aspects of poetry (e.g., meter, rhyme scheme, etc.) in an earlier unit.

Launching the Unit

To start the unit, I will read Jeffers' poem "Tor House" while video of the Carmel coast plays in the background. After reading the poem, I'll ask the class if having the video of the ocean had any affect on how they heard the poem. During the discussion, I'll put the words of the poem on the screen, and we'll transition into the text. I'll ask what words or images in the poem help to create the feeling of place for the reader. After the discussion, I'll have the students work on an SSR on the topic of place, asking them to write about a place they might write a poem about, and what aspects of the place would they want to emphasize. Some students may even want to try and write that poem. If students are having trouble with the topic, I'll use the exercises "Noticing How Objects Represent Place," and "Sketching Images of Place" from Nick Flynn and Shirley McPhillips' book on teaching poetry, *A Note Slipped Under the Door: Teaching From Poems We Love*, (158-9). These exercises encourage the students to focus in on a location by asking them to either, in the first case, think about the specific items that help to define a place (like a bed in a bedroom, for example), or to draw a picture of their place, which might remind students of its distinguishing features.

The Heart of the Unit

For the next several periods, the class will explore the poetry of Robinson Jeffers and other California poets. Particular attention will be paid to Jeffers' "Apology for Bad Dreams" (141-4), and William Everson's "A Canticle to the Waterbirds" (77-9). Both poems are longer poems allowing more material for the students to dig into. Additionally, both poems aren't about a specific location, yet feature place as an important aspect of the poems. As a class, we'll look at how place is represented, not just in the words that describe the location, but also how the more technical elements of poetry help define the place. For example, how are strong and weak syllables used to mimic the feel of the ocean? How do the sounds the words make together imitate the sounds one might expect to hear at these places?

During this time, I'll be encouraging the students to work on their final poetry anthology project. The assignment will consist of at least ten poems written by the student and ten poems written by other poets. I'll recommend students explore other Bay Area authors, such as Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Hass, Gary Snyder, and others, but they will be free to draw from other regions and eras as well.

The final day(s) of the unit will be an opportunity for the students to share some of the poetry they've written (and have found, for the more easily embarrassed students). A Power Point presentation with pictures of the locations written about will be strongly encouraged.

Extending the Unit

If the class seems to be enjoying this exploration of place and environment in poetry, we could include a section centered on John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*. This novel works well in this capacity as, in contrast to other Steinbeck novels, the book focuses more on the setting of Cannery Row in Monterey, CA, and not as strongly on the specific characters. There's not a Tom Joad or a George and Lennie in *Cannery Row*. As a result, students will be able to see clearly how a vividly portrayed environment affects the telling of a story.

Other novels that could be used include (but are not limited to): *Hatchet* by Gary Paulson; *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Munoz Ryan; *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell; *Holes* by Louis Sachar; *We Were Here* by Matt De La Pena; and *Al Capone Does My Shirts* by Gennifer Choldenko.

Finally, perhaps for a bit of a respite during the unit, as an alternate way to introduce the unit, or as a reward for finishing the unit, the class can view Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Set in and around San Francisco, the students can have fun pointing out all the locations they recognize. After the movie I would lead a discussion on how the choice of location affected the movie. What if the movie was set somewhere else? How would it be different?

Works Cited

- Choldenko, Gennifer. *Al Capone Does My Shirts*. New York: Scholastic, 2004. Print.
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- Everson, William. *The Veritable Years: Poems 1949-1966*. Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1998. Print.
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- Satsc2, "Trip To The Carmel, Monterey & Pacific Grove Coast." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 11 Feb. 2013. Web. 07 May 2013.
- Steinbeck, John. *Cannery Row*. New York: Penguin, 2002. Print.
- Vertigo*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. James Stewart, and Kim Novak. Universal, 1999. DVD.

Tor House

If you should look for this place after a handful of lifetimes:
Perhaps of my planted forest a few
May stand yet, dark-leaved Australians or the coast cypress, haggard
With storm-drift; but fire and the axe are devils.
Look for foundations of sea-worn granite, my fingers had the art
To make stone love stone, you will find some remnant.
But if you should look in your idleness after ten thousand years:
It is the granite knoll on the granite
And lava tongue in the midst of the bay, by the mouth of Carmel
River-valley, these four will remain
In the change of names. You know it by the wild sea-fragrance of wind
Though the ocean may have climbed or retired a little;
You will know it by the valley inland that our sun and our moon were born from
Before the poles changed; and Orion in December
Evenings was strung in the throat of the valley like a lamp-lighted bridge.
Come in the morning you will see white gulls
Weaving a dance over blue water, the wane of the moon
Their dance-companion, a ghost walking
By daylight, but wider and whiter than any bird in the world.
My ghost you needn't look for; it is probably
Here, but a dark one, deep in the granite, not dancing on wind
With the mad wings and the day moon.