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A SENSE OF PLACE: CONSIDER IT SERIOUSLY

M.P.Cavanaugh

We live in a place, we visit places, and we have places we dream about visiting. Television considers place so important that an entire channel is devoted to travel and destinations. Perhaps we should consider or re-consider this sense of place more importantly in both reading and writing. I will offer a three-step approach to a greater appreciation of this sense of place in our students' reading and writing.

First, define and explain place or setting. Second, provide excellent examples of the wonderful places authors have already taken us. Third, offer students opportunities to think about, work with, dabble in, mess around with, and actually create a sense of place in their own writing. As in all good writing, creating a sense of place will be challenging, but not impossible. We simply have not paid enough attention to it. We tend, as teachers, to credit plot and characters as the essential elements of narration.

Graves commented that "most professional writers of fiction say that 'character is all.'" He says that what happens in the story is the result of the nature of the characters. Except in the case of most of the fiction children write! Here, Graves points out, "most of the characters exist for the plot" (304). The emphasis is clearly on everything but setting.

Most textbooks on the teaching of language arts, writing, content area writing, and reading/writing connections neglect setting. We need to pay more attention to this important element in writ-

ing, in reading, and in the world around us. In *Stone Fox* Gardner comments that "Every line of fiction is a promise of something that you will have to deal with later on in the work" (qtd. in Graves 290). That should hold for the place of the story as it does for characters and plot.

Definition of Setting

In *Teaching Writing: Balancing Process and Product*, Tompkins discusses two kinds of settings: backdrop and integral. Backdrop setting is just that: merely a backdrop. The reader will obviously pay little attention to it, and the author intended that. Integral setting is crucial to the plot and character development. When teaching the art of writing to our students, we need to pay more attention to integral settings. We need to teach our students to pay attention to this sense of place in literature, and we need to teach our students how to incorporate integral settings in their writing (226).

Tompkins defines setting as having four parts: location, weather, length of time, and time period. Location is the place in which the story is set. Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* has a magical, fairytale location in Wonderland. It is an absolutely amazing place, but once we are there, we are captivated by the spell Carroll has devised. We do not question talking trees and flamingo mallets.

Weather, sky blue and sunny or stormy, can play a crucial role in literature. Young authors should also consider weather in their own writing.

In Hesse's *Out of the Dust*, weather plays a crucial role. "After seventy days of wind and sun, of wind and clouds, of wind and sand, after seventy days, of wind and dust, a little rain came. February 1934" (23).

Our young authors should consider if weather should play a part in their narratives. The process of such a consideration will help them think more like authors and bring them to a greater consideration of what they want to say and of their audience.

Time is Tompkin's third dimension. Time is both time of day and length of time as the story progresses. *Cinderella* can take place over many years or over just the days of preparation for the ball and the actual ball itself. Some versions have a series of balls held over several weeks. The time of day is crucial for Cinderella and nearly causes her downfall the closer the magical moment of midnight approaches.

Time Period is the fourth dimension of setting. *The Diary of Anne Frank* must take place prior to and during the Second World War. *Out of the Dust* must take place during the Great Depression in the United States. These stories are dependent on their time period. Our students tend to write most of their stories in the time period of the day on which they write. Consider the impact of helping students research another time period and write a story about a character from that place and that time.

Examples of Setting in Literature

Tompkins offers a variety of selections noted for their emphasis on place. Many readers have loved Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. Fans of this story are aware that it takes place in a museum. But have we ever asked students to concentrate on the details of the place? How the different rooms have such an influence over the characters? Discuss how this plot could take place in a different kind of place. In *A House Called Ugly*, Avi uses a summer cottage to symbolize the desire for permanence in a young boy's life. When his parents say they will try to find another cottage, the boy knows this is not the same.

Weather plays a crucial role in Gordon's *Waiting for the Rain*. Only the rain can save the crops and the farms. Doldrums, searching for the wind, and finally a lethal storm cause major conflicts in Avi's *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*. Without the rain storms, how would the plot of Patterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* change? Students can discuss how all these plots would change without the rain.

Time can define a story. In Wolff's *The Mozart Season*, the season is summer vacation and how it turned out quite differently than originally planned. White's *Charlotte's Web* continues and is dependent upon the time span of the life of a spider.

Time Periods influence characters as well as plot. Avi's *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* takes place during the summer of 1832 aboard the ship Seahawk as it journeys across the Atlantic Ocean. Readers learn not only about life aboard ship but also life in the 1830s. Avi's *The Man Who Was Poe* takes place in Providence, Rhode Island in the winter of 1848. Young readers learn how very different life was then.

Student Opportunities

Students need to go beyond learning a definition. They need opportunities to consider this sense of place in what they read and in what they write. Have students read short stories and picture books and ask them to consider the setting. Go beyond "Where did the story take place?" to "What was the setting like?" Elicit details and feelings. What do the various characters think of this place? What do the readers think of this place? Have students close their eyes while they are listening to a particularly descriptive section of a book. In Avi's *True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, "The foreyard is one of the biggest sails, one of a sailing ship's true engines. But even though it worked hard for the ship under normal circumstances, in this storm it strained *against* her as if trying to uproot the mast from the deck. Despite the roaring wind that beat about me, I could hear the creaking of the mast, could see it bend like a great bow. What I needed to do—had to do—was cut that sail free and release

the terrible strain upon the mast" (144).

Students can keep an "Illustration Journal." In it they can draw or sketch the place they are reading about or listening to. It is interesting to compare drawings and discuss differences in perspective.

Once students develop a deeper sense of place in what they read, they can begin to develop such a sense of place in their writing. But not all at once, nor right away. Young authors need practice and patience. Students can re-write certain settings from books they are reading. Students can write a short story and discuss not only why they chose the setting they did, but also talk about what a different setting would do to the plot or the characters.

Young authors can return to their Writing Folders now armed with a better sense of place. They can select a previously written story and revise it giving added importance and emphasis to location, weather, time, and time period. Noting the difference a vital sense of place can have on their own work will have a lasting, positive effect.

Considering a sense of place as an important factor in reading and writing is in no way negating the importance of the other elements of fiction. All elements—plot, characters, conflict, climax, resolution—are important. But we have tended to spend more time on the other elements and less on place. Adding this emphasis not only increases our students' awareness of place in both their reading and writing, but also heightens their awareness of their surroundings. They pay more attention to details and effect. This can transfer from their writing of fiction to their writing and reading of nonfiction.

Works Cited

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About the Author

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Conclusion