

2000

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Recommended Citation

Jeremiah, Milford A. (2000) "The Use of Place in Writing and Literature," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 7.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1352>

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THE USE OF PLACE IN WRITING AND LITERATURE

Milford A. Jeremiah

Place, in its literary sense, can be defined in several ways. For one thing, we may define place as the physical aspect of the environment at hand. In another sense, we may define place as the environment removed from the speaker or writer. In some instances, place is the term used to describe the setting in which issues of writing and other language-related skills are housed and discussed. In the literary world, place is usually combined with time and events to establish what is known as the social setting or the social context of a literary work.

An examination of the general topic of place in literature reveals that authors regard place as a starting point for their work. Thomas March, for example, uses place to show its relationship to such topics as the treatment of myth in the Western part of the United States (106-108). Other writers see place as providing the cultural background for a specific work (Bowen 49-50; Karamcheti xiii). Still other writers see place as a basis for comparative studies between cultures (Fleming 90-99). In addition, the writings of some authors use the word place as a central feature of the work (Montgomery 46-53). Finally, the term place is regarded as a mental construct for some authors with such titles as *"Is There a Place for Linguistics in the Foreign Language and Literature Curriculum?"*

From what has been observed, place is central to an understanding of a writer's work since the notion of place contributes to the larger meaning of what writers intend to convey to readers. The purpose of this paper is to discuss where place falls

within writing and literature. Writing in this sense pertains to expository forms that students produce in essay classes. For literature, we confine the discussion of place to novels—fiction and non-fiction—that we assign to students or those that we read for pleasure. Furthermore, the paper is intended to address issues of pedagogy as opposed to those of theory or of literary criticism.

Place in Expository Writing

In examining place in expository writing, there are two avenues, among others, for which place has benefits for teachers and for students. In expository writing, place is significant in that it serves as material for students' themes. In other words, we may consider place as the starting point from which students can begin their essays. According to Halliday, place serves an "ideational function" in that it gives writers something to write about (qtd. in Stillar 20). In another sense, place is significant in that it provides students with information outside the classroom from which they can discuss issues of grammar, for example, or even vocabulary lists discussed in class. We examine each of these views in turn.

A Place for Ideas

Students live, work, and play in the physical environment. The physical environment (e.g., churches, convenience stores, malls, and so on) are places that bombard the senses, especially the visual and auditory ones. As researchers have

pointed out, the visual and auditory pathways are responsible for a great deal of information that gets to the brain (Pinel 204-206). Using the information obtained from these sensory pathways, students can incorporate these impressions to start, to stimulate, or to improve on what they have written. Teachers could use this notion of place in writing to get students started in expository writing. If possible, teachers could take students to a physical setting and have them write on what they see or hear. This type of writing pattern would include traditional rhetorical patterns. For example, at a shopping mall or at the school's cafeteria, students could be directed to compare and to contrast the items purchased by teenagers and those purchased by adults or the difference in meals eaten by some students when compared to others.

At this writer's institution, there are several food carts located on a side street that is relatively close to the classroom. Faculty, students, and staff are their chief patrons. I have been using the activity surrounding the food carts as sources for augmenting or for reinforcing features of grammar and the essay. For example, if we are discussing passive construction, I ask students to form passive structures from activities that are usually conducted in the active form (e.g., *The vendor sells orange sodas*).

On a related topic, teachers could assign topics that deal with description and have students write descriptive essays from what they see and hear in the physical environment. Students could also initiate topics for writing in that they would bring to class flyers, posters, and other visual stimuli depicting people, places, and events. A poster of a tropical island, for instance, or one of a winter resort could be used to stimulate the rhetorical pattern of description or of comparison and contrast. With this type of involvement, students become analysts of language, as opposed to being passive recipients of it. This type of active involvement could even be expanded to include the use of media, given the advanced stage of video recordings today. Students could borrow, rent, or use their own video cameras to capture events or people at specific places, and

these recordings, too, could be brought to class for writing purposes.

A Place for Grammar

Another use of place in writing pertains to the visual stimuli that confronts students by way of posters, ads, and messages seen on billboards, on mass transit systems, on bumper stickers, and so on. These forms of language have been assigned a specific place in the physical environment to get the attention of readers for specific purposes (e.g., buy a product, become a member of an organization, avoid certain behaviors, and so forth). The examples noted above point to the physical use of place in that they serve to draw the readers' attention to a specific message placed at specific locations where they can be most visible to observers. It is assumed that students and other individuals read these signs and take action or inaction. However, these language stimuli, rather than just being placed in visible spots, can be used to augment classroom instruction if they are brought to the attention of students. One way in which this information can be used is in the area of grammar. Take the case of two ads seen in specific locations in an urban setting. The ads, for the most part, take the form of full sentences or fragments as seen in items (1) and (2):

- 1) Be an Organ and Tissue Donor
- 2) If Only Kids Came with Instructions

The responsibility of teachers and students would involve bringing these forms of language into a classroom to see how these statements fit into existing instruction in grammar. Here the term grammar goes beyond the memorization of parts of speech and involves the underlying knowledge that makes such utterances possible. In short, we are dealing with grammar within the notion of grammar as advanced by Noam Chomsky who sees grammar as "a description or theory of language . . ." (19) that seeks to determine what speakers, in our case writers, know about their language. This knowledge, when applied to writing, would allow writers to become

investigators of language. With this knowledge of grammar, writers are able to rearrange sentences—or parts of sentences—to expand them, to delete them, to determine if they are well formed or are anomalous. Our students are editors in the broadest sense of the word. For purposes of illustration, let us return to example (2):

2) If Only Kids Came with Instructions

This message placed on a billboard at the side of a city street is a sentence fragment in that it requires other information to complete the author's full intention. The writers of this billboard message structured the statement above with a humorous tone; however, for purposes of grammar, we would like to know what features of grammar contribute to the humorous nature of the message. Primarily, humor is due to placing the words *kids* and *instructions* in the same sentence. Normally, we assign instructions to inanimate objects in cases where we are assembling objects such as furniture, mechanical objects (e.g., *a lawn mower*), or electronic devices. In short, example (2) above violates certain structural principles of grammar in that certain words must be in the company of others. It is as if we said *The tree drank the milk* in which case the verb *drink* requires an animate subject or topic for the sentence. This is one example where grammar goes beyond rote memory of rules to instruction that looks at the inner structure of language.

Closely related to the topic of grammar above are elements that contribute to the composition of written communication. Within this idea of place, we are concerned with place as a feature of discourse as advanced by analysts such as Van Dijk who notes that some forms of writing "involve such parameters as participants, their roles and purposes, as well as properties of a setting, such as time and place" (11). A study of place in this context would allow readers, who then become writers, to examine such elements as the rationale for selecting a certain place to put a sign, the people to whom the message is directed, the meaning of the message, and even the background and color of the

language seen on the ads. In short, we are extending the boundaries of writing in such a way that students become critics and analysts that take into account other factors that contribute to the overall message of written communication. In essence, classroom talk then becomes a feature of writing. In example (3), there are certain features of writing that contribute to the message:

3) Learn to Square Dance

It is safe to say that example (3) is directed to a certain age group and perhaps to a certain ethnic and socioeconomic group, based on the location—a suburban area of a city—and the meaning of the message. We could also read into the message that not enough persons are square dancing or that the art of square dancing needs to be revived. In essence, this type of inquiry gets us into the realm of pragmatics or the meaning of a writer's (or speaker's) message rather than on the meaning of words or sentences (Peccei 5).

Use of Place in Literature

Place, as has been suggested, is a central feature of literature in so far as it places a writer's work within a specific location. William Zinsser takes a similar position when he states that "every human event happens somewhere, and the reader wants to know what that 'somewhere' is like" (88). Some examples of the use of place in literature are novels, biographies, narratives, and short stories. Place serves a function in that it puts the reader where the writer intends him or her to be mentally, and this information gives the reader some insight into the history, the terrain, the people, the customs of a community, and so forth. From Kafka's *Metamorphosis* to Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, from John Niehardt's *Black Elk Speaks* to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, readers are aware of the writer's work by the inclusion of place as a feature of their work. If anyone has read Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the writer transports him or her to life on southern plantations and at work camps, to churches, and to social

events in a manner that brings the reader to the specific locations through written communication.

Another feature of place in literature is that it serves to activate the reader's senses and to evoke an emotional response on the part of readers. This result of place would be in keeping with Louise Rosenblatt's thesis that literature should "arouse the reader's response" (42). Of course, the emotional response would not be possible without the writer's use of language in a specific manner. Richard Wright seems to make this point when he notes that he "strove to master words to make them disappear, to make them important by making them new, to make them melt into a rising spiral of emotional stimuli. . ." (22).

As in expository writing, place in literature relies primarily on descriptive rhetorical patterns. However, as Zinsser has noted, what would be of interest to a writer is not usually of interest to a reader. It is the writer's responsibility to bring the information alive to the reader. It is the details of place that make for interesting writing and eventual reading. As Zinsser further points out, "the detail must in some way be significant" (89). If we were to follow Zinsser's observation of writing, we are really at the level of descriptive writing mentioned earlier in a discussion of place and writing. However, as the author points out, what might be of interest to the writer might not be of interest to the reader. It is the writer's responsibility to draw the reader to the page. Whether the written product is "colorful or comic or entertaining" writers are urged to make sure to use "details that do useful work" (90).

It is at this level of literary expression that we can make a claim for the interaction of brain structures and language processing. Individuals are excited by different means, including language. As analysts have suggested, "a cognitive component and underlying physiological arousal are both necessary for emotionality to be fully felt" (Levinthal 349). It would not be farfetched to include the use of polygraph tests where language or the response to language is the central feature of such procedures. Of course, polygraph tests are not without

problems. We only mention them in support of the notion of language and the resultant emotional state that they are intended to produce. Thus, if literature is to serve its emotional purpose, writers are compelled to write in such a manner that achieves such aims.

Conclusion

My purpose in this essay was to look at place within the broad framework of students' writing, primarily expository writing and features of grammar. Its primary aim was to look at language in the students' environment as sources to stimulate topics for writing and elements for grammatical analysis. It is hoped that readers, primarily teachers, will discuss the issues raised as we seek to improve our students' mastery of writing and literary skills.

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Milford Jeremiah is an associate professor of English at Morgan State University. A frequent presenter at local and national conferences, he is a member of NCTE, CLA, and Middle Atlantic Writers Association.