

# PLACE IN LAWRENCE, THOMAS AND FITZGERALD



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In fiction 'place' does not just mean a location. It means landscape, history, community, personal investment, identity and experience. Above all it means people in a place and their relationship to that place, its contribution to the atmosphere and meaning of the story poem or script. Many admired and respected writers produce work about one particular place and through their exploration of character, identity, landscape, weather, atmosphere manage to look at these aspects of life in that place.

Orhan Pamuk writes about Istanbul, John Berger writes about rural eastern France, and Günter Grass writes about the vanished city of Danzig. North American writers for example, make very particular use of specific places: Alice Munro writes about rural Ontario, Phillip Roth writes about New Jersey, Willa Cather about the central plains of the USA. In the UK Dylan Thomas wrote about Swansea, Emily Bronte wrote about the Yorkshire moors near Howarth and D. H. Lawrence wrote about the Notts-Derby area. Now Alasdair Gray writes about Glasgow, John Cooper Clarke writes about Salford and a great many writers – too many to list - have written and re-written London...

Writing about a place is not just a story about what happened in a particular place. It should also tell us something about what else is going on there and what that place means for the people who live there. In poetry, drama and fiction the evocation of a place is bound up with the creation of an atmosphere and a revelation of character – those particular things happen to those particular people in that particular place. In fact writing about a place is never just about writing about a place. Writers never choose places at random. Places always mean something to the writer – and by the time they finish reading, they should come to mean something – something more than they used to - for the reader too.

Read the following very different passages and think about the treatment of place.

The first passage is from D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) and it shows the early stages of Paul's relationship with Miriam. Paul is aged about sixteen, maybe a little more and they are at her home, Willey Farm.

He set off with a spring, and in a moment was flying through the air, almost out of the door of the shed, the upper half of which was open, showing outside the drizzling rain, the filthy yard, the cattle standing disconsolate against the black cart-shed, and at the back of all the grey-green wall of the wood. She stood below in her crimson tam-o'-shanter and watched. He looked down at her, and she saw his blue eyes sparkling.

'It's a treat of swing,' he said.

'Yes.'

He was swinging through the air, every bit of him swinging, like a bird that swoops for joy of movement. And he looked down at her. Her crimson cap hung over her dark curls, her beautiful warm face, so still in a kind of brooding, was lifted towards

him. It was dark and rather cold in the shed. Suddenly a swallow came down from the high roof and darted out of the door.<sup>1</sup>



D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930)

- What do you think are the significant details here?
- What is suggested by these details?
- Are the details organised in any particular way?
- Is there an argument of some kind developing through these details?
- His energy v her brooding introspective passivity
- Note the contrast - her diffidence v his eagerness
- Note the adjectives: *disconsolate, brooding, dark, cold*
- Is the swing an extended metaphor for sex?
- Is the scene a metaphor for sexual intercourse between them?
- How does this passage reinforce sexual stereotypical gender patterns – active male, passive female?
- Does the farm share some of the depression, dark, cold and dirt we might expect of an urban industrial landscape? How does Lawrence indicate this? Why does Lawrence do this?
- Does Lawrence avoid the cliché of farm versus city? If so – how and why?
- How does the sense of place inform the events described?

In the following passage from the story 'Peaches' (1940), Dylan Thomas remembers going from his childhood home in the Uplands district of Swansea to spend a holiday at the farm on Fernhill.

The pigsties were at the far end of the yard. We walked towards them, Gwilym dressed in minister's black, though it was a weekday morning, and me in a serge suit with a darned bottom, past three hens scrabbling the muddy cobbles and a collie with one eye, sleeping with it open. The ramshackle outhouses had tumbling, rotten roofs, jagged holes in their sides, broken shutters, and peeling whitewash;

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<sup>1</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (London: Penguin, 2006), p.181.

rusty screws ripped out from the dangling, crooked boards; the lean cat of the night before sat snugly between the splintered jaws of bottles, cleaning its face, on the tip of the rubbish pile that roles triangular and smelling sweet and strong to the level of the riddled cart-house roof. There was nowhere like that farm-yard in all the slapdash county, nowhere so poor and grand and dirty as that square of mud and rubbish and bad wood and falling stone, where a bucketful of old and bedraggled hens scratched and laid small eggs. A duck quacked out of the trough in one deserted sty. Now a young man and a curly boy stood staring and sniffing over a wall at a sow, with its tits on the mud, giving suck.<sup>2</sup>



Dylan Thomas (1914-53)

- How does Thomas recreate the farm as it appeared to his childish self?
- Is this a conventional, clichéd sense of nostalgia for some lost rural idyll?
- What does the leanness of the cat and the smallness of the eggs suggest about the rural world as seen by the boy from Swansea town?
- How does he subvert the idea of a rural idyll?
- What is the function of words like 'slapdash', 'poor', 'grand', 'dirty', 'old', 'bedraggled'?
- What does the word 'bucketful' suggest about the hens?

The writing in the US east-coast novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940), is deceptive. On first encounter it looks simple, but on closer inspection it is subtle, rich in metaphor, very allusive and suggestive. It repays repeated re-reading.

We walked through a high hallway into a bright rosy-coloured space, fragilely bound into the house by French windows at either end. The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house. A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out at the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the

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<sup>2</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Dylan Thomas Collected Stories*, London: Phoenix, 2000, p.132.

ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-coloured rug making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea.

The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house. I must have stood for a few moments listening to the whip and snap of the curtains and the groan of a picture on the wall. Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor.<sup>3</sup>

The static 'enormous couch' here contrasts with the movement of the grass and the curtains, while the young women, back as if like witches from a short flight around the house, provide a very strong sense of foreboding and an uncanny sense of doom. This brief description picks up on a number of themes running through the book.

Fitzgerald never uses colour casually and here white – the white windows, the 'pale twisting flags' and 'the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling' – set against the 'rosy-coloured space', 'fresh grass' and the 'wine-coloured rug' - is suggestive of, among other things, Daisy Buchanan's otherworldliness. This echoes her character in terms of her wealth, her style of femininity and her relationship to other people. Fitzgerald also deftly suggests Tom Buchanan's powerful, controlling, physical presence – and particularly as he brings Daisy down to earth, his power over her.



### Follow-Up Work

- How can you make use of this approach to 'place' in your developing work?
- From a story of your own, choose a geographical location that is integral to the story and theme.

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<sup>3</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p.13.

- Be precise.
- Don't choose an entire country or even an entire house.
- Choose a very specific place.
- Now write a description that makes use of the following elements:
  - Something huge – a mountain, sky, landscape, piece of furniture etc.
  - Something tiny.
  - Something odd, uncanny or just plain strange.
  - Now consider exactly how you will fit this into your work...