Unit 5: Place

Introduction

*Place*, the view from the window in the desert or the city, the sea breeze coming through the kitchen window, the tar bubbles on a road under the Mississippi sun . . . is linked so closely with any story’s believability, that it seems too obvious to mention. And yet a good story must be precisely situated in order for us to enter its world.
Part 1: “Feelings are bound up in place”

Imagine the stories we have read so far in this course devoid of specificity about where the events happen. Kugelmass in any other city but New York, teaching at any other college but CCNY? “Girl” in any other place but Antigua? Hemingway’s couple in “Hills Like White Elephants” having their argument anywhere else but outside a station on a hot day in Spain, waiting for a train? Eudora Welty, in The Eye of the Story in a chapter called “Place in Fiction,” writes that “fiction is all bound up in the local. The internal reason for that is surely that feelings are bound up in place. . . fiction depends for its life on place. Location is the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of what happened? Who’s here? Who’s coming?—and that is the heart’s field”(118).

The heart’s field. I know we can all call to mind a significant place from our past. Why do you remember it? Isn’t it impossible to separate the details of how it looks from how it feels?
Part 2: The importance of real in the unreal

Gabriel García Márquez traveled back to the land of his childhood and discovered why he had always felt an affinity for the American writer William Faulkner: the Caribbean coast near Columbia felt like the Deep South of our country. Even though “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings” tells about a supernatural creature who lands in a tiny village—an old man with muddy, flea-infected vulture wings—we are situated in a real place: a tiny community of ordinary farmers, with its smelly chicken coops, village priest, oil lamps, branding irons, and onions for lunch. Even though the village is situated below the equator when spring comes in December, the detailed view from Elisenda’s kitchen window makes the place feel real and familiar. Through the frame of her window, we see the wet vegetable patch. At the same time, we are watching a winged man flap away! We stand at the window with Elisenda as she finishes cutting onions, and stare at the horizon.

In an essay called “Writing Short Stories” (1666), Flannery O’Connor (an author we read in Unit 2) tells us about the importance of “the strictest attention to the real” (1667). If the story is a fantasy, she says that the author “has to be even more strictly attentive to the concrete detail than someone writing in a naturalistic vein—because the greater the story’s strain on our credulity, the more convincing the properties in it have to be” (1668).

Read “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” to see how García Márquez pays attention to the details of a specific region of the world. Note also in the head notes to this story (p. 569) that García Márquez cautions us not to see his story as an allegory: “the origin of his stories is always an image, ‘not an idea or concept.’”

Contemporary fiction has grown away from teaching us with simple allegories. In writing about a small village, García Márquez’s attention to concrete details of setting and the manners of the people, support O’Connor’s statement that “you can’t cut characters off from their society and say much about them as individuals” (1671). Modern writers of fiction don’t paint bold arrows directing us to their meanings. They will always show meaning through details.

It is a paradox that the specific is also universal. Details of a remote region have a way of connecting to familiar pictures in one’s mind no matter where one grew up. As you take in the whole story and think about the problem these villagers have on their hands, imagine what any rural people in small town America would do. Is this a pestilence or a miracle? Do you kill it or charge admission?
Assignments

Reading

- Appendix 3 “Setting” (p. 1744)
- “Writing Short Stories” by O’Connor (pp. 1666–71)
- short story “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings” (pp. 570–4)
- related author biography: García Márquez, (p. 569)

Discussion Forum questions on “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”

You must choose ONE Discussion Forum question. Please indicate the number of the question to which you choose to respond.

*1. Even though García Márquez does not want us to see his story as an allegory, what could the winged man symbolize? Why do people prefer the spider woman? If you are from a provincial town or village, is there anything about the village in “A Very Old Man” that sounds familiar to you?

OR

*2. The head notes for this story (p. 569) tell us that García Márquez coauthored a screenplay of “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” in which a scene is added: “the old man is revealed as a trickster or confidence man who takes his wings off when he is alone.” But, in contradiction, the film also begins with a Biblical line from Hebrews: “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unaware.”

How could this contradiction help us understand this story’s central theme?

Questions to Ponder

“A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”
(use as a study guide for yourself):

1. Look up the etymology of the word “enormous.” Does this shed light on what is ordinary and enormous in this story?

2. In what ways does this story resemble a fairy tale, myth, or an allegory. In what ways does it differ? How does the old man differ from our usual conception of angels?

3. In what ways do people in this story attempt to categorize this winged man?
4. What implications can you derive from Father Gonzaga’s failure to communicate effectively with the winged man?

5. Why do you think the winged man tolerates the child patiently?

6. How do you feel as the angel flaps away at the end? Does Elisenda’s response adequately express yours?

7. What details stand out to you about Pelayo’s little homestead and the village where this story takes place? What do these details make you feel about this place?

8. Compare the presentations of the supernatural in “The Kuglemass Episode” and “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings.”

“Go” Further” (optional)

Considering the short story “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”:

Recall a place from your childhood (more particular than your town).

- Using each of your five senses, create five lists of five things each. For example, on the list for “touch” one of the things might be “slippery grass on my feet in the early morning.”

- Using the details from your list, write a description of this place. Think about the structure of your description. You can use a linear narrative (“I did _____, then _____, and finally _____”); it can move from whole to part, from panorama to close-up; or it can travel in the opposite direction, from particular detail to larger context. (This activity is adapted from The Creative Process, Burke and Tinsley, St. Martin’s Press, 1993, p. 34).
Midterm Exam

This week, you have a short-essay exam consisting of four questions. Write one paragraph on each question. It should be double-spaced, and please use font size 12, Times New Roman font. Your page limit is two pages to answer all four questions. Pack your paragraphs with thinking. Do not waste space by repeating the whole exam question as part of your answer. Use your own words. Do not quote glossary or dictionary definitions. Please post your exam answers by Wednesday night at 8 p.m. Following your posting, read Unit 5, Place, the story “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings,” and the Discussion Forum.

Note: Your Discussion Forum answer this week may be posted as late as Saturday, midnight.

Question #1:

Anne Bernays in her book What If? says that to be complete, a story “should be like a suspended drop of oil, entire unto itself, or, viewed another way, it should be psychically ‘resolved.’”

Using Bernay’s criteria, decide whether or not Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl” is a complete story (and not just a sketch of a mother and daughter argument). Explain your decision. (“Psychically resolved” means that the conflict is settled or at least altered in at least one character’s mind.)

Question #2:

Discuss ways in which The Misfit OR Arnold Friend is equally forceful as an antagonist to his protagonist (the grandmother OR Connie).

Choose ONE story to discuss: “A Good Man is Hard to Find” OR “Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?”

Question #3:

The voice of “Tiny, Smiling Daddy” and the voice of “Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?” are quite different even though both stories are written using the third-person point of view. In my discussion of voice in Unit 3, I say that an author decides on the spatial distance between the reader and the narrative, in addition to placing his characters where he wants them. In Gaitskill’s story, we feel in tight physical proximity to Stew. In Oates’s story, it is as if we view events from a catwalk above. The distant voice in Oates’s story at first may seem inappropriate, but the horror of events is intensified because they are related in a tone of utter neutrality. Voice is always a matter of choice for the writer, not chance.

Please choose ONE of the stories listed here and discuss the spatial distance between you as the reader and the events in the story. (It might be helpful to imagine the story as a
movie, and where the position of the camera would be—see Unit 3.) What feeling does that spatial distance evoke in you? Illustrate how the author achieves this feeling with two specific examples from that story. Choose “The Kugelmass Episode” OR “A Good Man is Hard to Find” OR “Why I live at the P.O.” for your discussion.

Question #4:

In “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” what point of view is used? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this point of view? What might Carver’s considerations have been in wanting to tell this story using this point of view?