

Poetry and place: basic approaches

1.) If you're thinking of writing poems for your assignment, you may find it useful to do some preparatory research.

You may already be familiar with some poems or poets of place: return to your favourite pieces by them. Explore what you like about their work and how they achieve their effects when writing about place.

Read other poets, especially contemporary ones, who focus on place, especially ones who write about specific locations. This is something you can research for yourself but do also ask me for reading suggestions once you have a general idea of what you want to write about.

For contextual reading, I recommend *Poets in a Landscape*, Jeremy Hooker, (UW Press 1996) and by the same author, *Poetry of Place: Essays and Reviews, 1970 -81* (Carcanet, 1981) – a few decades old now but still relevant in many respects.

This is a more recent and extremely useful source of ideas, examples and contextualising theory:

[Place and Poetry | PLACENESS, PLACE, PLACELESSNESS](https://www.placeness.com/place-and-poetry)

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I also recommend searching for Poetry and Place on the poets.org website – orientated towards the States, but a rich source of ideas and some interesting essays.

<https://poets.org>

The poetry and essays of the Scottish poet Kathleen Jamie are a great source of inspiration around place. Google her and follow up which of her books catches your interest. Similarly, the late Seamus Heaney – you might like to explore his poetry and his essays.

There is much recent writing around place and climate change, as also around new and radical approaches used by poets to explore how we perceptually situate ourselves in a landscape. Again, contact me for specific reading suggestions if this is of interest. A fascinating essay is 'Walking Women' by Eleanore Widger, which discusses, through the work of some women poets, how ways of walking and connecting to place can inspire new ways of shaping a poem. All about perspective again! I have added a link to the essay on your moodle page.

When researching specific places, you can draw on a variety of sources on the web, including excerpts from archived journals and letters, photo or film footage, and material on relevant aspects like geology or history. One line of enquiry can lead to another or highlight a theme or a story you might want to explore as a creative topic.

2.) Much of what I've said about fiction writing also applies to poetry – use specific, thematically relevant images and details, not vague abstractions or generalisations. You create a sense of place by showing it through such details, using sensory descriptive language to convey context, theme, mood and atmosphere. Draw on all the senses. And remember that height and depth, distance and proximity, heat, cold, humidity, the weather, the clouds, are all part of place.

Light and darkness are also highly evocative aspects you can exploit to enhance a place poem, or even make the central concept.

Look at this poem by Aberystwyth based poet Matthew Francis:

Streetlamps

Then there was more night
than we knew what to do with,
so we went into the street
which had been waiting for us
all that time,

or if not for us,
then for anyone to come
and understand its spaces
the way the lamps do in their
cones of gaze.

We walked between them,
veiled sisters leaning over
their patches of ordinary
and making the moths sparkle
with meaning,

till what we said was
strung out in the same rhythm,
sentences left for the lights
to look at, and in-between
our dark steps.
from *Muscovy*, Faber and Faber, 2013

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Notice the use of personification here, as if the lamps are themselves seeking meaning by casting light on whatever, or whoever, is passing under them, through the darkness. They become a metaphor for the human search for light in dark. Yet this concept is filtered through precise and visual imagery – moths sparkling in lamplight for example. This image positions the reader in a very sensory and immediate way in time and place yet is full of suggestion and symbolism. Write down your own response to the poem.

Prose poems naturally fall into a ‘house-like’ or container shape that could be appropriate to ‘placeness’ subject matter. Here’s an example:

Cyprus Well, Causley’s house, is a stepping-down-into house. One step then another from front door to little hall then into the lounge. You will come to see what this means. You will come down into the house and because of this you will come down into yourself. Into the well of yourself. You will keep going until you come to water. You will become a bucket and rope, a round stone wall and a winching system. When you are full of water you will haul the bucket of yourself back up.

This is what the stepping down does. It lowers you down and hauls you up. It helps that the house is quiet. That nothing interrupts the race of the rope as it plummets. It also helps that there's a tradition of stepping down here. More than thirty years of it already.

From: *On Ridgewrope Hill* Alyson Halett (Atlantic Press, 2015)

3.) Poetry is a gift for writers of place because of the range of devices you can bring into play. The poem itself, and its arrangement into Stanzas, or freer form, on the white space of the page, in itself creates a 'place' - one that can be conveyed visually, but that can also take advantage of rhythm repetition and patterning to underscore the verbal content. Refrains or repeated lines for example, act as a kind of 'home' place' from which the poem journeys and returns to, each return casting a different perspective on the 'home' line or adding to its layers of meaning. White space is the territory of possibility it journeys into. Similarly, there are opportunities to exploit sonic effects. You can make use of hard consonants to echo, for example, a place of hard edges, of stone, or urban cacophony. You can use softer sibilant sound for a less precise or softer landscape, seashore, river etc. Short staccato sentences or long flowing ones with tributaries of meaning can have the same effect. Alliteration and assonance are onomatopoeic in a similar way.

Contrasting places within a poem can be highly effective (giving you opportunities to use contrasting sonic effects, colours, textures etc) -it can also help provide structure and tension, for example by contrasting a place you once were with one you inhabit now. Consider this poem by Grace Nichols:

Island Man

(for a Caribbean island man in London who still wakes up to the sound of the sea)

Morning
and island man wakes up
to the sound of blue surf
in his head
the steady breaking and wombing
wild seabirds
and fishermen pushing out to sea
the sun surfacing defiantly
from the east
of his small emerald island
he always comes back groggily groggily
Comes back to sands
of a grey metallic soar
 to surge of wheels
to dull North Circular roar
muffling muffling
his crumpled pillow waves
island man heaves himself
Another London day

4.) Thinking about the visual aspect, the white page can be used to convey a sense of movement through time and space – perhaps a meandering shape that follows a meandering journey through a place for example. The white space can represent pauses in motion, or a leap from one physical site to another, or between memory and the present. Text can be staggered or arranged vertically as well as horizontally. If you look through the online archives of Poetry Wales magazine, or of Poetry London, you will find many examples of such textual experimentation. Or you can write a ‘shape poem’, turning the text into a graphic representation of the poem’s subject matter. In this shape poem in Gillian Eaton (2010) place is the world:

THE BIG WHISPER

It
may be
true that the
world began with
a whisper not with
a bang. A small out
breath or lift or stir
in the dark or shift of
atom or eve, a release
maybe from tension to peace and
like a party balloon inflated some small
speck and created us all and everything that we
know in a gentle act simple and slow. Spring would then
make sense coming as it does bit by bit humming through the hedges
and the trees smoothing itself across the fields plumping up the hills with a
soft hand steadying the waves towards the land. For sizing the seed into the
egg at least or the egg into the bird or beast follows the order that is known
from small beginnings great things are grown the baby’s cry to the old
man’s moan. If so then the bang must come at the end
and all that’s perfect and imperfect lend
itself to world without world
without world

without

Ah

Here is a fascinating link: [The White Space in Poetry. In the beginning, in margins ...](#)

5.) Lineation – the arrangement of a poem into lines – is another aspect you could play with. Lines that are a complete unit of meaning (end-stopped) have a very different atmosphere to those whose meanings flow on from one line to the next (enjambment) You can employ both within a poem. For a slower more meditative feel, use the end-stop, for a more flowing, or rapid, or cumulative effect, or to create tension, use the run on. Mix them for variety. Sentence structure and syntax work alongside lineation to underpin the effects you are aiming to create:

6.) Whether the narrative voice in the poem is your own, or an alternative narrator, or addressed to someone/something else, the experience of place will be filtered through a point of view. And remember you can write from the POV of an object, or an environment, a crab, a skyscraper, a tree – whatever you choose; personification is a very effective tool. Decide about whether to use first second or third person, and which tense/tone of voice.

7.) Poems need structure. The need to be more than just a string of impressions – the poems we remember are ‘about’ something; they possess an internal friction, develop an idea through imagery that’s organically linked. Many poems, like fiction, embed ‘change’ - a shift or progression in the line of thought. So, when writing about place in a poem, you need to go further than just describing it or expressing emotion. What is it you want to say about that place? What’s the story? Does it feel like a resonant example of, or metaphor for, a wider human theme? If you write a poem in a strict form, such as the sonnet, the villanelle, or the haiku, these tend to have ready-made structural and narrative expectations. Sonnets, for example, traditionally have a three-part structure, framed around argument, counter argument and resolution. The rhyme patterns support this structure. In free verse forms there are many ways to provide structure – list poems that gradually build a narrative, poems built around contrast eg then/now dream/reality, premise and ironic counter premise, or a ‘this but also this’; a ‘when this happened it led to this’ etc
Read the poems below and make notes on how they are structured.

AVOID CLICHES!

Abandoned Farmhouse

He was a big man, says the size of his shoes
on a pile of broken dishes by the house;
a tall man too, says the length of the bed
in an upstairs room; and a good, God-fearing man,
says the Bible with a broken back
on the floor below the window, dusty with sun;
but not a man for farming, say the fields
cluttered with boulders and the leaky barn.
A woman lived with him, says the bedroom wall
papered with lilacs and the kitchen shelves

covered with oilcloth, and they had a child,
says the sandbox made from a tractor tire.
Money was scarce, say the jars of plum preserves
and canned tomatoes sealed in the cellar hole.
And the winters cold, say the rags in the window frames.
It was lonely here, says the narrow country road.
Something went wrong, says the empty house
in the weed-choked yard. Stones in the fields
say he was not a farmer; the still-sealed jars
in the cellar say she left in a nervous haste.
And the child? Its toys are strewn in the yard
like branches after a storm—a rubber cow,
a rusty tractor with a broken plow,
a doll in overalls. Something went wrong, they say.

Ted Kooser, "Abandoned Farmhouse" from *Sure Signs: New and Selected Poem*

Where I'm From

I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening,
it tasted like beets.)
I am from the forsythia bush
the Dutch elm
whose long-gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.

I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,
from Imogene and Alafair.
I'm from the know-it-alls
and the pass-it-ons,
from Perk up! and Pipe down!
I'm from He restoreth my soul
with a cottonball lamb
and ten verses I can say myself.

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger,
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.

Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
a sift of lost faces
to drift beneath my dreams.
I am from those moments--

snapped before I budded --
leaf-fall from the family tree.

George Ella

How to Get to Green Springs

Nobody knows exactly when it fell off the map
or what the pressures were on its flooding river.
The hedge, the tottering mailbox, were gone. That dimple
of light from the bicycle that raised itself to creak
at noon across a clattering bridge names my father.
His blood silent as a surging wish drags this town
lost through my body, a place I can get back to only
by hunch and a train whistle that was right on time.

But time and trains were never right in Green Springs,
West Virginia. What color could map the coal's grime,
shacks shored against the river every March, mail
left to rot because no one answered to occupant?
Farmers low on sugar cursed the heat and left bad cigars
boys would puff back to clouds where they dreamed
of girls naked as their hands under outfield flies.
Scores were low. There were no springs for the sick.
Women lined their walls with the Sears catalog, but
the only fur they ever had was a warbled rabbit.
To get here think of dirt, think of night leaking,
the tick of waterbugs, a train held in Pittsburgh.

Dave Smith, "How to Get to Green Springs," from *The Roundhouse Voices: Selected and New Poems* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985). Copyright © 1985 by Dave Smith. Reprinted with the permission of the author.

Home

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well

your neighbors running faster than you
breath bloody in their throats
the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.

no one leaves home unless home chases you
fire under feet
hot blood in your belly
it's not something you ever thought of doing
until the blade burnt threats into
your neck
and even then you carried the anthem under
your breath
only tearing up your passport in an airport toilet
sobbing as each mouthful of paper
made it clear that you wouldn't be going back.

you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land
no one burns their palms
under trains
beneath carriages
no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled
means something more than journey.
no one crawls under fences
no one wants to be beaten
pitied

no one chooses refugee camps
or strip searches where your
body is left aching
or prison,
because prison is safer
than a city of fire
and one prison guard
in the night
is better than a truckload
of men who look like your father
no one could take it
no one could stomach it
no one skin would be tough enough

the
go home blacks
refugees
dirty immigrants
asylum seekers
sucking our country dry
niggers with their hands out
they smell strange
savage
messed up their country and now they want
to mess ours up
how do the words
the dirty looks

roll off your backs
maybe because the blow is softer
than a limb torn off

or the words are more tender
than fourteen men between
your legs
or the insults are easier
to swallow
than rubble
than bone
than your child body
in pieces.
i want to go home,
but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun
and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore
unless home told you
to quicken your legs
leave your clothes behind
crawl through the desert
wade through the oceans
drown
save
be hunger
beg
forget pride
your survival is more important

no one leaves home until home is a sweaty voice in your ear
saying-
leave,
run away from me now
i dont know what i've become
but i know that anywhere
is safer than here

Warsan Shire

Islands

For Derek Walcott

An island is one great eye
gazing out, a beckoning lighthouse,
searchlight, a wishbone compass,
or counterweight to the stars.
When it comes to outlook & point

of view, a figure stands on a rocky ledge
peering out toward an archipelago
of glass on the mainland, a seagull's
wings touching the tip of a high wave,
out to where the brain may stumble.

But when a mind climbs down
from its high craggy lookout
we know it is truly a stubborn thing,
& has to leaf through pages of dust
& light, through pre-memory & folklore,
remembering fires roared down there
till they pushed up through the seafloor
& plumes of ash covered the dead
shaken awake worlds away, & silence
filled up with centuries of waiting.

Sea urchin, turtle, & crab
came with earthly know-how,
& one bird arrived with a sprig in its beak,
before everything clouded with cries,
a millennium of small deaths now topsoil
& seasons of blossoms in a single seed.
Light edged along salt-crust stones,
across a cataract of blue water,
& lost sailors' parrots spoke of sirens,
the last words of men buried at sea.

Someone could stand here
contemplating the future, leafing
through torn pages of St. Augustine
or the prophecies by fishermen,
translating spore & folly down to taproot.
The dreamy-eyed boy still in the man,
the girl in the woman, a sunny forecast
behind today, but tomorrow's beyond
words. To behold a body of water
is to know pig iron & mother wit.

Whoever this figure is,
he will soon return to dancing
through the aroma of dagger's log,
ginger lily, & bougainvillea,
between chants & strings struck
till gourds rally the healing air,
& till the church-steeple birds
fly sweet darkness home.
Whoever this friend or lover is,
he intones redemptive harmonies.

To lie down in remembrance
is to know each of us is a prodigal

son or daughter, looking out beyond land
 & sky, the chemical & metaphysical
beyond falling & turning waterwheels
 in the colossal brain of damnable gods,
a Eureka held up to the sun's blinding eye,
 born to gaze into fire. After conquering
frontiers, the mind comes back to rest,
 stretching out over the white sand.

Yusef Komunyakaa