

21W.755, Writing and Reading Short Stories (Fall 2006)  
Shariann Lewitt  
**Session 20: Place**

---

Short stories must be extremely **efficient**, so every element serves multiple purposes.

People always interact with their environment. This is a relationship that reveals character as much as interaction with other characters. Nobody exists outside of the context of environment—nobody lives in a blank screen. And that environment shapes who we are and the way we interact with others, even who those others might be.

Place – there are NO generic places. “Nothing happens nowhere.”

And where we are often defines/reflects the kinds of things that will happen, can happen. (Your room, your grandmother’s house, your best friend’s car, the mall, the library, a classroom—all of these immediately identify an entire range of possible interactions and events, even characters.) Remember your context, and that you can use place to bring the reader’s experience into the story. Drawing on your reader’s context of place will make your job much easier.

The reader must be grounded in some kind of physical space at all times, and that place needs to feel solid and reliable while the reader is in the story. Building place relies not only on visual description, but on ALL FIVE SENSES. You do not need all senses in every setting, but make sure to get at least one of the lesser-used senses in. A smell, a taste, a texture, conveys emotional content on a more primitive level than sights and sounds. But make sure that the reader always know where s/he IS. There is NO BLANK SPACE in a story. People do not talk in nowhere.

Always be clear on where you/your reader/your characters are. This may be another area where you can cut pictures from magazines or draw, so that you KNOW the character can see the bedroom from the front door, for example, or that the apple tree has RED apples, not green ones.

Setting for:

- atmosphere
- character
- emotion
- symbolic or suggestive
  - be careful of being heavy handed
- alien or familiar
  - think of the alien as familiar, think of the familiar as alien
  - how do you introduce/show the alien?

All places can be both alien and familiar. Think about what your reader expects, what your reader knows, and what your reader doesn’t know. Remember what your reader **needs** to know, as well. Showing what is alien to the reader is it useful to have a pov where the character can explain some of the difference, or at least note it. (Returning to a place after many years absence, noting the differences. Coming to a new place for the first time.)

Make sure your reader always knows:

- time period
- weather
- season
- time of day

We don't think of these things, but we always exist inside of them. We always know what time of day it is (if not precisely, then we know it's late afternoon, or early morning) and our readers need this information too. If the reader doesn't know these things, their experience of the story is far less convincing.

Name some non-existent literary places that have *become real* (in our experience).

- Middle Earth
- Hogwarts

How does the writer make these places real? What details are convincing?

Setting/Place reveals character. It can even *be* a character in its own right (stories we have read).

But people and events are **embedded in place**.

Any setting can express ANY emotion.

- how you handle it (though there are some assumed "types" like Paris, Los Angeles, small town Ohio)

Every place has many **aspects**, from

- childhood memory
- place you know well
- place you visited once but it made an impression
- place you make up

Getting place *right*

- Is it a character in its own right?
- Can you write a place you don't know?
- Why? Why not?
  - getting it wrong, assumptions
  - "exploit, that means to steal"

It is possible to write a place you don't know well if you do a lot of research. You do NOT want to get the details wrong as it will pop the reader out of the story and into disbelief. We all like to read about places we know well, and we pay attention to whether the writer gets the details right.

Think about things you've read or films you've seen that take place in a place you know well. (GOOD WILL HUNTING?) We enjoy the sense of the familiar. And we are extremely aware of when a writer (or filmmaker) gets it wrong—and we no longer believe anything in the story.

This is one of those areas where "write what you know" pays off. Use places you know well. If you must use a setting you do not know well, both do heavy research and find someone from that area and check out the details. Do not have a small town in the woods in Arizona

(okay, you laugh, people have done this!) or make New York full of small back alleys. There is no reason NOT to set stories in places you know, at least not generally.

Often we get it wrong because we make assumptions about people/areas we don't know well. Best to avoid this because our assumptions are generalizations and there are no generalized places or characters. If we use these kinds of assumptions, our characters become cardboard cut-outs who don't live on the page. And no one likes those.

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21W.755 / 21W.757 Writing and Reading Short Stories  
Spring 2012

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.