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## The Sense of Place in 20th Century American Fiction: Stories and Novels by Raymond Chandler, William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Eudora Welty, and Nathanael West

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*Writers bring fiction to life by providing details that allow a reader to virtually see, touch, smell, hear, even taste what the characters do. In the best stories, these sensory details create a setting where only that particular story or novel could take place. The setting is integral to the story, and the story in turn says something about the place.*

The fiction of William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Eudora Welty, and others has helped readers around the world envision the American South—not just what the rolling hills or the flat delta of Mississippi might look like, but also how local dialects sound and what holds rural communities together. Faulkner's imaginary Yoknapatawpha County, the setting of many of his novels and stories, created an impression of rural poverty and resourcefulness that haunts Mississippi to this day. Likewise, Nathanael West's apocalyptic visions of Hollywood and Raymond Chandler's cool tough guys have created lasting images of a slick and dangerous California. Each place has been affected by its most memorable fictional representations, which transforms life into a myth that the place then tries to live up to—or to live down.

**Eudora Welty** (1909– ) set many stories in her native Mississippi delta, but she also drew upon her experiences traveling as a photographer for the WPA in the 1930s to write more widely of life in the South. Welty's South is a land of lush vegetation, tight-knit communities, and powerful natural forces. At its center are the family and the often delicate relation between the sexes. Consider the short story "The Wide Net." [*Eudora Welty: Stories, Essays, and Memoir,* pp. 204–227] A man returns from a night out with friends to find that his pregnant wife has left him a note saying that she plans to drown herself in the local river. He organizes his neighbors into a search party, and the group sets out with the communal fishing net to dredge the river. In the passage beginning "The path they always followed was the Old Natchez Trace" [211], as the company walks through the woods toward the river, each character responds differently to the situation. More precisely, each character's personality, experiences, and feelings about the situation are reflected by his reaction to the landscape.

The small boys Grady and Brucie stop running to watch a distant freight train, which brings tears to Grady's eyes. Perhaps the boys feel trapped, sensing the contrast between the train's rapid movement—which suggests freedom and escape—and the somber mission of the

search party, who walk deeper into their native land in pursuit of death rather than life. Old Doc connects the current crisis to larger natural forces, speaking as the self-appointed voice of local wisdom and constancy. He knows the seasons and takes it upon himself to educate the others. ("Magnolia and live-oak never die. Remember that.") A reader learns about local foliage and seasonal changes from Doc's speech, but this information becomes vivid because Doc seems so insensitive, even pompous. The character brings out the landscape, which in turn draws out the character. William Wallace, the distraught husband, connects Doc's observation that "everything just before it changes looks to be made of gold" [212] to his absent, pregnant wife, Hazel. A reader can see that William both admires and fears his wife, whose own "goldenness" (like the trees) makes her seem "too precious to touch." The link between the missing woman and the soon-to-change foliage also suggests that forces of nature bind the people and the land in fertility and, perhaps, in death.

William, dismayed by his wife's disappearance, is unable to remember the name of the local river. This shocks the other characters. Virgil—the only character who seems to be paying attention to William and his plight—jogs his memory. ("It's deep here. Remember?") William's disorientation at his sudden separation from his wife is emphasized by his confused relationship with the land. Throughout the story, in addition to the characters' responses to the landscape, an impersonal narrator describes the natural setting ("Below them the river was glimmering, narrow, soft, and skin-colored ..."). These descriptions take on an added dimension because they provide the backdrop to particular actions; the phrase "skin-colored," for instance, reminds us that the pregnant woman might have drowned in this river. The story provides closely observed details of the lush landscape, but it also suggests less tangible truths: the human griefs lurking in nature, the benefits and trials of neighborly help in a small community, the distance between men and women, the elders' sense of constancy, and the youths' longing for escape. Each abstract theme comes to life through human comment and action in a particular landscape.

A story does not have to describe a landscape to impart a sense of place. **William Faulkner** 's (1897–1962) *Go Down, Moses* consists of seven stories that take place in the southern community of Jefferson, most involving members of the McCaslin family, who have lived there for generations. In chapter II, part I of "The Fire and the Hearth," Lucas Beauchamp approaches the commissary

owner Carothers Edmonds to ask for a loan. Lucas wants to buy a gold-divining machine from a city salesman. Notice how Faulkner uses the interaction between Lucas, who is black, and the much younger white salesman—and the white shop owner—to suggest the prevailing racial attitudes of the day (this story takes place in 1941) and to define the distinctive features of the characters involved. Several details convey a specific sense of place. These include the careful attention to race ("He was young ... and a white man"); Lucas's authority in spite of his humble dress ("the negro in battered overalls ... stood looking down at him not only with dignity but with command"); and the surrounding poverty ("Did you ever hear of anybody in this country with enough money to bury?"). Lucas hesitates to address the man in the shop directly, suggesting rules of racial or perhaps class deference. But he and Edmonds are familiar to each other; indeed their history goes back at least a generation ("Your father would have lent me three hundred dollars"). The reader was told at the beginning of the story that the two men are cousins—their common ancestor owned a plantation during the era of slavery. This shared lineage evokes the long history of the place, binding the characters to one another and to a land that still bears traces of its past ("a bright-colored young mare ... under a plantation saddle").

In addition to racial divisions, this passage from "The Fire and the Hearth" reveals the local tension between town and country. The city man acts superior ("here I've come all the way from Memphis"), but Lucas isn't fooled by his facade ("*Hah ... He mought talk like a city man and he mought even think he is one. But I know now where he was born at*"). Each will try to take advantage of the other. Lucas's belief in a divining machine suggests rural superstition ("I buried a dollar in my back yard this morning and that machine went right straight to where it was and found it"). This results in moments of comedy, but it also points to the serious larger theme—again connected to the history of the land—that Lucas feels cheated out of money that rightfully belongs to him, buried money stolen by "two white men." Even the brief interaction between Lucas and Edmonds, both of whom lay claim to the land and its wealth, reveals a struggle for control. Although a reader might not know just which state the story takes place in, traces of dialect help to place it in the American South. The conversation between Lucas and Edmonds ("Can you imagine anybody in this country burying anything worth as much as two bits that some of his kinfolks ... aint dug up...?") and the drawled words of George Wilkins ("Hit wuz a big churn") are instantly

recognizable as southern speech. The characters are sufficiently rooted in the ways of the region to impart its feeling and history to the reader.

Local dialect is a crucial element in the works of **Zora Neale Hurston** (1891–1960), a writer and anthropologist who traveled throughout Alabama, Louisiana, Haiti, and her native Florida in the 1920s to record folk customs among communities of African descent. Hurston transformed some of her observations into richly textured fiction. In the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* the character Janie leaves her west Florida village to help a new husband establish a new town, and after his death she journeys to the Everglades with the man she loves, Tea Cake. In each location, Janie finds herself cast into a new role as a woman. At first she is a young girl who has no choice but to marry. Then she assumes the duties of the wife of a small-town mayor. Still later she labors in the field, asserting her equality with male workers. These various roles always reveal something about the human and natural environment. At the beginning of Chapter 14, Janie has just arrived in the Everglades. Her newcomer's eyes help a reader envision the place, too. ("... everything was big and new. Big Lake Okechobee, big beans, big weeds, big everything.") Bits of folk expressions are sprinkled throughout Janie's narration ("wild cane on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. People wild too"), reminding a reader that Janie is telling the story of the novel to one of her former neighbors in the cozy setting of her kitchen. Hurston imagines the novel as a kitchen chat between women, recreating some of the sounds and comforts of southern life.

True dialect begins in the passage when Tea Cake starts to talk. His grammar isn't as correct as the narrator's ("De big men haves ..."), and his accent suggests a deep rural background. But note that Tea Cake is wise and commands respect from Janie, his community, and the reader. He knows the rules for survival—how to find a home, and to secure the best job, and to win at dice—and he knows how to find joy in his life. He may be poor and uneducated, but the narrative presents him as a privileged guide through this region. (Faulkner's presentation of Lucas Beauchamp offers an interesting contrast, since Lucas appears somewhat simple for his belief in superstition and buried riches.) Tea Cake conveys a sense of how the environment—human, natural, and economic—affects a community not often represented in American literature until the 1920s. One lesson to be taken from his fresh observations and poetic expression is that place is in the eye of the beholder.

Sometimes a single character can speak for a region. **Raymond Chandler**'s (1888–1959) suave Philip Marlowe, a private detective who appeared in several of Chandler's novels and stories, embodies a Los Angeles of wealthy stars, gun-toting tough guys, a "special brand of sunshine," and intrigue beneath the glittering surfaces. Marlowe's Los Angeles is "a city no worse than others, a city rich and vigorous and full of pride, a city lost and beaten and full of emptiness" [*The Long Goodbye*]. Unlike the rural landscape of the southern writers considered above, Chandler's urban landscape has a constantly shifting face. Most of the southern characters found reassurance in their connection with the land and its past, even in the most traumatic situations. The modern city dweller, however, feels disoriented when looking for constancy of place or message. So many people are newcomers to the city; so much of the natural landscape is altered and still in flux. This is one reason that Chandler's Los Angeles becomes a good setting for a detective novel; in order to understand the place, scattered impressions need to be pieced together like the clues in a crime story.

Detective Philip Marlowe is at turns cynical and romantic as he tries to make sense of the modern city. When things get tough, he jumps in his car—a consummate L.A. gesture to this day. In *The Little Sister,* Marlowe has just learned that he has an ice-pick killer to catch, perhaps one of the starlets he has been trying to protect. At the beginning of chapter 13 [*Raymond Chandler: Later Novels and Other Writings*, 267], Marlowe drives north out of Hollywood, passing through the San Fernando Valley and into Ventura County. He repeats to himself, "You're not human tonight, Marlowe." And yet, what strikes Marlowe as he drives through the landscape is the human environment, not the natural setting. The road, the lights, the "sleazy hamburger joints that look like palaces under the colors" all suggest to him human lives and suffering. When he glimpses nature it reminds him of people, either grand ("an occasional light winked from the hills through thick trees. The homes of screen stars") or overlooked ("the great fat solid Pacific trudging into shore like a scrubwoman going home"). Marlowe reminds the reader that place can be defined by what it lacks: "No moon, no fuss, hardly a sound of the surf. No smell. None of the harsh wild smell of the sea." The natural order that might have grounded an earlier generation in the West—or contemporary characters in the South—has been replaced by an exclusively human world. As Marlowe turns back south toward L.A. on his drive, he acknowledges a quality unique to the place, an artificiality at once disturbing

("attitudes and pseudo-refined voices and waterfront morals") and magical ("there ought to be a monument to the man who invented neon lights"). It seems unlikely that these reflections would have been summoned by any other spot in the world.

**Nathanael West** (1903–1940) also portrayed a Hollywood of human suffering and disorienting, false surfaces. Unlike Chandler's vision of light and motion, West's Hollywood is a place of stasis and failed dreams, the disappointing endpoint to America's westward march. Nevertheless, the hero of *The Day of the Locust* is more charitable than Philip Marlowe. Tod Hackett, an artist, has just arrived in Hollywood for a scene-painting job. He brings visual sophistication—and an East Coast bias—to his first walk through his neighborhood, which begins at the end of chapter 1. Hackett notices the discrepancy between signs and their usual meanings here: "The fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office." [p. 242] Even outdoor clothing has lost its association with exploration and the pioneering spirit that settled California; West's early-twentieth-century Los Angeles is a place that has forgotten its history. Like Philip Marlowe, Hackett notes different classes of people in Hollywood, comparing the bustling crowd to those who "loitered on corners," the people he believes "had come to California to die." [p. 242] In contrast to the mythic California of gold, a new frontier, and a fresh start, West presents California as a place to abandon all hope. As for the jarring contrast of housing styles—a sampling of everything humanity has invented so far—Hackett finds the jumble to be "monstrous." But notice the hero's compassion and search for beauty even in his dark vision. He wants to study this "tasteless, even horrible" landscape in order to complete his painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles." If Philip Marlowe clarified his sense of place by solving the mysteries around him, Tod Hackett tries to organize his observations of a fragmented city into a single painting. The painting, like the novel, offers an artistic vision of California as the end of the world. But like so many other places celebrated and satirized by American writers, the real place goes on, taking on new colors from its various representations in art.

**Suggested Excerpts:**
The Sense of Place in 20th-Century American Fiction:
Stories and Novels by Raymond Chandler, William Faulkner,
Zora Neale Hurston, Eudora Welty, and Nathanael West

1. Eudora Welty, final part of section I, "The Wide Net"
   *Eudora Welty: Stories, Essays, & Memoir*
   pages 211–213 (from "The path they always followed was the Old Natchez Trace" to "'Do you think she jumped?' Virgil asked William Wallace.")

2. William Faulkner, chapter II, part I, "The Fire and the Hearth," *Go Down, Moses*
   *William Faulkner: Novels 1942–1954*
   pages 61–64 (from "About a hundred yards before they reached the commissary" to "Go to my stable and get my halter.")

3. Zora Neale Hurston, opening to chapter 14, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
   *Zora Neale Hurston: Novels and Stories*
   pages 280–281 (from "To Janie's strange eyes, everything in the Everglades was big and new" to "They didn't come bringing money, they were coming to make some.")

4. Raymond Chandler, opening to chapter 13, *The Little Sister*
   *Raymond Chandler: Later Novels and Other Writings*
   pages 267–269 (omitting first two paragraphs on page 269)
   (from "I drove east on Sunset but I didn't go home" to "Here we go again. You're not human tonight, Marlowe [bottom 268]"; omitting two paragraphs, beginning again "Malibu. More movie stars," through "There's a boy who really made something out of nothing" [bottom 269].)

5. Nathanael West, final part of chapter 1, *The Day of the Locust*
   *Nathanael West: Novels and Other Writings*
   pages 242–243 (from "He left the car at Vine Street" to "Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous" [end to chapter 1])

**Suggested Discussion Questions:**
The Sense of Place in 20th Century American Fiction:
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1. In the essay "Place in Fiction," Eudora Welty wrote: "Every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else." [*Eudora Welty: Stories, Essays & Memoir*, 787] Do you agree? Consider the various excerpts in this discussion and imagine how the stories would have to change—if at all—if they took place somewhere else.

2. Compare the three representations of the American South (by Welty, Faulkner, and Hurston) to one another. What evidence do you see that the writers describe a similar region? How would you describe the differences in their representations—and how does this alter your impression of the landscape or the characters?

3. Based on these excerpts, how would you describe the difference in character between Chandler's Philip Marlowe and West's Tod Hackett? How do these differences in character alter the impression a reader gets of Los Angeles?

4. How does a character's emotion affect a reader's impression of the landscape? Compare Philip Marlowe's description of Hollywood in *The Little Sister*; Tod Hackett's description of Hollywood in *The Day of the Locust*; and Janie and Tea Cake's description of the Everglades in *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* You may want to begin by characterizing the emotions of the characters. How exactly does the author convey this emotion?

5. In what ways would you consider these stories and novels "fair" to their locations? Can you point to examples where you think the writer exaggerates or alters details in a manner unfair to the setting of the story?

6. Consider your own impressions of the American South or of California. How do you think you formed these impressions? Can you point to any stories, novels, or other works of art that may have influenced you?

## Ideas for Further Reading:
The Sense of Place in 20th Century American Fiction

**Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita.***
The provocative plot of *Lolita*—a middle-aged man's affair with a pre-pubescent girl—often occupies a reader's primary attention. But the novel can also be considered a road narrative, a dark view of America's highways and towns as seen through the eyes of the fugitive European anti-hero Humbert Humbert. A passage you might want to consider in particular is Part 2, Chapter 2. How would you describe the narrator's representation of the American landscape? Would you say that his America is closer to a land of fragmentation, or one of rootedness? Finally, note how the narrator uses observations of the landscape to convey his frame of mind.
*Vladimir Nabokov: Novels 1955–1962,* 144-155.

**Gertrude Stein, "The Geographical History of America."**
Gertrude Stein's experiments with language helped influence a generation of early-twentieth-century writers, including Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Consider the fragmented essay/poem "The Geographical History of America" as an example. Stein's observations in this essay include: "In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. / This is what makes America what it is." Do you agree? Browse through a few brief "chapters" in this essay and consider what other insight Stein offers about the relationship between geography and human nature. You may also want to consider whether you see a relationship between the subject of the essay and its unusual style.
*Gertrude Stein: Writings 1932–1946*, 367–488.

**Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction."**
The short-story writer and memoirist Eudora Welty recorded her own thoughts about the importance of sense of place in fiction. See whether her observations lend insight into your own approach to reading, or even writing, fiction.
*Eudora Welty: Stories, Essays & Memoir,* 781-796.