

They Know Their Place

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The classic statement on “place” is by Eudora Welty, I believe, and her essay is titled—simply, as is characteristic of her—“Place in Fiction.” Thinking that I would have little new to say about the assigned subject, I decided to limit my comments to the dramatization of place and spare myself the necessity of dealing with the intricacies and subtleties that have been so clearly and gracefully laid out by others, particularly by Miss Welty.

Preparing for my talk, I chose four major ways in which place is made an essential part of story or in which its presence in a narrative is underlined and brought forward from the background to be part of the action. There must be many more ways than four to be followed by writers, but these gave me a sufficiency to ponder upon and they filled up my hour of chatty discourse.

The four methods of dramatization I lit upon are these: first, *discovery*, in which characters venture to places new to them and endure or enjoy encounters with episodes on unaccustomed ground. The second is *departure*. A character takes leave, by choice or necessity, of the place where she is accustomed to live. Because she is leaving, she sees this familiar place with new eyes; it becomes a different place because its features are made unfamiliar as emotions arise and strengthen. Third is the use of the *return* of someone to the place he used to inhabit or to visit frequently. Fourth is *meditation*, in which a native of a place carefully chooses that place as a subject for study and investigation. This particular strand of self-conscious analysis is more often found in nonfiction than in imaginative literature, as in *Walden*, in the works by writers like Henry Beston, and in diarists and writers of memoirs. In fiction, the most exhaustive practice of meditation upon place is probably Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, but there is a plethora, if not a surfeit, to be found in the pages of Henry James. This approach also admits of hybrid volumes that can be a mix of history, autobiography, and fictionalized material. Casey Clabough’s *The Warrior’s Path* (2007) is a sterling example of the hybrid.



Poet, fiction writer, literary critic, and North Carolina’s former Poet Laureate, Fred Chappell was invited to read from his work and make some remarks about “place” in literature to the Teachers Institute on Appalachian Voices, sponsored by the North Carolina Humanities Council, in Glendale Springs, North Carolina, on June 20, 2010. Based on that presentation, he prepared this essay for Appalachian Journal.