**The Poetry of Place**: by Trish O’Connor, Steinbeck Institute Scholar 2013

**OVERVIEW OF LESSON**

**Background:** Drawn from the wealth of texts, scholars, analysis, discussions, and field trips, two ideas from the Institute keep resonating with me: the importance of “place” and the value of experiential learning. The Institute encouraged us not only to discuss Steinbeck’s connection to land and sea, but also to get out and experience these locations, to observe them closely--get low and go slow.

I have a larger set of lessons still under construction addressing the themes and structure of *The Grapes of Wrath*, but for now I have designed this *Poetry of Place* lesson for junior-level, American Lit classes.

After students have read and explored *The* Grapes of *Wrath*, I would lead into this lesson with discourse about the importance of place to Steinbeck— using text passages from *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cannery Row*, to Ricketts —using his lab, and excerpts from The *Sea of Cortez,* and to Jeffers—using Tor House and selected poetry.

**Hypothetical Construct:** The idea for this writing lesson is to hypothetically explore displacement and loss of place to see if we can kick up a cloud of creative responses.

In many ways, *The Grapes of Wrath* is about being displaced, about being forced out by a series of circumstances well beyond the individual’s control. The Joads are the fictional representation of thousands of real families who left their homes, in most cases never to return. Steinbeck asks us to consider what it means to lose one’s sense of place. What is the impact on the individual who must leave their home, farm, land, church, and community?

**What if we had to leave our school and never return?**

Which physical place would you miss most? Have you ever felt this kind of loss? What would be lost in the chaos of this physical displacement? In some ways this is not purely a *hypothetical*. Our neighboring district, Sandy Hook, has had to close down a school and recreate itself somewhere else. And in the recent past, the housing crisis led to foreclosures for many families.

**Product:** A poem set in or about a “sacred” BHS place. A “poem” can be in text, audio, or video formats; original mashups of multi-genres also allowed, as long as you are carefully selecting and exploring language choice, patterns, and structures (remember to consider our work on narrative) to deepen our understanding of the power and poignancy of this “sacred” place.

**Process:** Choose a sacred place, Go on a “field trip” for observation, Free-write to generate and explore ideas, Write a poem/song/audio/video text, Create a QR code, Post QR link in the “sacred” place, Participate in class tour of Poetry of Place.

**Presentation:** Post your QR code with the title of your poem in THE PLACE the poem is about. Classmates (and other students) will scan your QR code and read your poem. You may also link us to the song or audio/video version of your poetry. Be sure to show an awareness of class expectations and of your audience as you select the form and style of your presentation.

**The Poetry of Place: using Steinbeck, observation, and technology to write poetry grounded in a place.**

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**What if we had to leave our school and never return?** Which physical place/s would you miss most? Have you ever felt this kind of loss? What would be lost in the chaos of this physical displacement? In some ways this is not purely a *hypothetical*. Our neighboring district, Sandy Hook, has had to close down a school and recreate itself somewhere else. And in the recent past, the housing crisis led to foreclosures for many families.

1. **Find and discuss quotes from *The Grapes of Wrath* that describe and evoke specific, significant places.**

**Such as:**

*“To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth…The surface of the earth crusted, a thin hard crust, and as the sky became pale, so the earth became pale, pink in the red country and white in the gray country…In the water-cut gullies the earth dusted down in dry little streams. Gophers and ant lions stared small avalanches. And as the sharp sun struck day after day, the leaves of the young corn become less stiff and erect; they bent in a curve at first, and then, as the central ribs of strength grew weak, each leaf tilted downward”(Steinbeck 1).*

*“…but it’s our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it’s no good, it’s still ours. That’s what makes it ours—being born on it, working it, dying, on it” (Steinbeck 33).*

*“Joad paused at the entrance to the tool-shed lean to, and no tools were there—a broken plow point, a gnawed mule collar, a flat gallon oil can crusted with dirt and oil, and a pair of torn overalls hanging on a nail. ‘There ain’t nothing left…” (Steinbeck 40).*

*“On the edge of the ring of firelight the men had gathered. For tools they had a shovel and a mattock. Pa marked out the ground—eight feet long and three feet wide. The work went on in relays. Pa chopped the earth with the mattock and then Uncle John shoveled it out…” (Steinbeck 144).*

*“Along 66 the hamburger stands...Two gasoline pumps in front, a screen door, a long bar, stools, and a foot rail. At one end of the counter a covered case; candy cough drops, caffeine sulphate called Sleepless, No-Doze; candy, cigarettes, razor blades, aspirin, Bromo-Seltzer, Alka-Seltzer. The walls decorated with posters, bathing girls, blondes with big breasts and slender hips and waxen faces in white bathing suits, and holding a bottle of Coca-Cola and smiling—see what you get with a Coca-Cola” (Steinbeck 153).*

*“Ma—come look. We’re there!” Ruthie and Winfield scrambled down from the car, and then they stood silent ans awestruck, embarrassed before the great valley. The distance was thinned with haze, and the land grew softer and softer in the distance. A windmill flashed in the sun and its turning blades were like a little heliograph, far away…Ruthie whispered, ‘It’s California” (Steinbeck 227).*

1. **Read and consider the following:**

**“**In painting, chiaroscuro, the use of light and dark, provides definition, contrast, the heightening or lessening of emotion; in addition, I would argue, it allows viewers a way into the painting. In poetry, place serves a similar function: readers can enter the particular world of the poem; however, if readers languish in the general world of no place, then nothing will happen for them, neither the excitement and explosion of language nor the complex connection of realized experience. Further, the imagination, it seems to me, starves on a diet of no place poems; even sitcom writers, surely an intellectually anorexic lot if ever there was one, have located their characters with their endless brouhahas in recognizable places—Seattle, New York, Chicago.” **by Peter Huggins** http:// www.terrain.org/articles/15/huggins.htm

1. **Your task** is to write a poem set in or about a “sacred” and specific BHS place. The “poem” can be in text, audio, or video formats; original mashups of multi-genres are also allowed, as long as you are carefully selecting and exploring language choice, patterns, and structures (remember to consider our work on narrative) to deepen our understanding of the power and poignancy of this “sacred” place.

***Partner up and get ready to go on a field trip to a “sacred” place in our school or on school property. If one day we could never come back to Brookfield High School, which place would you miss the most?***

1. While on the field trip, use <http://todaysmeet.com/> to keep me updated on *where* you are and *what* you are photographing. We can also avoid too many duplications by reading what other students are choosing to photograph. Take a photo of each other in the sacred place you have chosen.
2. After you have your photographs, put the technology away and observe this sacred place carefully and quietly for 5 minutes. Create a log--take some notes on what you see…be precise and detailed in your recording. Think about: your senses and consider atmosphere, lighting, history, purpose, use, and inhabitants as you record.
3. Meet back in the room in 20 minutes with photographs and logs.
4. Back in class: Open up your photo and your log and use them to help you create a free-write of your sacred place in your Writer’s Notebook . Write for 20 minutes. Play around with perspective and tone. Turn the visual details into both literal descriptions and figurative language--analogies, metaphors, and similes. Feel free to stop and start over, make lists, fragments, or complete paragraphs. Put a gag on the editor/critic in your brain and focus on the place. Some questions to help you get started:

* How would you describe this place to someone who could not see the photograph?
* What’s unique about this place? Or, what is ordinary about it?
* What would the Instagram or facebook caption of this place be?
* How would you describe this place… in a page of your memoir after you are famous? …in an article in the school newspaper about favorite places? …in your blog?
* What would be the opening/closing line of a poem about this place? What would the title be? What would be the dominant image?
* Who inhabits this place? Whose voices are here? If the walls could talk…..???
* Who will inhabit this place in the future?
* What are the power dynamics of this place?

1. Polish and shape your poem at home. You will have 30 minutes of peer edit time in class before the poem is due in final form.
2. Save your final product to google docs or google drive. If you want audio or video formats, upload to Youtube.
3. Make a QR code for your poem. Go to <http://qrcode.kaywa.com> or similar site for a free QR code. Create the code (this is really simple and fully explained on the site) link to your poem, print the QR code, and bring it to school with you.
4. On the day the poem is due, post the QR code that links to your poem in the actual place you wrote about. (I have some good, sticky tape, and don’t worry, I’ve notified the custodians and staff of our project.)
5. Once all the QR codes are posted, we will go on a tour of our **Poetry of Place**. Enjoy!

**Extension Possibilities:** Students choose another sacred place beyond school grounds—anywhere that is important to them at home, vacation spots, etc.

Classes could map the important places in their whole town. Repeating the process as outlined above…and create a QR code map for town hall or library? Or if there is already a big town map, as there often is, they could get permission to put QR codes right on it with some tempting but cryptic instructions to see who would scan the codes and read a poem of place!

**Links to the CCS:**

* [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2d](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/11-12/2/d/) Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary, and techniques such as metaphor, simile, and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic.
* [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3d](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/11-12/3/d/) Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.
* [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/11-12/5/) Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.
* [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.5](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/11-12/5/) Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
* [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.3](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/11-12/3/) Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.
* [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.6](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/11-12/6/) Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.

**References:**

From the Institute’s digital binder: DeBlieu, Jan. “Mapping the Sacred Places.”

Huggins, Peter. "Poetry Place." *Terrain: A Journal of the Built and Natural Environment* 15.Fall (2004): Web. 11 Aug. 2013. <http://terrain.org/>.

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Penguin, 2006. Print.