

TERRY HERMSEN

# Poetry of Place

Helping Students Write Their Worlds



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# Introduction: To Know Again the World

## Relearning Where We Live

How can poetry help students find meaning; that is, how can it help them reengage who they are, where they are, and how they see the world? Second, how can we teach poetry in a more comprehensive way, a way in which each lesson, while self-contained and fresh, also links to a wider strategy of interlocking conceptual and perceptual skills?

This book is woven around these two basic questions. It proposes certain answers, while recognizing the complexities involved with any such answers. It grows out of twenty-five years of trial and error, lessons spun out of necessity and curiosity, as I roved around the state of Ohio, conducting residencies for the Ohio Art Council's Artists in Education program—as well as out of my evolving conviction over that time that students often barely know how to look at where they live.

I've taught in a rural high school, for instance, situated directly across the road from Darby Creek, one of the state's designated Scenic Rivers, guiding students on poetry-writing walks along its banks who seldom had (and mostly *never* had) thought to venture there. I've taken middle school students in Marion—a decaying postindustrial city to the north—on metaphor-scavenging hunts around the blocks surrounding their inner-city school, which might as well have been another planet given how alien and at the same time strangely intriguing they became. Perhaps hardest of all have been the suburban classrooms I've experienced where "outside" is mostly a collection of self-similar streets and cul-de-sacs, leading to the impression that everywhere is the same and hardly worth investigating at all.

This book traces my attempt to find reasons and strategies for guiding students in the reinvestigation of their worlds and their lives, intended for the use of teachers in *all* locations, from the rural to the urban to the suburban. I've grounded the lessons within four interlocking precepts, ones which I've found both theoretically exciting yet adaptable to nearly every grade level:

1. Metaphor constitutes not only the heart of poetry but the core of thought and language as well;
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2. Metaphoric thinking roots itself in physical experience—and the more we show students direct ways to link the two, the more their poetry and all their perceptions may flourish;
3. By guiding students in the process of leaping back and forth from metaphor to the physical world, we help strengthen a third and complementary component of thought—*visualization*;
4. Coupled this way, all art, poetry, thinking, and perception offer entrance to a deeply *playful* way of being—not as an escape or mere diversion, but as one of the main routes toward understanding what it means to be human.

There's hardly a lesson here that does not find its grounding in one or more of these ideas. Indeed, I would contend that none of these skills can be fully taught separately. Training in one often enhances facility in the others; and further, I've come to believe that these four skills form a kind of generative cycle whereby poetry might open up and illuminate the "ordinary mysteries" that surround us all the time.

I would hesitate to make anything here into a set formula, a lock-step process to fit every classroom. Rather, these lessons offer possibilities, which perhaps might be useful in constructing your own routes to the aforementioned goals. Mix and match. Use these stories to create your own. Start with evoking your students' *interior lives*—their sense of metaphor, play, and language; their skills in working with memory and invention. Then, wherever you happen to be teaching, guide them out into exploring their world, be that the streets of Columbus or Akron or Colorado Springs, the cliffs of a nearby river valley, the cemetery down the street, or even the local grocery. As a biologist I taught with once put it, "anywhere we are is a habitat of significance," human or otherwise. By connecting their inner sense of perception to the world around them, we can show our students that where they are matters and can become a rich source for writing.

### **The Structure of the Book**

This book falls into two main sections, dividing thirty lessons between them. The first gathers lessons connected to these four principles that I've developed from a wide variety of places and grade levels, including one invented at Thomas Jefferson School, a bilingual academy in Concepción, Chile. Each lesson arises, as I believe all teaching does, from the place of its inception—but I hope they may be adapted for other locations as well. The first half of the book spells out some lessons designed to teach the four skills I've mentioned, in preparation for applying those skills to the investigation of particular places.

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The second part lays out a case study—a model that, while intricately bound to the investigation of one place, Mt. Gilead, Ohio, can readily be replicated anywhere. In the fall of 2002, I conducted a three-month residency in two tenth-grade English classrooms of Jill Grubb, a wonderful teacher who contributed greatly to the evolution of each lesson and the residency itself. Mt. Gilead High School is a small community of about four hundred students, located in the county seat of a mostly rural county about an hour north of Columbus. By focusing the second half of the book on this study, in which we deliberately set out to engage these principles, I hope to offer inspiration—and some adaptable lesson plans—for further such studies of how students can come to experience more deeply the rich environments where they live.

By presenting these lessons in a narrative format, often with the names and backgrounds of the student writers included,\* rather than in a more generic, prescriptive frame, my hope is that the assignments—and the philosophical principles they contain—will be that much more potable, more adaptable to your own sensibilities and situations. The classroom, the year, and the context may vary, but these interlocking perceptual and conceptual skills will, I hope, be useful to you and your students, wherever you are.

### **Out of the Poetry-in-the-Schools Movement**

Before we begin, let me say a few words about the teaching experiences in which these lessons began—and then about the theory that those experiences evoked.

As mentioned, each of the main ideas here grew out of my travels around the state of Ohio as a “poet-in-the-schools” for the Ohio Arts Council for nearly twenty-five years. What a grand experiment that movement became! Funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, those years resembled a kind of Works Progress Administration for underemployed writers, armed only with our notebooks and whatever sections of our libraries we could cram into our cars. We showed up in classrooms somewhat at random, with neither teachers, students, nor poets knowing quite what to make of each other at first, then slowly warming to the exchange through the creative exploration of language. Pencils moving across the page in mesmerized silence brought a new tenor to the rooms. And the poems that emerged seemed like holy documents, reminding us of some lost elements of our common humanity. I

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\*I have included the student writers’ actual first names in most cases.

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worked in Catholic schools in Springfield and Mansfield, where the transformative power of symbolism was often no farther away than the ashes placed on their foreheads during morning Ash Wednesday services. I visited high schools in New Washington, Plymouth, and Apple Creek, where driving in I'd need to consult my map to interpret the signs on the nearly empty roads, and cows grazed within sight of the downtown markets. I slept in motels (sometimes donated by local businesses), family bedrooms, and once in a hunting cabin far out in the woods that belonged to one student's grandparents.

Gradually, like so many of the hundreds of poets visiting the schools across the country, through many trials and errors I noticed certain types of lessons and approaches evoked richer poems and contained certain "ingredients" I started trying to name. Nothing sapped a day or a lesson of its excitement more than mediocre poems, and poems without a clever or fresh use of metaphor sapped that energy the most. But how does one teach that essential approach? As with most of us, I struggled to make metaphor's application more than cursory ("the cloud was white as cotton . . .", etc.). By hook or by crook, as they say, I found that when I brought *stuff* into the classroom, or got the kids moving or connecting their poems to their bodily experience of the world, the writing—and the metaphors—got better. I began carrying boxes of objects from room to room . . . old car parts, pieces of curled driftwood, deer antlers, geodes, a coagulation of melted lead I found outside a factory in Mansfield. Before class, students would often gather around the "stuff table," picking up these items like flotsam from a shipwreck, fascinated most by those objects they could not name. And their metaphors grew. Even when the assignment didn't deal directly with the stuff, having those objects before them in the room gave them imagery from which to draw. As some of the philosophers I read later could have suggested, what else would the students have to make metaphors *from*? Like lamps to our sometimes glazed-over eyes, metaphors can lead us back to an exploration of the senses.

Indirectly, visual awareness slowly began to play more and more of a role. I turned instinctively toward imagery, the first source for my own poetic training. I always knew that poems created mental pictures. But how does one convey that to kids, when they mainly wanted to tell stories and, in adolescence, conjecture about thoroughly abstract topics like the nature of love and the universe? By giving students visual images to spark their own imagination, bringing in reproductions and sometimes artist friends to display their work, or taking kids to nearby museums, it all got richer and more intriguing. Here the ripples wid-

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ened—and circled back on themselves. For five years I worked in a program called DepARTures at the Columbus Museum of Art, visiting classrooms around the city and then guiding students on poetry-writing tours of the museum. But writing from art alone proved to be empty without first grounding their poems in metaphor and the physical world.

And everything was less exciting without the essential element of **play**; for all theory, all pedagogy, and all *experience* grows stale. I remember listening to yet another group of high school students at Cloverleaf—a wonderful class that had been involved from the start—read their “dream poems” (an assignment I had used many times but was beginning to tire of). Somewhere in the middle, I got a spark: “Let’s take all our poems,” I said, “and cut them up into some of their most surprising lines, then put those lines in this box, stir them around, and divide them up so we can put them back together again, sort of like an experiment in the collective unconscious.” When the combined poems that day proved so much more exciting than our individual efforts, I knew I’d accidentally opened a new door. If I could build assignments that were more like games, and encourage a sense of playfulness with words so that students weren’t just out to “write meaningful poems” but let the meaning emerge out of sound, imagery, and play, I was often stunned by how the writing blossomed. But why? Eventually, I sought out answers.

### **Four Interlocking Theories: Metaphor, Physicality, Visualization, and Play**

I went to philosophers, linguists, cognitive scientists, and poets themselves. Could these four skills be somehow related? My reading gradually suggested to me that they were. Here are some of the main supports upon which I base such a claim:

Step One: *Metaphor, so many theorists now insist, sits at the heart of how we speak, who we are, and how we visualize the world.* Robert Frost said so in the 1920s and 1930s—and folks like Max Black, Roman Jakobson, Paul Ricouer, George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Giles Fauconnier have since agreed with him in spades. In essence, they claim that how we structure our perceptions is rooted in metaphor, symbol, analogy, and sign—all versions of each other, and means, as Frost put it, “saying one thing in terms of another” (41). In his deceptively homespun way, he was both building a case for poetry and sparking a metaphor revolution that exploded over the next seventy years to reshape our view of the mind.

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When we weave in semiotics, the study of how all societies construct themselves around signs—and remember that signs are basically metaphors—we get the feeling that if we’re going to teach children how the world works, we’d better give them a solid grounding in metaphor, as Frost claimed. Such is the foundation upon which this book rests.

Step Two: Notice how with that subheading comes the implication that we are walking somewhere, perhaps crossing a stream, looking for stable stones upon which to balance. This simple realization leads to the second key idea: *That exploration in metaphor (which is poetry itself) necessitates building a connection of thought with physical experience.* Philosopher Mark Johnson says as much in his book *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*. “Through metaphor,” he contends, “we make use of patterns that obtain in our physical experience to organize our more abstract understanding” (xv). In so many ways, Frost’s own premises show up in Johnson’s words. The following sentence, for example, could easily have been written by Frost: “It is not possible to grasp the logic of [a] speaker’s argument without understanding the basic, irreducible metaphorical structure that holds it together” (5). Johnson goes so far as to maintain that *all* our metaphors grow out of our bodily, physical experience of the world. I’ll say more on his work later, but let’s suppose that he’s right. What would this mean for poetry? Wouldn’t our students’ poems get stronger if we involved physical experience in the process? That’s been my sense. Maybe that’s because we’re clueing them in to how the mind works. And what child, if free to explore, can resist becoming fascinated with the workings of his or her own mind? The theory behind this book contends: metaphor grows out of the mind interacting with the body and the physical world—and the physical world, when investigated with curiosity, opens up the workings of the mind.

Step Three: And the visual? W. J. T. Mitchell, leaning on Foucault, claims that “knowledge itself is a ‘system of archeological strata made of things and words, of bands of visibility and bands of readability’” (*Picture Theory*, 71). Images matter because they are crossroads of knowledge, the points where the visual and the verbal meet. To physicalize thought is to bring it onto the stage where we can see it as well as say it. Words abstract meaning from experience, but they can’t do so without setting up further experiences for us to enter—physically, visually, and by means of sign. Poems are routes into such visual/verbal play, almost as if they were a blend of essays (statements) and paintings (imagery).

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We allow students' writing to get richer when we offer them the means of entering that process.

Step Four: Are you following me? We're about to step onto the other bank, the premise of which is: *Societies are visual, physical, metaphor-based arenas of play—and the arts are the source where that play is enacted, where metaphors get unpacked and put together again, and where real change is possible*. One key source here is Samuel Taylor Coleridge's idea of "the Secondary Imagination," which "dissolves, dissipates, in order to recreate" (28) that which primary imagination puts in place (our worlds). A century or so later, Johan Huizinga, the father of modern play theory, claimed that "civilization arises and unfolds in and as play" (i) and calls poetry "a play function . . . that proceeds within the play-ground of the mind" (119). Such play is at the center of how societies operate . . . and if poetry is at heart playful, what then? Biologist Lewis Thomas calls us the word creatures of the planet. Don't we owe it to our kids to help them experience how play operates, how the mind is structured, and how metaphors *play with us*, if we are going to help them understand themselves and the world? In other words, don't we owe them poetry?

Such, in condensed form, is the theory within which this book operates. But don't let me tell you. Let the students show you. For more than theory, more than lesson plans, more than a narrative of one poet's journey through the schools, this book celebrates an array of student poems—and a way of *reading* student poems—which I hope can invite us all to reconsider what poetry can do, and what our students can teach *us* about rediscovering the world.

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# Poetry of Place:

## Helping Students Write Their Worlds



A published poet, Terry Hermesen now teaches creative writing and literature at Otterbein College. He taught poetry for 25 years as part of the Ohio Arts Council's Artists in

Education program, teaching students from kindergarten through high school, as well as senior citizens and other adults. He also has served on the faculty of the Antioch Writers Workshop and worked with teachers as part of the Ohio Arts Council's

Experience of Writing summer workshops. He has a BA in English from Wittenberg University, an MFA in poetry from Goddard College, and a PhD in art education from The Ohio State University.

isn't your typical book about teaching poetry. Sure, you'll find plenty of information on helping students learn the fundamentals of writing poetry. But you'll also find creative, innovative ways to engage students in poetry—even those students who might be initially resistant to poetry.

Through his extensive work with students in grade school through high school, poet-in-residence Terry Hermesen has learned how to foster a love of poetry by taking the learning out of the classroom—and into students' real lives. With numerous lessons and activities, Hermesen demonstrates how even the most mundane, everyday items—from “stuff” to food to photographs—can spark the imagination of student poets.

Truly teacher-tested, Hermesen's lessons draw on his extensive teaching career as well as a semester-long case study conducted in two high school English classes in Mt. Gilead, Ohio.

Activities include:

- Using literature and art to spark ideas for poems
- Transforming a routine field trip into a poetry-writing session
- Exploring nature and students' surroundings through a poetry night hike

Filled with student examples, this book illustrates that poetry doesn't have to be boring. It can help students develop interpretive and creative thinking skills while helping them better understand the world around them, wherever they may live.

ISBN 978-0-8141-3608-9



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