

PLACE AND SPACE IN LITERATURE

In Russian, English and in most languages there is not one, but several words to denote spatial relations, e. g. in English it's "place" and "space," in Russian – "пространство" and "место," in Arabic place means "المكان" and space means "الفضاء" which refers to cosmos. This or that word can be used depending on the context, and when we study literature and the fictional worlds created by authors it's important to differentiate between the categories of space and place. In this article I'm going to demonstrate the main differences between place and space in literature using poetry as an example, specifically Irish poetry.

In his essay *Towards Topopoetics: Space, Place and the Poem* Tim Creswell considers that space is a fundamental fact of the reality of the universe, while place is what humans make out of it. According to Heidegger, being is always placed – existence is thoroughly intertwined with place, or as Creswell puts it, "to be is to be *in place* – to be *here / there*" (T. Creswell. *Towards Topopoetics: Space, Place and the Poem*, 2017). If place refers to the area around the humans, space refers more to the cosmos, it means that it is wider than place in terms of the amount. "[S]pace is seen as limitless, empty, divisible and subject to mathematical forms of understanding while place is seen as bounded, full, unique and subject to forms of interpretive understanding" (*Towards Topopoetics*). Space becomes place through experience. This means that there is a deep relationship between place and culture, because through culture place can be identified.

In her book *Spatializing Culture: The Ethnography of Space and Place* (2017) Setha Low gives an overview of theoretical approaches to space and place by philosophers, social theorists, geographers, anthropologists, environmental psychologists and architects. She demonstrates that those who view place as the predominant construct rely on phenomenological theories and epistemologies and those who use space as the all-encompassing construct rely on Marxism, neo-Marxism, mathematics, geometry and historical materialism as their theoretical foundations. For example, Edward Casey who draws on the work of the phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that space is a modern concept preceded by the premodern notion of place. He suggests that "place is primary and the universal form of all human existence"

(qtd. in *Spatializing Culture*, p. 17). The French theoretician Henry Lefebvre viewed space as a social product and postulated that social space is made up of a conceptual triad of spatial practices, representations of space and representational spaces. Neil Smith focuses on geographical space or, more generally, “the space of human activity, from architectural space at a lower scale up to the scale of the entire surface of the earth” (qtd. in *Spatializing Culture*, p. 21). For environmental psychologists the notion of place includes spatial location, sense of place and a constellation of material things with specific sets of meanings, and for archaeologists the meanings that are attached to places are connected with the past and present experiences of people. Setha Low herself considers space to be the more general and abstract construct; it is preeminently social, produced by bodies and groups of people, as well as historical and political forces. Place for her is “inhabited and appropriated through the attribution of personal and group meanings, feelings, sensory perceptions and understandings” (*Spatializing Culture*, p. 32).

As for poetry, Tim Creswell suggests that poems themselves are “places” in the way that they are not simply about places, rather they are a species of place with a special relationship to what it is to be in (external) place. He argues that the act of building and dwelling which is a poem (according to Heidegger) starts with a blank white space. He says that “by writing poems we gather that space and give it form. <...> The space becomes margins and gaps between words even holes within letters.” (*Towards Topopoetics*, p. 323). The process of writing creates a top and a bottom, left and right, beginning and end. This means that space is not only a concept or something to analyze within a poem, but rather, it is the structure of the poem. The very idea of place is bound up with uniqueness and a sense of division from what lies beyond it.

Now I’m going to explain how space and place are reflected in the poems of W. B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney. In his poem *I am of Ireland* (1932) Yeats is speaking about his homeland – Ireland. The poem begins in the following way:

‘I am of Ireland,
And the Holy Land of Ireland,
And time runs on,’ cried she.
‘Come out of charity,
Come dance with me in Ireland.’
<...>

Yeats starts this poem by praising his country with its unique music, instruments and folklore. He feels a deep intimacy for his home, because he considers his country to be a holy land. He goes beyond to assert that Ireland as a people is like one man, which means they share a common love for their homeland, which has had a troubled history. In this poem, we can notice that the concept of space is more strongly present than place, because he talks about Ireland as a homeland in general. Yeats doesn’t describe the physical properties of the place that is Ireland, for him Ireland is more like a concept, a space filled with “holiness” and “dancing”. It is a land that is very old, and its civilization has deep roots. In fact, the opening lines of the poem come from the medieval Irish lyric poem:

Ich am of Irlonde,
Ant of the holy londe
Of Irlonde.

Goode sire, praye ich thee,
For of sainte charitee,
Com ant daunce wyt me
In Irlonde.

In the poem *The Barn* from Seamus Heaney's first book of poetry *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) Heaney talks about the place where he lived. His family had a farm and they worked on it, so he started describing his place in some poems:

Threshed corn lay piled like grit of ivory
Or solid as cement in two-lugged sacks.
The musky dark hoarded an armoury
Of farmyard implements, harness, plough-socks.

The floor was mouse-grey, smooth, chilly concrete.
There were no windows, just two narrow shafts
Of gilded motes, crossing, from air-holes slit
High in each gable. The one door meant no draughts.

<...>

In this poem Heaney describes the barn on the farm where he and his family lived and worked. His emotional attachment to the place is clear because of the many details that he uses to describe the barn. Here a strong sense of place is created, and Heaney tries to show how a simple place like the farm has its own beauty. At first glance, the barn seems to be a contradictory place with both bad and good qualities. It has no windows, only narrow shafts, but the light of the sun gets through these shafts. According to Tim Cresswell, place is "a gathering of things, practices and meanings in a particular location" (*Towards Topopoetics*), and this is what the poem describes. Also, we see that this place is filled with the speaker's childhood memories, even fears. So place is associated with the existence of memories (events), but space is a vacuum that exists in every place and it is not a condition related to events or memories. Here it is important to consider Seamus Heaney's essay *A Sense of Place* (1977) where he says: "It is this feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind, whether that country of the mind takes its tone unconsciously from a shared oral inherited culture, or from a consciously savoured literary culture, or from both, it is this marriage that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation" (S. Heaney. *A Sense of Place*). It is clear that for Heaney place has not only specific geographical but also cultural and psychological characteristics. This corresponds to Setha low's assertion that "subjectivities, inter subjectivities and identities transform space into places – the lived spaces of human and nonhuman importance" (*Spatializing Culture*).

In short, space and place as two concepts have a deep influence on poets and poetry. They play a fundamental role in forming the structure of the poem for the poet, because the poet interacts with his/her environment, and the poems of any poet refer not only to the abstract and universal idea of space but also contain descriptions of particular places associated with subjective, internal experiences. So although differences between space and place in literature seem to be very few, the examples from Yeats and Heaney show that these categories function differently in literature.