

A Sacred Place:
Exploring the Concept and Importance of
Place in the Human Experience

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A Sacred Place: Abstract

This curriculum unit explores the significance of place and how a place can impact one's development as an individual. While the term "place" might appear general or generic to students, this unit forces them to look more closely and see that a place consists of many things, some physical and some more abstract, perhaps even spiritual. Students will consider that a place is also the people that comprise it as well as the experiences in which these people participate. In fact, a place is as varied and dynamic as each person who lives there; places are perhaps sacred, and students will begin to consider whether they might have their own sacred place. Additionally, many have asserted that "we are products of our environment," and this unit attempts to investigate the extent of truth in that statement. In order to do so, students will approach the concept of place in literature and through their own lived experience.

Students will read Michael Patrick MacDonald's memoir, *All Souls*, in which the author revisits his childhood city, South Boston, recalling the people and events of his youth. As MacDonald remembers the joy and camaraderie, the hatred and the suffering, students will begin to see the complexity of place and will start considering all of the possible characteristics that make a place unique. Using *All Souls* as the starting point, students will then begin to investigate a special place in their own lives. While they are welcome to choose any significant place –

town/city of childhood home, town/city of favorite vacation spot, town/city of grandparents' house, etc. – students must focus on one particular place for the extent of the unit. Beginning more generally, students will investigate historical and cultural aspects of the place such as famous figures, important events, a common custom or tradition. Going further, students will ultimately reflect upon what role the particular place has played in their own lives.

Duration and Objectives

Duration: This unit can be taught over a 3 – 4 week time period, or 10 – 14 class periods, depending on student ability and the individual teacher's choice of pacing.

Objectives:

- Students will be able to compose an original definition of what “place” means to them
- Students will be able to evaluate the positive and negative impacts a place can have on an individual
- Students will be able to analyze a poem's commentary on the impact of place
- Students will be able to identify an important place in their own lives
- Students will be able to differentiate between abstract and concrete details
- Students will be able to employ concrete language in order to describe a specific place
- Students will be able to infer the impact of key people and events on a place

- Students will be able to recognize the customs and/or traditions of a place
- Students will be able to assess the impact of customs and/or traditions on a place over time
- Students will be able to explain the impact a tragic event has on a place
- Students will be able to synthesize the many aspects of place
- Students will be able to compare their own experience with place to that expressed in literature

Unit Outline

Lesson 1

- Brainstorm positive and negative impacts a place can have
- Analyze “We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks
- Hand out Michael Patrick MacDonald’s *All Souls*
- Homework: Read Chapters 1 and 2 of *All Souls*

Lesson 2

- Discuss the reading, relating back to Lesson 1’s discussion of positives and negatives
- In groups, define “place” and make a list of items comprising a given place

- Groups report out; combine answers and record to create a class definition of place and a class list of items comprising a given place
- Students begin to consider a place that has been important to them
- Homework: choose one important place from own life to focus on; read Chapter 3 of *All Souls*

Lesson 3

- Discuss the reading, focusing on details narrator uses to describe his new home
- Learn about using concrete language in order to “show vs. tell” in writing
- Check off that students have chosen a place to focus on
- Homework: make a thorough list of concrete details about the place you have chosen; read Chapter 4 of *All Souls*

Lesson 4

- Discuss the reading, focusing on the busing riots
- Provide additional resources on riots, such as “Eyes on the Prize” documentary
- Homework: research any historical incident that occurred in your place; read chapter 5 of *All Souls*

Lesson 5

- Discuss the reading, focusing on Whitey Bulger and his role in the community
- Provide additional resources on Whitey Bulger, such as excerpts from the book *Black Mass* and copies of news articles.

- Homework: research any famous figure from your place; read chapters 6 and 7 of *All Souls*

Lesson 6

- Discuss the reading, focusing on the various people, customs, and traditions that MacDonald describes
- Homework: write about some of the people, customs, and/or traditions from your place; read chapter 8 of *All Souls*

Lesson 7

- Discuss the reading, focusing on the many tragedies occurring in the community
- Homework: write about a tragedy or unfortunate event that occurred in your place; read chapter 9 of *All Souls*

Lesson 8

- Discuss the reading, focusing on MacDonald's relationship to and understanding of his place, South Boston
- Receive final essay assignment; go over in detail
- Homework: begin working on final essay; read chapters 10 and 11 of *All Souls*

Lesson Details

Lesson 1 Details

- Teacher will begin the unit by asking students two questions, which will guide today's lesson:
 - Does the place where a person lives have a more positive or negative impact on him/her?
 - What can make a place positive or negative?
- Teacher will draw a T-chart on the board, with one column for "positive" and one for "negative"
 - Teacher will write down comments generated by the students in the appropriate column
- Teacher will hand out the poem "We Real Cool" by Gwendolyn Brooks
 - Class will read the poem together
- Teacher will ask the students to now look at the poem considering the larger questions about place
 - Students will break into groups of 3 or 4 to read and discuss the poem
 - Students will look at the poem through the lens of the day's larger questions on place
 - Groups will report their thoughts to the class
 - Teacher can write student comments on board and/or connect to ideas they generated in the brainstorm

- Teacher will explain that the book we are about to read is the true story of one individual's relationship to a particular place, and that students need to think about the ideas explored today as they read
- Teacher will hand out *All Souls*
- Homework: Read Chapters 1 and 2

Lesson 2 Details

- Teacher will lead discussion on the first two chapters of *All Souls*
- Teacher will begin discussion by asking students to comment on the narrator's thoughts and/or feelings as he returns to South Boston
 - Teacher will relate this topic back to Lesson 1's discussion of positive and negative aspects of a place
 - Teacher will ask: what are some positives and negatives MacDonald recalls as he returns to South Boston?
- Students will break into groups (different than the ones from the previous lesson)
 - Students in groups will work together to define "place"
 - Students in groups will work together to make a list of items that they feel make up a place
 - Groups report out and teacher records ideas on board
 - Begin to create a class definition and class list
- Teacher will begin to synthesis ideas from the past two lessons, activities, and the reading
 - Teacher will note that clearly much goes into a place, and clearly MacDonald is showing us how a place can be both complicated and important for a person.

- Teacher will introduce the next phase of the unit in which students must choose a place of their own to focus on
 - Students will be asked to choose a place that has been complicated or important in their lives
 - Students may choose any significant place – town/city of childhood home, town/city of favorite vacation spot, town/city of grandparents’ house, etc.
 - Teacher will instruct students to take their time thinking about this because they will be investigating this place for the next few weeks
- Homework: Read Chapter 3 of *All Souls*; also, finalize choice of a place to investigate

Lesson 3 Details

- Teacher will begin discussion on Chapter 3, covering basic plot details
- Teacher will introduce concrete vs. abstract language and “show vs. tell” writing
 - Students will pair up to find examples of concrete descriptions in the reading
 - While students are working, teacher circulates and checks that all students have chosen a place from their own lives to investigate
- Student pairs will report out examples of concrete descriptions in the reading
 - Students in class will turn to examples in the book to read along
 - Students will work together as a class to determine which examples use concrete language and which do not
- Teacher will introduce the next part of the place unit, Place Assignment #1:
 - Students will make a thorough list of concrete details about the place they have chosen

- Teacher will direct students to use their senses – what do you see, hear, smell, feel, taste?
- Homework: Read Chapter 4 of *All Souls*; complete Place Assignment #1, make a list of sensory details at your place using concrete language to describe

Lesson 4 Details

- Teacher will begin discussion on Chapter 4, focusing on details about the busing riots
- Teacher will provide additional resources on the riots in order to give students a complete understanding
 - One great resource is the “Eyes on the Prize” documentary, which addresses the riots and events surrounding them in detail (roughly 40 minutes)
 - While students are watching the video, teacher will collect Place Assignment #1
- Teacher will ask students to think about and comment on what impact this historical incident might have on the place
 - Does this sort of event change the place?
 - Does it change the image of the place? Does this matter?
- Teacher will introduce the next part of the place unit, Place Assignment #2:
 - Students will research and describe any historical incident that happened in their chosen place
 - This need not be more than a page
 - Students will briefly consider the impact on the place and its people

- Students are welcome, but not required, to consider similarities and differences between the impact of the historical event in their place and the riots in South Boston
- Homework: Read Chapter 5; complete Place Assignment #2, research and write about a historical event that occurred in your place

Lesson 5 Details

- Teacher will begin discussion on Chapter 5, focusing on details about Whitey Bulger
- Teacher will ask students to describe Bulger's role in the community, reputation, influence, etc.
- Teacher will provide additional resources on Whitey Bulger in order to give students a complete understanding
 - Teacher will hand out excerpts from the book on Bulger, *Black Mass*,
 - Teacher will hand out copies of news articles about Bulger.
- Students will discuss the impact of having Bulger as the place's most famous figure
- Teacher will introduce the next part of the place unit, Place Assignment #3:
 - Students will research and describe any famous figure from their chosen place
 - This need not be more than a page
 - Students will briefly consider the impact of such a figure on the place
 - Students are welcome, but not required, to consider similarities and differences between the impact of the famous figure in their place and Whitey Bulger in South Boston

- Homework: Read Chapters 6 and 7; complete Place Assignment #3, research and write about a famous figure from your place

Lesson 6 Details

- Teacher will begin discussion on Chapters 6 and 7, focusing on the various people that comprise the place and the customs and traditions that occur there
 - Teacher will ask students to find descriptions of different individual's in MacDonald's place
 - Students will discuss why they think MacDonald includes these people – why are they important to the place?
 - Teacher will ask students to recall some of the different customs and traditions described in the chapter
 - Some possible customs/traditions: kids setting dumpster fires in order to get the fire department to come, MacDonald's mother leading Irish sing-alongs, new kids in the neighborhood having to get in at least one fight before being accepted, etc.
 - Students will discuss how these customs are important to the place
- Teacher will introduce the next part of the place unit, Place Assignment #4:
 - Students will write about some of the people, customs, and/or traditions from their place
 - This need not be more than a page or two
 - Students will explain their own thoughts and feelings on the people/customs/traditions

- Why are they important to the place?
 - Are they important to you?
- Students will explain the origins of customs/traditions, if they know them (if not they might consider the significance of this mysterious practice)
- Students are welcome, but not required, to consider similarities and differences between the people, customs, and traditions in their place with those in South Boston
- Homework: Read Chapter 8; complete Place Assignment #4, write about significant people, customs, and/or traditions from your place

Lesson 7 Details

- Teacher will begin discussion on Chapter 8, focusing on the many tragedies described such as kids dropping out of school, individuals battling drug addiction, and the deaths of friends and loved ones
 - Students will discuss what impact these events have on the place
- Teacher will ask students to consider whether any of these tragedies are related to- perhaps consequences of? – any of the earlier topics such as the historical incident of the riots, the famous figure of Whitey Bulger, the significant people and customs of the place
 - Students will break into group of 3 or 4 to discuss
 - Students will report out to class on the different connections they make
- Teacher will introduce the next part of the place unit, Place Assignment #5:
 - Students will write about a tragedy or an unfortunate event that occurred in their place

- This need not be more than a page or two
 - Students will explain their own thoughts and feelings on the tragedy or unfortunate event
 - What impact did this have on the atmosphere of the place?
 - What impact did this have on your own feelings about the place?
 - Students are welcome, but not required, to consider similarities and differences between the tragedy/unfortunate event in their place with one or more of those in South Boston
- Homework: Read Chapter 9; complete Place Assignment #5, write about a tragedy or an unfortunate event that occurred in your place

Lesson 8 Details

- Teacher will begin discussion on Chapter 9, focusing on MacDonald’s relationship to and understanding of his place, South Boston
 - Teacher will explain that Chapter 9 is titled “Exile” because in the chapter MacDonald leaves South Boston, “exiling” himself from his place
 - Students will discuss how leaving a place can give one different perspective on the place
 - Students will discuss the different thoughts and reflections MacDonald experiences in his exile
 - Teacher will revisit the first two questions of the unit with students, asking them to consider these questions through the lived experience of MacDonald at this point in the memoir:

- Does the place where a person lives have a more positive or negative impact on him/her?
 - What can make a place positive or negative?
- Teacher will hand out the final essay assignment
 - Teacher will explain that in this essay students must do what MacDonald does, synthesizing all of the different aspects of their chosen place
 - Students will use details and ideas from their previous place assignments as they see fit
 - Teacher will pose the ultimate questions for this final writing assignment:
 - What significance does your place have for you in your lived experience? How has it contributed—or not contributed—to your growth as a person?
- Homework: Read Chapter 10 and 11; begin working on final essay

List of Materials

Copy of Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "We Real Cool"

"Eyes on the Prize" – link to YouTube video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWHdcsGSYDA>

Place Assignment #1:

What place in your life have you chosen to focus on?

Make a thorough list of concrete details about the place you have chosen. What do you:

See

Hear

Smell

Feel

Taste

Place Assignment #2:

For this assignment, you will research and describe any historical incident that happened in your chosen place. Your actual writing does not need to be much longer than a page, but you must include specific and thorough details about the incident.

Once you have gathered information about the historical incident, consider: what impact might this incident have had – and perhaps continue to have – on your place and its people?

Extended thinking...

Consider similarities and differences between the impact of the historical event in your place and the riots in South Boston. You can write your thoughts or just reflect if you prefer.

Place Assignment #3:

For this assignment, you will research and describe any famous figure from your chosen place. Your actual writing does not need to be much longer than a page, but you must include specific and thorough details about the person.

Once you have gathered information about the famous figure, consider: what is the impact of such a figure on your place?

Extended thinking...

Consider similarities and differences between the impact of the famous figure in your place and Whitey Bulger in South Boston. You can write your thoughts or just reflect if you prefer.

Place Assignment #4:

For this assignment, you will write about some of the people, customs, and/or traditions from your place. Your actual writing does not need to be much longer than a page or two, but you must include specific and thorough details about the people/customs/traditions.

Brainstorm some of the different people, customs, and/or traditions. Then, consider: why are they important to the place? Are they important to you? Also, explain the origins of customs/traditions, if you know them (if not, consider the significance of this mysterious practice).

Extended thinking...

Consider the similarities and differences between the people, customs, and traditions in your place with those in South Boston. You can write your thoughts or just reflect if you prefer.

Place Assignment #5:

For this assignment, you will write about a tragedy or an unfortunate event that occurred in your place. Your actual writing does not need to be much longer than a page or two, but you must include specific and thorough details about the tragedy or unfortunate event.

Brainstorm some of the different tragedies/unfortunate events that have occurred in your place. Then, consider: what impact did this have on the atmosphere of the place? What impact did this have on your own feelings about the place?

Extended thinking...

Consider the similarities and differences between the tragedy/unfortunate event in your place with one or more of those in South Boston. You can write your thoughts or just reflect if you prefer.

Final Essay Assignment

For this final assignment, you must bring together all of your thinking and research about your place. You now know extensive details about the history of the place, the key characteristics of the place, and – perhaps most importantly – your own connections to and feelings about the place.

In a well-written, 3 – 4 page essay, please explain:

What significance does your place have for you in your lived experience? How has it contributed—or not contributed—to your growth as a person? Is your place a “sacred” place for you?

For this final essay, you should use details and ideas from your previous place assignments as you see fit.

Grading System

Place Assignment #1 =	20 points
Place Assignment #2 =	20 points
Place Assignment #3 =	20 points
Place Assignment #4 =	20 points
Place Assignment #5 =	20 points
Total =	100 points
Final Essay Assignment =	100 points
Total Weight of Unit =	<u>200 points</u>

Links to State Standards:

Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework

Reading Standard for Literature 6 – 12

Reading: Literature

2. Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

5. Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

6. Analyze a case in which grasping point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

Reading: Informational Texts

2. Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.

3. Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines *faction* in *Federalist No. 10*).

6. Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text.

Writing Standards 6 – 12

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

a. Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

d. Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

e. Provide a concluding statement

2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

a. Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information so that each new element builds on that which precedes it to create a unified whole; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

b. Develop the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.

c. Use appropriate and varied transitions and syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts.

d. Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary, and techniques such as metaphor, simile, and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic.

f. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation

3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

a. Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

b. Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

c. Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome (e.g., a sense of mystery, suspense, growth, or resolution).

d. Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

e. Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

MA.3.A. Demonstrate understanding of the concept of theme by writing short narratives, poems, essays, speeches, or reflections that respond to universal themes (e.g., challenges, the individual and society, moral dilemmas, the dynamics of tradition and change).

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. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1–3 up to and including grades 11–12 on page 67.)

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.

7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate;

synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Language Standards 6 – 12

1. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

2. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

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.

a. Vary syntax for effect, consulting references (e.g., Tufte’s *Artful Sentences*) for guidance as needed; apply an understanding of syntax to the study of complex texts when reading.

6. Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

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