Place in Poetry; Poetry in its Place

Alison Halliday

In poetry for children ideas of place play an important role. The possibilities begin, at one end of the spectrum, with those that seem to be a function of the need to ground the poem in reality or to give it substance. Just as the child expands her knowledge of place, so place in the poetry spreads out from that which is best known to the youngest child to embrace the less familiar places of the wider world. Thus poetry for the youngest children focuses on those intimate and domestic places of bedroom and kitchen and then moves outside to the garden, the neighbourhood and school. I would suggest that the unknown places that may be found in children's poetry are linked to worlds of fantasy and make-believe and are similarly delineated by clearly recognisable elements.

Place for the older child may be made unfamiliar and strange as a function of changes in time and geographical parameters. For the older child, and in more complex poetry, notions of place are found not only in the external dimensions of the child's world but also in the internal. That is, these poems may depend upon an emotional landscape or the exploration of thoughts and feelings. I have used the terms 'landscape' and 'exploration' deliberately in the preceding sentence because even when poetry for children is working at a complex level of abstraction or metaphorical significance, I would suggest that in most of this poetry, there is still a reference to, or dependence upon, place.

When place is used metaphorically it enables the poem to carry a double layer of meaning or significance. There is the literal meaning of the poem, and there is the implied, suggested or metaphoric meaning. This double significance of poetry is something that the child reader has to learn but, I would suggest, that it is so common in adult assumptions about poetry that it is rarely questioned. That is, poetry will say one thing and mean something more or different. The double significance underlines the perception of poetry as a more difficult text to understand than prose.

I would suggest that notions of place are perhaps more clearly defined in poetry for children because place is a repository for many of the ideologies which permeate poetry that is written and chosen for children. It is useful here to remind ourselves that most poetry for children is written and selected by an adult and for many children poetry is shared with a dual reader that is, more often than not, an adult. Styles (1998, 186) has commented that '[W]e must not forget that it is adults ... who buy children's poetry - and write, sell, publish and teach it'. In other words, notions of place are found in poetry for children for a complex bundle of reasons which should take account of the role and expectations of the wider adult society in linking the child to poetry. Place has ongoing ideological purposes in poetry for children.

Despite Styles' (1998) assertions that place in poetry has moved from the garden to the street, as argued in her recent work, these claims seem to be more applicable to poetry for the British child than for the child in the United States or in Australia. The reasons for this may be manifold but I would suggest that they reflect a more conservative attitude to most poetry for children in Australia and America. The poetry for the children of these two latter countries remains largely oriented to a rural or natural place. Furthermore, however this particular place is defined, it is not a place of wilderness untouched by humanity.

In essence, place in poetry for children is a civilised natural place, a not uncommon orientation as pointed out by Hollindale (1988) and Sarland (1996). This place is not built or constructed but it still reflects a cultural orientation in its necessary and identifying characteristics. Place may also carry a metaphoric weight. Place may give a sense of reality to the poem; it literally grounds the poem but it also reinforces the essential 'doubleness' of poetry signification. It is, of course, not the only element in poetry for children that may have these functions but, for the purpose of this paper, place will be the focus of interest.

It is against this position that I wish to examine the function of place in two recent verse novels. These are: *Out of the Dust* (1997) by Karen Hesse from USA and from Australia, *A place like this* (1998) by Steven Herrick. These two poems, perhaps because they are for the rather older child reader (especially the Australian one), reconcile and redefine two ideas of place. They bring the garden and the street together rather than seeing one replace the other or their being in opposition. In both poems the role

of place continues to be redefined, and in so doing place serves to explore some characteristics of what poetry for the young reader may be.

Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse tells the story of two years in the life of Billie Jo in the 1930s on a farm in the dust bowl of Oklahoma during the Depression. In this time Billie Jo's mother and her new baby son die after a horrific burning accident for which both Billie Jo and her father are partially responsible. Billie Jo has to come to an understanding of the death of her mother and baby brother, and the agonising burns on her hands which prevent her from playing the piano which is her greatest joy and her only escape from the harsh reality of drought and the Depression. As Billie Jo re-negotiates the relationship with her father, growing from a child to a young woman, she sees various members of the community both cope with, and fail against, the physical hardship of the dust-bowl conditions. There is a constant parallel between the physical and psychological health of Billie Jo and the condition of the land on which she, her family and the whole community are dependent.

Steven Herrick's *a place like this* traces a few months in the lives of Jack and Annabel as they escape from the post school routine of university and more study to have some time some where else just for themselves. They run out of money and petrol and find work on an apple orchard where a father and his children are coping with a meagre income and a teenage pregnancy. In helping to bring in the harvest, Jack and Annabel come to terms with each other, their future and the balance of responsibility they have for themselves and those with whom they are temporarily living. While this outline seems to high-light the differences between these two texts there are fundamental similarities between them, not least being the function of place.

Place has a similar function in these two poems. The orientation towards a rural rather than an urban place focuses on the necessity of growing a crop for survival, wheat or apples. The characteristics of the two places in the country are contrasted with the nearest towns. Civilisation is attractive but it is in the home in the country where the important values are learnt and important decisions are made. In both texts nature is shown as something unpredictable and often antagonistic. It is something that people have to learn to understand and work with, but it is also a force with the potential for misfortune and destruction.

I wish to explore these depictions of place through two characteristics of poetry which are clearly exemplified in these two texts. The first of these is through the self-reflexive nature of poetry, and the second is the role of intertextuality.

It is virtually a truism of critical comments on poetry that the nature and characteristics of poetry are defined, examined and discussed through poems. Both these texts contain two types of poetry: the verse-novel or narrative poem and the lyric poem. Thus it is possible to ask what each of these forms of poetry contributes to the role of place in these texts. As suggested earlier, these poems create certain ideologies of place, and the role of place in these poems suggests certain possible parameters of poetry for children. Whatever the particular nature of the place, in many of the separate lyrics that make up the whole, place has a dual function: it is both realistic and metaphoric. The realism of the descriptions of place give a precise locality for the people and emphasises the physical hardship of their lives, battling either drought or isolation. The repeated and shifting positions of the respective places, as the poems accumulate, means that the ideas of place assume a resonance that is metaphorical. That is, the significance of place is a function of what is associated with it, or suggested by it, as well as its actual meaning. The weight of each accumulates with each lyric being added to the ones before; so that there is an ongoing commentary about the continually shifting and developing significance of place. In other words, the lyric comments on a possibility of what poetry may be but the whole text offers both a multiplicity of options as well as one that frames or sums up all of these.

This self-reflexiveness is suggested initially in the title of both texts. *Out of the Dust* refers to the dust which permeates the lives of these people but while this is essentially destructive it may also be seen as an enabling force. The place of this poem is reduced to its most basic

element of dust, of dirt, or earth; but out of it come positive and even redemptive experiences and a greater understanding of the self. The poem 'Not too Much To Ask' shows the courage of these people:

We haven't had a good crop in three years,
not since the bounty of '31
and we're all whittled down to the bone these days,
even Ma, with her new round belly,
but still
when the committee came asking,
Ma donated:
three jars of apple sauce
and
some cured pork,
and a
feed-sack nightie she'd sewn for our coming baby
(p.16)

They are sustained by a belief in better times ahead:

'Well, it rains enough,' Ma says,
'now and again,
to keep a person hoping.
But even if it didn't
your daddy would have to believe.
It's coming on spring,
and he's a farmer.'
('Debts', p.27)

Even when times are at their worst and their whole selves are covered in dust Billie Jo's parents show a stoic acceptance: 'if he had cried,/ his tears would have been mud too,/ but he didn't cry./ And neither did Ma' ('Fields of Flashing Light', p.33). This stoicism is seen as a function of the hardship of this place. Billie Jo's parents cannot and will not leave but she thinks of other places where the dust does not dominate. But these places are only far-off abstractions: a 'distant place/ of green vines and promises'. The wild boy of the road, some settlers, and her friend Mad Dog Craddock all leave, but in so doing they leave behind not only the place which has created them but part of themselves: 'Dust rose each place his foot fell,/ leaving a trace of him/ long after he'd gone' ('The Visit', p.169). After the death of her mother, Billie Jo also attempts to escape, jumping on a train travelling west but she realises that this solves nothing:

Getting away,
it wasn't any better.
Just different.
And lonely.
Lonelier than the wind.
Emptier than the sky.
More silent than the dust,
piled in drifts between me
and my
father.
('Homeward Bound', p.204)

While *Out of the Dust* is set in a specific historical period, the experiences of Billie Jo are given a universality which is largely a function of the focalisation of the text through her eyes. This text does not present a nostalgic view of another time and place but rather it uses the structures of historical realism to explore more universal ideologies about acceptance, the need for love and the importance of place in enabling growth towards autonomy and acknowledgment of mutual needs. The text shows both the actual reality of this place and the use of place as a metaphor for the lives of the people. Many of the poems offer one aspect of place but the accumulation of the separate lyrics ultimately creates a mosaic of separate and developing ideas of place and what it means to the different characters:

The way I see it, hard times aren't only
about money,
or drought,
or dust.
Hard times are about losing spirit,
and hope,
and what happens when dreams dry up
('Finding a Way', p.225)

Thus as the reader progresses through *Out of the Dust* there is a growing awareness of the hardship and problems created by the drought and the dust but also that the dust, and its opposite, the flowering apple trees, has a significance for the emotional well-being of these people. The character of the place demands that their lives be

lived in a certain way but it also echoes the inner state of those lives.

This self-reflexive function of poetry, the ability to describe the physical reality of a place and simultaneously have a metaphorical weight for the lives of the people in that place, is also seen in *a place like this*. Here the place is one where Jack and Annabel find themselves almost by accident as they escape for a while from their families' expectations. For them the farm and apple orchard is a place they have escaped to, a place where their dreams of independence and no responsibility may be allowed to occur. But for those who live on this farm the place is an isolated orchard of hard work and loneliness. The title reinforces the notion that this place has a different reality and a different metaphorical function for all those who live there. These shifting positions are explored through the different first person narrators of the individual poems. Unlike the representation of place in Oklahoma there is no absolute *this-ness* of place here, but rather a plurality of shifting viewpoints. The layering effect created by the sum of a number of short, independent but related poems creates a matrix of potential ideas about place that accumulates throughout this text.

The gap between the vision and the reality is summed up by Annabel:

> *You watch.*
> *First week, we'll be out of money,*
> *sleeping near a smelly river, eating cold baked beans out of a can.*
> *The car will have a flat battery*
> *and Jack will be saying something like,*
> *'Isn't this great. Back to nature.*
> *Living off the land. Not a care in the world.'*
> *Jesus Christ.*
> ('Annabel on Jack', pp.13-14)

An alternative is focalised through Jack's vision of perfection after accepting the job in the orchard:

> *A beer or two and I'm set for life.*
> *A beer or two and Annabel's lips*
> *and her arm resting on my stomach*
> *and I hope never to leave*
> *the late afternoon*
> *of tired muscles, channel water*
> *and this quiet land.*
> ('This quiet land', p.25)

Both Annabel and Jack come to their separate, and then shared, realisations that they are achieving more than just an income:

> *I'm glad we came here.*
> *I work extra hard in the orchard,*
> *not for the money anymore,*
> *but for something I can't explain.*
> *Something worth more than money.*
> ('Jack', p.64)

The text offers a more complete analysis of Jack as he comes to realise his obligations are greater than just accepting the job. Against his own needs Jack comes to realise how their lives are impinging upon the family members who live on the farm: 'Emma deserves help,/ like George needed help with picking' ('Jack's plans', p.75).

At the farm live George and his three children. The eldest, Emma, is pregnant, with the father unknown, and she has left school early to have the baby. Their mother has not died but left them all with no warning. The importance of the harvest and the need to look after his children give substance to George's life:

> *'I'm glad she left me the kids.*
> *I'd be lost without them.*
> *Lost and bitter.*
> *With them here, I'm only bitter.'*
> ('George', p.50)

Just as Billie Jo tried to escape from the dust so Emma dreams of moving to the city but she cannot tell if it is 'a dream,/ or a nightmare' ('Emma's Dream', p.57). But while she sees the city as a place 'where I can get lost,/ get lost for good' ('Emma and the apples', p.88) she comes to accept that when she does go it has to be not as an escape from the reality of farm and baby but as part of her

life over which she has gained control. She does not wish to repeat the action of her mother:

> *And me getting out of here,*
> *my way,*
> *when I'm ready*
> *with my child.*
> *Me, getting out but*
> *not like Mum,*
> *running so fast*
> *she's too scared to look back.*
> *Me, getting out but*
> *being able to come back.*
> *Me and my home.*
> *('A young orchard', p.121)*

Thus both these texts create and reflect upon ideologies of place in which the reality of both places imposes upon the people but also enables them to achieve a greater understanding of themselves and their relationship with their place. The function of place, as both literal or real, and as a metaphor of the lives and hopes of the people, is an image of the double significance of poetry itself.

The second characteristic of these poetry texts which creates a range of meaning for place is their intertextuality. While self-reflexiveness and intertextuality are being discussed separately these two elements impinge upon each other, creating a layering effect that reinforces the interaction of poetry and place. Both these texts are intensely intertextual. This occurs in two ways and I wish to outline these by concentrating on only one element, which is the use made of apple trees in each text. The apple trees come to represent the essence of each place.

Apple trees are redolent with echoes of earlier poetry, from Sappho to Keats and to Frost. Apples also come bearing a cultural significance of which, I would suggest, it would be unusual for a reader to be in total ignorance. Bible stories, classical myths, fairy stories and even social epigrams ('an apple a day keeps the doctor away') foreground the potential significance of apples. Apples come bearing a weight of meaning which may be summed up as representing the essence of fruitfulness. They are a food and must be harvested but they are also significant of the whole year's harvest; they are a promise that winter will be survived; they are something both essential and exotic; they are representations of civilisation and of survival. In the texts considered here the apple trees are the essence of both the dust and the orchard; they are exotic and precious but also ordinary and edible. An apple is both sensual and sensible.

The central importance of apple trees in these texts, and their multiple and varied positions in the poems develops the use of apples within each text and underlines the possible connections to apples in a wider cultural matrix. In both texts the apple trees not only have a reality but the function of intertextuality demands that the reader creates a meaning that is more than just that of 'apples'. In other words, the meaning of apples is not only created within the poetry but it is found, as Culler (1997) suggests, in the gap between these poems and all the literary, social and political texts that have created a whole ideology of apples. In both texts the use of short lyric poems reinforces this 'otherness' of apples with a complex web of repeated ideas and motifs that layer, reinforce and sometimes contradict each other. This is more obvious in the Australian text where there are multiple voices and perspectives.

The significance of the apple trees also evolves as a result of what may be called 'intra-textuality'. As mentioned earlier, these texts consist of a number of short lyric poems (80 in *a place like this* and 111 in *Out of the Dust*) which link to create a verse novel. The lyrics function as separate poems but the accumulation of the number of lyrics means that meaning becomes a function of the connection of each lyric to any or all of the others as well as to the progressive whole. The chronology of the texts emphasises the need to read each on its own and against all and any one of the poems that precede it.

Thus the apple trees are a means of focusing on the intertextuality of these two texts while they also function in the intra-textuality. It is the successive references to apple trees, the repetitions and variations that build up not only the various connotations of apple trees but also the link between the trees and the greater place. Apple trees and apples are all that they might be but each also creates metaphoric possibilities in both the texts. To put it most

simply, the intertextual meaning of apples for both texts is similar but the differences are due to the intra-textual effects.

In *Out of the Dust* Billie Jo's mother has nurtured two apple trees against the drought and the dust:

> *And Daddy says,*
> *'What about those apple trees of yours, Pol?*
> *You think they are?*
> *Nothing needs more to drink than those two.*
> *But you wouldn't hear of leveling your apples,*
> *would you?'*
> ('Give Up on Wheat', p.41)

To Billie Jo and to her mother the apple trees are beautiful and fruitful. They represent all that the farm, the father's place, is not able to be. Through 'Apple Blossoms' the apple trees are shown in their real and in their metaphoric significance:

> *Ma*
> *has been nursing these two trees*
> *for as long as I can remember.*
> *In spite of the dust*
> *in spite of the drought,*
> *because of Ma's stubborn care,*
> *these trees are thick with blossoms,*
> *delicate and*
> *pinky-white.*
>
> *My eyes can't get enough of the sight of them.*
> *stand under the trees*
> *and let the petals*
> *fall into my hair,*
> *a blizzard*
> *of sweet-smelling flowers,*
> *dropped from the boughs of the two*
> *placed there*
> *in the front yard by Ma*
> *before I was born,*
> *that she and they might bring forth fruit*
> *into our home,*
> *together.*
> ('May 1934', p.43)

From the annual crop of apples Ma is able to make 'pies/ and sauce/ and pudding/ and dumplings/ and cake/ and cobbler' ('Apples', p.45) even when the wheat is blown away in the dust storms. While the apples might sustain life for this family they also reflect the life of and within the mother. On the day of her death, while giving birth to Billie Jo's baby brother, the grasshoppers came and 'ate every leaf,/ they ate every piece of fruit./ Nothing left but a couple of apple cores,/ hanging from Ma's trees' ('Devoured', p.68). The baby brother dies also.

The land and her father 'have a hold on each other' ('Roots', p.75) but Billie Jo does not find contentment until she and her father have come to a new understanding of each other, and of this place. So they change from the individual isolation of 'He stares at me/ as I empty the wash water at the roots / of Ma's apple trees' ('Outlined by Dust', p.111) to the acceptance represented by their shared memories of a bowl filled with apples As they walk around the farm they both see that

> *the pond is holding its own,*
> *it will keep Ma's apple trees alive,*
> *nourish her garden,*
> *help the grass around it grow*
> ('November Dust', p.219)

Eventually Louise comes and shares their lives in that place. It is no coincidence that her acceptance into their lives by Billie Jo is mirrored by an association with apples but one that differs from that of her mother:

> *She brings apples in a sack,*
> *perfect apples she arranges*
> *in a bowl on the shelf,*
> *opposite the book of poetry*
> ('Finding a Way', p.227)

In *Out of the Dust* the apple trees are something beautiful and special, representing a luxury and an ideal rather than something essential. On the other hand, the apple trees in *a place like this* are the basis of the productivity of the farm but they too develop a metaphorical resonance. Jack and Annabel are hired to help with the harvest:

> *...Because I got fifty acres of ripe apples*
> *and a town full of unemployed kids that*

hate the sight of them, that's why.
And my kids and I can't pick fifty acres
in two years, much less two months.
('The ride', p.18)

but George insists that they are carefully picked, and not just because they are his livelihood. The nurturing image of George and the apples is echoed in his love for his children and it contrasts sharply with the inexplicable desertion by the wife and mother:

George loves his apples so much
he can't bear to just pick them.
He plucks them quick, yet soft,
places them in his bag
and when it's full
leans over the bin and releases the latch.
('The Shed', p.26)

The apple trees, the farm and ideas about place; and the inter-connectedness of Jack and Annabel who happen to find themselves there with the people whose home and livelihood is represented by the apple trees, is summed up in 'The dew-wet grass':

The best time is early morning
with the dew-wet grass,
the hills shouldered in mist,
everything quiet.
Annabel and I climb each ladder,
pick a cold apple
and crunch away.
The juice so sharp and tart
it hurts my teeth.
We sit like this,
watching the crows in the fir trees,
the silver-eyes darting among the fruit,
listening for George's tractor
with the empty bins rattling,
calling to be filled.
Annabel, the mist, a farm apple, the birds,
and an orchard waking up.
(p.40)

But Emma hates the loneliness and the unchanging life on the farm. She sees it as an inescapable surfeit of 'apples, apple pie, baked apples, apple juice,/ apple jam for God's sake' ('Screwed', p.35) and, like Billie Jo, she longs to escape. But she too comes to realise that, although 'twenty kilometres away,/ I can still smell them', the apples represent the essence of the place. At the same time, she acknowledges that it is within herself that she has to find some peace and control over her life. As she observes the apple-picking, the lives of Jack and Annabel, and her developing pregnancy, Emma comes to realise a number of things about herself and her family which are intrinsically bound to this place and to the apples:

I go walking to watch the trees
and the sun's light filtering through them.
I talk to my baby.
I describe the farm
I tell him about the apples
and the blossoms in spring
and the Paterson's curse that covers the hills
and the birds gorging on rotten fruit.
I tell him everything
as we walk.
Maybe so he won't be disappointed
being born into
a place like this.
('A place like this', p.92)

When Jack and Annabel leave the orchard Emma realises that she can either stay or she can leave but she will take the place and the significance of the apples with her: 'finding another orchard/ a young orchard/ and making it ours.' ('A young orchard', p.121).

In *a place like this* the apples are a metonym for the orchard, and apple and place develop a separate significance for each of the characters. But for all of them, as for Billie Jo and her father, an acceptance of the reality of place and its potential significance has to come from within the individual.

Thus these texts reinforce the on-going and intrinsic association of place and the structures of childhood, with the parallel of the metaphor of apple trees and the growth to autonomy of the young people. In and through these poems intertextuality not only defines and empowers the places within these texts but it also validates the self

reflexive nature of poetry. The ideology of place in these poems reinforces the idea that through interaction with something natural it is possible to come to an understanding of oneself.

The second part of the title for this paper is 'poetry in its place'. I wish to conclude by commenting briefly on what I intended by using this phrase. First, it deliberately suggests that there is a place for poetry; but it also implies that poetry should know what its place is, and stay there.

There is no doubt that poetry has become an endangered species; and not only poetry for children. Styles (1998) considers that in the last few years there has been a real revival of poetry in Britain but this does not hold true for Australia, and I suspect that it is also not true for the United States.

While it is possible to cite examples of wonderful poetry written especially for children, to have experienced stimulating workshops with poets and have seen teachers of poetry inspiring a classroom of children I would suggest that these are exceptions rather than the rule. The place for poetry has become largely confined to the classroom, especially in high school, and there it is usually the poor relation in the literature family.

I do not think that this is a position to be accepted or one which we should be complacent about. I think that poetry has to be moved out of the pedagogic frame and back into the whole world of literature for children (of all ages). Poetry needs to be able to be read and heard as part of our day to day life. It should be there in our papers, our magazines; it should be part of our library borrowings and shared amongst peers and family members. It must be enjoyed before it can be discussed, analysed and criticised. It should become commonplace in all of our reading lives.

I would suggest that the two books of poetry on which I have based this brief examination of place in poetry show a possible future direction. The Australian poet Dorothy Porter, who has written three verse-novels, recently said that she preferred to call this form a 'verse narrative'. In doing this she felt that the poets were reclaiming the power of story; taking some small part of it back from the novelists and prose writers. It could be argued that the verse narrative is a compromise between poetry and the novel but I would suggest that the verse novel is a valid poetic discourse and one that is significant for having an implied adolescent reader. Herrick's *a place like this* offers the adolescent reader a strong narrative using relevant issues while at the same time it is not afraid to foreground the role of poetry. This may well be an unusual combination for the young reader but its success lies in renewing and reshaping the partnership of poem and story.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Alison Halliday is currently completing her Ph.D. dissertation at Macquarie University in Sydney on the ideology of Australian poetry anthologies for children. She is also interested in life stories and the transmutation of texts.