



Sense of Place in Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*

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Abstract

The Temptations of Big Bear by Rudy Wiebe focuses on Big Bear's struggle against the European settlers who take over the land inhabited by the Natives for thousands of years. This impressive depiction of the Western Canadian history is revitalised using vivid portrayal of Canadian prairies highlighting 'place' as a crucial aspect in this novel. This paper, therefore, aims to highlight the various portrayals of place in the novel *The Temptations of Big Bear* before progressing to examine the relationship between the place and its inhabitants depicted in the novel. In order to attain these two objectives, two concepts are applied in this study - place (physical setting) and sense of place (territorial bonding). The findings of this study reveal that the places portrayed in the novel can be classified into two main categories: landscape and dwelling place of buffalo. Then, with the concept of sense of place, the relationship between the Natives and each of these places is foregrounded. Most importantly, this study reveals that the relationship between the place and the inhabitants are bidirectional.

Key words: Place, Sense of Place, Canadian Prairies, Bidirectional Relationship

1. Introduction

In a conversation about literature, place, language and faith between Jean Janzen, John Ruth and Rudy Wiebe, which was staged as a plenary session of a conference, John Ruth (2006) said that,

I remember lying in bed as a kid, ten, twelve years old, and wondering. I was right next to the wall, and it was made of plaster. Now plaster is not interesting; it's white, it's inert, and you don't know who put it there. I began to wonder who did put it there, and why, and why was I there, along that creek, that farm, with people who spoke two languages. I began to conclude that unless you're asking why, you're not awake. And therefore whatever place it is, it becomes a kind of sacred journey to encounter it. (cited in Kasdorf, 2008, p.78)

From the quotation above, it is evident that place is an important aspect to investigate. *The Temptations of Big Bear* is a suitable novel for research focusing on this aspect. This is due to the fact that Wiebe depicts the Canadian prairies which the Natives have lived for thousands of years realistically in *The Temptations of Big Bear*. Thus, this paper proposes to investigate the place portrayed in Wiebe's novel *The Temptations of Big Bear*.

In addition, the novel, *The Temptations of Big Bear* not only encompasses the Western Canadian history, but also the whole richness of the Plains culture. Most importantly, the giant circle of the prairie horizon is portrayed vividly with a permeation of a sense of place and time in *The Temptations of Big Bear* which is suitable for the analysis of place and more specifically, sense of place.

In order to analyse the portrayal of these two concepts in the novel, this paper aims to: firstly, highlight the various depictions of place in the novel, and then investigate the relationship between human and place. By attaining these two objectives, both the place and sense of place portrayed in the novel are foregrounded.

2. Literature Review

The concept of place has evolved after decades of arguments and debates. Hence, in this section of present paper, the concepts of place postulated by several scholars are discussed. In addition, since this paper aims to analyse the portrayal of sense of place in the novel, this concept is also discussed.

2.1 Place

Relph (1976) uses the research method called "a phenomenology of place" to investigate the complexity and depth of place (p.4-7; cited in Seamon & Sowers, 2008, p.44). Since phenomenology is the interpretive study of human experience which aims to examine human events, situations, experiences and meanings that take place in daily life unconsciously, Relph approaches the concept of place by questioning the taken-for-granted nature of place and its importance in human life and experience. In greater detail, Relph (1976) focuses on two main things in examining place

in depth, that is, human's identity of place and human's identity with place (p.45; cited in Seamon & Sowers, 2008, p.45). Regarding human's identity of place, Relph explains that it is the "persistent sameness and unity which allows that [place] to be differentiated from others". Furthermore, this persistent identity is made up of three main components, namely (a) the physical setting of the place; (b) the place's activities, events and situations; and (c) the individual and group meanings formed through human's intentions and experiences regarding the place. On the other hand, Relph clarifies that human's identity with place is the degree of involvement, concern and attachment an individual or a group has for a particular place. In other words, when one is with a place, one is inside the place, safe, not threatened, enclosed and not exposed. In short, Relph suggests that only by combining both human's identity of place and human's identity with place, the concept of place can be understood thoroughly.

However, Tuan (1977) argues that place can be defined in various ways (p.161; cited in Cresswell, 2008, p.56). Firstly, place is defined as any stable object that captures one's attention because when one's eyes pause at points of interest of a panoramic scene, each of these pauses creates an image of place that looms large momentarily in one's views. Secondly, place is defined as a subtle mixture of self-aware reflection and world of habitual action due to the fact that one knows a place in depth either by participating in it unconsciously or by relating to the place with something visible, like monuments. In addition, according to Tuan (1977), place should be understood temporally because he believes that a true sense of place takes time to establish (cited in Cresswell, 2008, p.56). Hence, this leads to the last definition of place suggested by Tuan, that is, place can be a method to make time visible since one gets to know the past or history through places as the representations of memories. Overall, Tuan's definitions of place are very diverse.

Despite these, Oakes (1997) starts to clarify the term "place" by establishing what place is not (p.510). Firstly, Oakes points out that place is not (organic) "community". He further explains that place is not "locality" and also not a local version of "region or "nation" because these terms give a distinct territorial quality, which leads to sense of identity that is only an imagined abstraction. On the contrary, place consists of two components, namely, meaningful identity and immediate agency (Oakes, 1997, p.510). Thus, place is not only a site where individual performs meaningful actions which gives them meaningful identity but also where a sense of territorial bonding is formed and overcomes the imagined abstraction.

2.2 Sense of Place

The sense of territorial bonding between the inhabitants (including human and wildlife) and physical setting can be documented as another concept called sense of place. Since place centres on the involvement of human presence, as pointed out by Awang and Wan Yahya (2010, p.15), sense of place is an important concept to be focused on and clarified.

Sense of place has two meanings in geography discipline (Simpson-Housley & Williams, n.d., p.2). Firstly, it is defined as a feature of a place that is remarkable or indelible and have high "imageability" (Lynch, 1960, 1972; cited in Simpson-Housley & Williams, n.d., p.2), for example the sacred or symbolic place such as Stonehenge and Mecca. Another definition of sense of place is the connection between the physical setting and the inhabitants of the physical setting (Simpson-Housley & Williams, n.d., p.2). For instance, home is where a strong sense of being "in place" is felt (Raffan, 1993, p.4; cited in Simpson-Housley & Williams, n.d., p.3). Hence, topophilia, which means love of place might be born due to strong sense of place. Topophilia can be seen in two levels: (1) national level that leads to imperial patriotism and (2) local level that leads to local patriotism such as attachment to hometown and neighbourhood (Simpson-Housley & Norcliffe, 1992, p.5; cited in Simpson-Housley & Williams, n.d., p.3). Furthermore, local patriotism might be due to some personal history of the inhabitants with the place, for instance, significant biographical events like birth. Thus, a sense of place is also formed between the individual and the place through historical association (Simpson-Housley & Williams, n.d., p.3).

Moreover, sense of place is related to three qualities postulated by Lopez (1997): (1) paying intimate attention (2) a storied relationship to a place and (3) living in some sort of ethical unity with a place (para.15). Lopez (1997) explains that when one is intimate with the place, which history one is familiar with, and having an ethical conversation with the place, the place will not only know that one is there, but also will feel one and not abandon, cut off or forgets one (para.15). This can also be interpreted as a version of sense of place where the connection between the inhabitants and the place is bidirectional rather than only the inhabitants feel the place.

3. Place and Sense of Place

By referring to the three scholars' definitions of place above, the concept of place that is applied in present paper is established. It is made up of two main components: (1) physical setting and (2) representations of identity. Regarding the first component of place, place is seen as a location that has a unity which cannot be found in other locations. Furthermore, place is observed as a location where activities, events and situations of the inhabitants take place either unconsciously or subconsciously and leads to the creation of habitual action and history. Then, the second component of the place comes in. With the habitual action and history, place becomes a physical setting that gives attachments, involvement, meaningful memories and most importantly identities, which then results in forming a sense of territorial bonding not only between the inhabitants but also between the inhabitants and the physical setting.

In present study, sense of place is treated as the linkage between the place and its inhabitants. This linkage is formed through various ways, for instance distinct features or symbolic meanings of the place that is unique to the inhabitants or biographical events and historical association that is important to the inhabitants. However, what is crucial about the

concept sense of place applied in present study is that the linkage between the place and its inhabitants is bidirectional rather than merely one way.

4. Depictions of Place and Relationship between Place and the Inhabitants in *The Temptations of Big Bear*

By applying the two concepts, place and sense of place discussed, the novel is analysed in two stages to attain the objectives proposed. Firstly, various depictions of place in *The Temptations of Big Bear* are identified by using the concept place. These various depictions of place are classified into two main categories, landscape and dwelling place of buffalo. Then, the relationship between human and each of these places is foregrounded by using the concept sense of place.

4.1 *The Landscape and Human*

4.1.1 Under the Sun

By referring to the concept of place applied in present paper, place is seen as a physical setting that has a unity. Since the Canadian prairie is portrayed as a united location under the sun, as shown in the following quotation, it is considered a place:

Through the clear darkness light became, creeping over the land's black shoulders until the river rose on the valley like the serpent that lurks swivelled in the earth, misting upwards, drifting into deeper blue. In the south the bare cones of hills would be forming black above the curl of willows along the creek and before him gradually the naked river shone through its mist, green within moving white; the edge of the sun came levelling the worn land... (Wiebe, 2000, p.153)

Through the eyes of Big Bear, the land, river, valley, hills, willows and creek are united under the sun.

In addition, place is a physical setting where activities of the inhabitants take place and leads to the creation of habitual action and history. Since Big Bear and his people perform spiritual dances under the sun and include the sun as an important component in the ritual, the notion that under the sun is a place is strengthened. These are evident in the following quotations:

Big Bear ... singing the Thirst Dance Song that had been revealed to him, which he alone could sing:

the sun helps me to stand

the sun helps me to walk

(Wiebe, 2000, p.155)

Perhaps it was the look into the sun, so overpoweringly Sun that during the altar building he was physically blind but in the ceremony he felt lit by light so sheer it was nothing outside himself, purely and completely himself. He danced now with that round black sun centred in his eyes on the Tree, a corona of light licking around its edge with sweetgrass burning. (Wiebe, 2000, p.162)

Furthermore, in these two quotations, another component that made up place, that is, representations of identity is foregrounded. In these two quotations, it is evident that place gives involvement to Big Bear and his people. Both Big Bear's community and the place, under the sun involve in the Thirst Dance Song. Thus, they represent the identities of place and inhabitants, which is a form of sense of territorial bonding between the physical setting and inhabitants.

Thus, sense of place or the linkage between the place, under the sun and its inhabitants, Big Bear's community is formed. This sense of place is a distinct feature between the place, under the sun and the inhabitants, Big Bear's community. In contrast, the white settlers do not have this linkage to the place, under the sun, as shown in the following quotations:

... up the slopes around were five or six hundred Indians ... Sometimes they seemed to move through the sun directly. The Governor ... now faced straight into the lowering sun... He shook his head; the outlined smile on the old face before him smudged, wavered, ... shifting to his left... the Governor had cut off the sun against the chief's raven headdress... (Wiebe, 2000, p.9-10)

The Indians seemed to move through the sun directly suggests that they are comfortable under the sun; while, the Governor did not like his position of facing even only the lowering sun. The Governor represents the white settlers in Canadian prairie that do not have the bonding with the place. Under the sun, the Governor is irritated and wavered. His conduct of cutting off the sun against the chief's raven headdress postulate that the white settlers do not have linkage with the place and this notion of sense of place is only unique to the Indians.

Furthermore, one of the crucial criteria about sense of place, which is bidirectional linkage rather than merely one way connection, is also portrayed between under the sun and Big Bear's community. This is reflected in the following quotation:

"The Sun will warm you."

So she took off her clothing. . . . the sun bulged over her stark in the livid sky and heat began weaving loops of warmth about her. She felt herself becoming again ... the curves of his massive chest ablaze above her, ... singing her suspended while Sun devoured her warmer and warmer until she was suffused. Herself; completely; open and radiant. Held in his chant, rocked in his radiance. (Wiebe, 2000, p.318-9)

Big Bear's massive chest ablaze suggests that while Big Bear is an inhabitant under the sun, he is also like the sun burning quickly and strongly, bringing warm to the place under the sun by protecting the prairie his community live for thousands of years throughout the novel. Hence, this reflects that the sense of place between Big Bear and under the sun is bidirectional.

4.1.2 Woods

One of the reasons the woods portrayed in the novel are also considered as place is these woods are physical settings that have the characteristic of unity. For instance, "[o]n a small rise he stopped; within the wide loops of the river across its wide valley stood thick, dark spruce, and birch and poplar yellow-green in fresh, glistening leaves" (Wiebe, 2000, p.155-6). By picturing this quotation in mind, the various trees, river and valley are united as one, the wood.

The second reason is habitual actions are taken place in the woods. For example,

The eight scouts left their horses and advanced on foot, stealthily ... and vanished among the trees... Suddenly ... a long wolf-howl. Immediately it was echoed by another there and the ridge swirled alive in laughter and running ... The young men emerge from the woods on their foaming horses ... (Wiebe, 2000, p.156-7)

It is evident that the Indians are used to be in the woods. It is one of their usual habits. They could vanish among the trees on foot and then suddenly emerge from the woods on their horses. Hence, the woods meet one of the criteria of place, that is, as a location where habitual action takes place.

Since the Indians carry out habitual action in the woods, the woods have another criterion of place, that is give attachments to the Indians. Although the Indians killed animals in the woods for food, chop down trees for Thirst Dance Song, they do not violate the woods like the white settlers. One of the examples of violation did by the white settlers is,

... settlers ripping up land and knocking down trees and wolves dashing about scattering poison and killing wolves and buffalo. ... they were always moving though no one had died at the old place - maybe whites quickly made a place sick? - one fort and then another, build this, tear that down. (Wiebe, 2000, p.97)

The Indians could not understand why the white settlers have to rip up the land, knock out trees and scatter poison to kill the animals of the woods. The Indians are also angry that the white settlers made the place sick by tearing down woods and building numerous of forts. These reactions of the Indians reflect their attachments to the woods.

The fourth criterion that makes the woods to be regarded as place is the fact that woods give meaningful memories to the inhabitants. As an example,

Directly before him, between the grey water churning below and the straight line of prairie above, protruded the burned timbers of Fort Carlton; but a little south of that Big Bear saw the still green tops of the spruce under which he had been born. It was the place. (Wiebe, 2000, p.356)

Although the prairie has changed enormously due to the white settlers' development, Big Bear can still recognise the wood, where he was born. For Big Bear, this particular wood contains his meaningful memories. A sense of territorial bonding is created between Big Bear and this particular wood.

Therefore, sense of place exists between the woods and its inhabitants. Between Big Bear and the wood where he was born, his biological event, birth becomes the symbolic meaning of the place that is unique to Big Bear. Another example for showing the existence of sense of place is, "It was a little after "the leaves came out" which is his favourite time for talking because the land is happy and everyone feels new and good..." (Wiebe, 2000, p.114). This example obviously reflects the bidirectional linkage between the woods and its inhabitants. The conditions of the woods, for instance, leaves coming out, causes Big Bear and his community to feel new and good. Simultaneously, the wood is also being personified as having the emotion, happy. Therefore, the sense of place between the woods and the Indians is bidirectional.

4.1.3 Lake and River

Due to the fact that both lake and river portrayed in the novel have a unity which cannot be found in other locations, they are considered as a place. In the following quotation, Loon Lake reveals its unity:

Between the lake and the wooded hills ... trees grew thick to the edge of the water, white palisades against green; ... On its rocky point she found a short spit of blackish sand among rushes,... Loon Lake, a crescent ... the shining three miles of water... (Wiebe, 2000, p.316)

Everything in the area, including the trees and plants, such as rushes around the lake, the colour of the edge of the lake, white palisade against green, the blackish sand on the lake's rocky point, the crescent shape of the lake and the three miles shining surface of the lake as well as the wind that blow combine and form a complete unity.

Another important component that makes lake and river to be considered as a place is the situations of the inhabitants in these locations. The following quotation reflects one of the situations of the Indians live near the river,

... everyone knew when the officer, who with his men had been camped beside the Little Pine and Poundmaker Reserve departmental supplies for ten days now and allowing them nothing because none of their visitors had the permission of their farming instructors to leave their reserves, so that they were all now living on fish trapped in weirs they had built across the river, ... (Wiebe, 2000, p.160)

This shows that the Indians could not leave the reserves to hunt, which then causes them to build weirs in the river in order to catch fish to be their main food supply. They would not forget this situation, which they were not permitted to

leave the reserves as they used to be. After they have lived the same piece of land for thousands of years freely, such changes mark the situation as an important part of their history. Since this kind of situations which occur near the river or lake become part of the Indians' history, river and lake are again proven for having the characteristics of place.

Moreover, both river and lake give attachment to its inhabitants. The quotations below show that the Indians, who are the inhabitants that are strongly attached to the river, could not accept the construction of railway along the river.

... the men had actually admitted they were exploring how far east the coal extends along the river and incidentally noting levels for a possible railway. (Wiebe, 2000, p.111)

It came to him that he must take Horsechild and his women to see the iron road. ... many of the women wailed in terror. They ... could hear it and needed no scouts and about noon on the third they came upon it. ... the women refused to move closer so they retreated up the hillside and sat, watching, the smaller children huddled around them. (Wiebe, 2000, p.134-5)

The Indians' reactions, such as bringing the others to see the railway, wailing in terror, refusing to move closer and huddling around their mothers reflect that they are sad, disappointed and afraid that the place they live for thousands of years is intruded and to certain extent, destroyed. Hence, it is obvious that there is an attachment between the river and the Indians. This kind of attachment can be seen as the formation of a sense of territorial bonding among the Indians towards the river.

This sense of territorial bonding or sense of place between the Indians and the lake or river is bidirectional. For instance,

He would remain silent now, Twin Wolverine his second elder son to die before him, and his last wife began to keen. The Magpie's voice rose to high, thin, wail that held itself, shivering slightly; Nowah-keetch, full sister, followed; then Sits Green On The Earth, wife of the half-brother, and Quinn's wife who had no son to mourn. Their sorrow burrowed into the darkness about them, tunnelling through, and over the vacant lake;... (Wiebe, 2000, p.345)

The sorrowful feeling of the Indians seems to be able to be released into the lake, which is vacant, suggesting it is ready to comfort them by becoming their listener. By looking at the previous quotation about the Indians' reaction towards the railway along the river and this quotation about the lake's condition when the Indians are sorrowful, the bidirectional connection between the inhabitants, Indians and place, river and lake are revealed.

4.2 *Dwelling Place of Buffalo and Human*

The concept of place applied in this paper considers place as a location with unity. Thus, the dwelling place of buffalo, which is depicted as a united physical setting, is being regarded as a place. The quotation below uncovers the unity found in the description of the dwelling place of buffalo:

I see his track in the deep paths he wore to sweet water, and at river crossings where wind moans through his wool hung on the low bushes, I see his shape in the wallows, the print of his tongue where salt gleams like frost in the Scattering Moon, I hear the thunder of his running under the Tramping Lakes, and at Sounding where The Giver Of All runs the great herds still and they graze the soft spring grass and lick their little calves. Eiya-eiya-a-a, where have we gone, where, where. (Wiebe, 2000, p.200)

The deep paths that buffalo walk on to drink water, the river crossings with bushes, the lake, grasses, wind as well as the sound of the buffalo's running created a beautiful picture of unity.

Additionally, the dwelling place of buffalo is a location where the Indians carry out their hunting activities for thousands of years. For instance,

Dust, bellows, shrieks, rifle explosions, grunts were gone, only himself and the bay stallion rocking suspended as earth turned gently, silently under them ... as he drifted to her shoulder and his arrow for an instant pointed her like the giant constellation of the wolf road points the sky at night ... In the circle of sun and sky and earth and death he stood complete. (Wiebe, 2000, p.125-6)

This whole quotation is about the hunting of buffalo by the Indians, specifically Big Bear. The hunting activity on the location that buffalo dwells is vividly described. However, the hunting is not described in a violent way. It is described as an act of rightness within the natural order with the line "In the circle of sun and sky and earth and death he stood complete." (Wiebe, 2000, p.125-6). Hence, it is apparent that the hunting of buffalo in its dwelling place is a habitual action of the Indians as well as an important aspect of their history.

Thus, this habitual action or important history of the Indians is also a meaningful memory for all of them. This is emphasised by Big Bear,

Before many of you were born I ran buffalo over this place where you have put this building,... I am free... This land is torn up, black with fires, and empty. (Wiebe, 2000, p.405)

... that was a train there, crawling on the prairie so far away he could see only its black line, stubby and belching. (Wiebe, 2000, p.400)

These two quotations are about Big Bear's memory of the dwelling place of buffalo as well as his disappointment about the condition of the place now, which is torn, black with fires, empty and with a train crawling on. These not only

foreground the Indians' identity as lifetime buffalo runner, hunter, but also reflect their attachment to the dwelling place of buffalo. The sense of territorial bonding between the Indians and the dwelling place of buffalo are hence revealed.

The linkage between the dwelling place of buffalo and the Indians in the form of sense of place is not merely one way but bidirectional. For example,

The thunder of *mus-toos-wuk* running the earth. At last, again; here. He stood feeling it, motionlessly listening. They were there, coming, the bulls bellowing in happiness as they ran side by side and the spring calves by their mothers and the dust of their numberless hooves roiled up wherever the horizon would reach and his body was with them a living wand thrust into the earth, shivering to the drum-roll of the charge coming to trample him into itself. (Wiebe, 2000, p.414)

Big Bear's body is described as with the buffalo and both are a living wand that thrust into the earth, the dwelling place of buffalo. In return, the dwelling place of buffalo is described as shivering to the charging of the buffalo that will trample Big Bear into the earth, the dwelling place of buffalo itself. This two way connection between the Indians and the dwelling place of buffalo is powerfully depicted.

5. Conclusion

In brief, under the sun, woods, lake and river as well as dwelling place of buffalo are places identified in the novel. Each of these places has the features of place applied in present study, which include physical setting that has unity, a location where activities take place and leads to the creation of habitual action as well as history. Furthermore, these places represent the identity of its inhabitants by giving them attachments, involvement and meaningful memories. Therefore, the relationship between human, the Indians and these places in the form of sense of place could also be detected. Because each of these places has distinct characteristics or symbolic meaning to the Indians, some are in the form of biological events and historical association. Most importantly, all the sense of place uncovered are bidirectional rather than merely one way.

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