

Reliving Situation in Learning Literary Text: The Initial Part of E. B. White's "Once More to the Lake"

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Abstract

Theories concerning the situational factor in learning, SLT and situated cognition for instances, attach emphasis to the role of contextualization played in the effective learning. Based on a brief discussion of reliving situation, this paper probes into its application in learning literary text. The initial part of E. B. White's "Once More to the Lake" serves as the material for the case study. It proves that in composing this autobiographical White makes full use of linguistic devices to recreate a vivid but past situation to relive specific part of his life experiences, involving his journeys to a Maine lake as child in the past and as a father now. Then, there is an implication that a learner of literary text should create continuous situations in reading so as to achieve a deeper understanding of an author, including his or her particular temperament and artistic style.

Keywords

Learning; Situation; Relive; E. B. White; "Once More to the Lake".

1. Introduction

There are at least two theories concerning the situational factor in learning. While Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's situated learning theory (SLT, 1991) reveals "the process and development of learning when individuals have the opportunity to participate in a community of practice" supported by experts, the theory of situated cognition, presented by John Seely Brown, Allan Collins and Paul Duguid (1989), discusses deeper "the social nature of learning and argues that learning cannot be abstracted from the situations in which it is learned and merely be transferred or applied in school" (Herrera, 2024). Both theories attach emphasis to the role of contextualization played in the effective learning, and thus they both adopt situation as a key word.

Concerning the effects of situated learning and student knowledge acquisition, there have been several previous studies (Zheng, 2010; Bell et al. 2013; Catalano, 2015), which "suggest that learning based in situated environments transfers more frequently and provides usable knowledge to real world contexts" (Herrera, 2024). Anyhow, "there are still many ways that the model (of SLT) can be used and tested in research," including asking more questions, one of which is raised as "[c]an situated learning be applied in all subject areas? If so, how?" (Herrera, 2024) Based on a brief discussion of reliving situation, this paper will probe into its application in learning literary text. The initial part of E. B. White's "Once More to the Lake" (para. 1-3) will serve as the material for the case study.

2. Overview of Reliving Situation and E. B. White's "Once More to the Lake"

2.1. Reliving Situation

In the article entitled as "Situational Learning: Connotation, Value and Implementation," Zeyuan Yu and Mingming Na (2023) rightly point out that "[i]nteraction and mobility are the essential attributes of situation," and "[l]earning takes place in specific situations, which *affect* people and learning" (emphasis added). Perhaps more importantly, they state that "[p]eople in learning *create continuous* situations (ibid., emphasis added). For a learner or a reader of a literary text, this kind of situation creating is even crucial, which is in fact concerned with the efforts of reliving and "entering" the context of situation created by the writer and his or her spiritual world. Here reliving "means to *experience again* or *re-experience* something from the past," which "involves mentally or emotionally *going back* to a particular moment or event and *relishing* the sensations, emotions, or memories associated with it. When we *relive* something, we vividly *recall* and *immerse* ourselves in the past, almost as if we are[were] living it *once more*" (Dictionary.Cambridge, 2024, emphasis added).

A good writer (especially in composing an autobiographical or semi-autobiographical work) turns to make full use of linguistic devices to recreate a vivid but past situation to relive specific part of his or her life journey. This situation, as Michael Toolan (2016) states in the book *Making Sense of Narrative Text: Situation, Repetition, and Picturing in the Reading of Short Stories*, "approximates what Aristotle called the *beginning* of a story: the establishment of a stable and persisting set of circumstances that can serve as the core elements and core interests of a narrative—typically, a person or persons, a place or place(s), and entities and time(s)," and once such a situation is established, "*repeated* mentions of them and *recurrent* reference to them, incorporating significant change, are warranted and expected" (p. 92, emphasis added). Thus, no wonder people in learning turn to "create *continuous* situations" as mentioned before.

2.2. E. B. White's "Once More to the Lake"

"Once More to the Lake" by American writer E. B. White (1899-1985, see Figure 2) is a frequently anthologized marvellous essay, which included first in the author's popular book *One Man's Meat* (see Figure 1). It's said that this essay "took more than a quarter century to complete" (Nordquist, 2024). In this piece of autobiographical work, the narrator visits his ideal boyhood vacation spot with his son (see Figure 2), who "had never had any fresh water up his nose and who had seen lily pads only from train windows" (White, 1999, p. 246. Hereafter only the page number of this book referred to in parenthetical citations), and regains great joy during this summer. From time to time, the narrator compares the past and the present, and then he begins to sustain the illusion that he were a son again as well as he is a father at present (Tao, 2011).

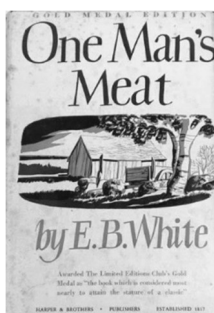


Figure 1. One Man's Meat (1944) **Figure 2.** E. B. White **Figure 3.** E. B. White and his son

Returning to this never changed old haunt of a small lake in illusion, as Rogers S. Platizky (1988, pp. 171-172) has rightly pointed out in his “mythic interpretation,” the narrator seems to “retreat into a rebirth” and is released “from the flux of temporality, arresting in the timeless, the permanent, the ever recurrent conceived as a ‘sacred repetition’.” Next section will do a close examination of the recurrent cues for writer’s reliving of the lake setting and relative activities, which will be concerned with more dimensions such as the pastoral tradition (Clausson, 2008, pp. 1-14) or the religion (Atkins, 2012, pp. 133-140).

3. The Initial Part of “Once More to the Lake”

3.1. Scenes of Sea and Lake Comparing: Motivation for the Revisit

In a nostalgic tone, seeming combined with sweet and sorrow, the essay starts with the narrator’s recall of the camp life on the lake about twenty seven years ago, when he is still a boy at the age of five. In this introductory paragraph the repetitive items of “summer” (the first three times), “August” (twice), aided by some details of accidental incidences of camp life, combine to evoke a deep impression on a successful vacation. Closely associated with this impression is the cherished lake in Maine woods-Great Pond (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Great Pond from top of Mt Phillips (Credit: M. Morris)
 (<https://www.mainetrailfinder.com/trails/trail/mount-phillip-trail>)

Located in a farming country with cottage for campers and farmers, this lake is not wild. However, the shores of it “were quite heavily wooded” and thus an ecological picture of lake-in-wood is shown-the lake remains “undisturbed,” maintaining “the placidity,” and “to a child at least, seemed infinitely remote and primeval.” No wonder the narrator and his family members “returned summer after summer-always on August 2st for one month.” This turns out to be a ritual event for the family, with an accumulation of collective memories and emotions. When the item of “summer” occurs for the forth time, however, the situation is totally different now, the description of which and relative comparison can be summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Scenes of sea and lake comparing

Scene	Description	Comment
Sea	restlessness of tides, fearful cold of the sea water, incessant wind, blow	The current life by the sea is uncomfortable.
Lake	placidity, stillness, undisturbed, quite heavily wooded, remote, primeval,	The past life at the lake sees the harmony between Nature and human beings. The lake is like a paradise imprinted in the narrator’s heart ever since the childhood

As the table shows, the items describing the narrator’s current life as a salt-water man are all negative in comparison to those concerning the life at the lake. It is quite easy to understand

that he has a strong desire to revisit his old haunts, the lake in particular. Next section will examine the narrator's feeling on the road to the lake.

3.2. Wonder and Remember: On the Road to the Lake

To recreate a profound prospect and express his sincerity, the narrator accumulates several repetitive items on both the lexical and syntactic levels from the starting point of the journey, which combine to set the reader in an aesthetic situation promptly. Take an extract from the essay for instance:

On the journey over to the lake I began to **wonder** *what it would be like* {1}. I **wondered** *how time would have* marred this unique, this holy spot-the coves and streams, the hills that the sun set behind, the camps and the paths behind the camps {2}. I was sure that the tarred road *would have* found it out and I **wondered** *in what other ways it would be* desolated {3}. It is strange how much you can **remember** about places like that once you **allow** your ***mind to return*** into the grooves which **lead back** {4}. You **remember** one thing, and that suddenly **reminds** you of another thing {5}. (pp. 246-247).

Looking through the material, one might easily detect the high frequency of occurrence of two words, i.e. "wonder" and "remember." The repetition of the former occurs in the first three sentences, which denotes the curious mood of the author before he arrives at the scenic spot: "I began to wonder" {1}, "I wondered" {2}, "And I wondered" {3}. This repetition shows that the author is eager to see the lake again and is curious about the it after many years' absence. In addition, the syntactic items in italic help raise wonders as well: The narrator wants to know whether the lake has been changed or not and if the lake has been changed, it needs how much time and "in what ways" {3}. All these items specifically denote the narrator's feeling at that special moment.

Obviously, on the journey to revisit the lake, the narrator recreates the pastoral scenes through his recalling of so many things, which are denoted by the underlined nouns in almost all the sentences included in the extract, especially in sentence {4} and {5}. Perhaps what might impress the readers most is the vivid recall of one of his boyhood behaviors- being "always the first up," young White "would dress softly so as not to wake the others, and sneak out" to do rowing, during which he was "very careful never to rub my paddle against the gunwale for fear of disturbing the stillness of the cathedral" (p. 247). This peaceful atmosphere has shaped a quiet White ever since. Now with his son he "settled into" this peaceful haunt and "sustained the illusion" (p. 247), which is broken by "an unfamiliar nervous sound of the outboard motors" that was not "a quiet sound" of inboard ones. Thus, the quiet writer is really irritated and there seems to be no more his perfect old haunt.

4. Conclusion

It proves that in composing this autobiographical White makes full use of linguistic devices to recreate a vivid but past situation to relive specific part of his life experiences, involving his journeys to a Maine lake as child in the past and as a father now. Then, there is an implication that a learner of literary text should create continuous situations in reading so as to achieve a deeper understanding of an author, including his or her particular temperament and artistic style. In the case of White', his friend, James Thurber (Goodreads, 2024) once described him as a quiet man of showing no preference for publicity in that "His life is his own." This might be well explained by Kate DiCamillo's foreword to White's *Charlotte's Web*, quoting the writer's own words: "All that I hope to say in books, all that I ever hope to say, is that I love the world" (White, 1952, p. ii). In his own world, White loved animals, farms and farming implements, seasons, and weather formats. It is hard to deny it's the small lake and the surrounding landscapes, which were so interconnected White's childhood memories and then turned into

“old haunts” (p. 246), that really played a dominant role in such a world. This was and is the very situation of White. Eventually, all this contributed a lot to the unity of both White’s life style and writing style. As Liu Li (2007, p. 85) has discussed, “the specific choices of White’s language diction played a vital role in arousing the aesthetic effect, enhancing the aesthetic values, and highlighting the theme of “Once More to the Lake,” reliving his situations during the life journey.

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