

Describing Setting

Read the following excerpt from the short novel Heart of Darkness (1902) by Joseph Conrad, and then work through the following activities, to discover how the writer uses setting to create an eerie, mysterious atmosphere.

The narrator is travelling up the River Congo in Africa to find Kurtz, who runs an isolated native trading post in the jungle and is believed to have gone mad.

'Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and big trees were kings. An empty, stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters slowed through a mob of wooded island; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off forever from everything you had known once-somewhere-far away- in another existence perhaps....

The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was very quiet there. At night sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of trees would run up the river and remain sustained faintly, as if hovering in the air high over our heads, till the first break of day. Whether it meant war, peace or prayer we could not tell. The dawns were heralded by descent of a chill stillness; the wood-cutters slept, their fires burned low; the snapping of a twig would make you start.'

1. The writer uses various senses in his writing, including sight, sound and touch. Highlight any examples you can find.
2. How do the following contrasts add tension to the atmosphere? One had been completed as an example.

'heart of darkness'	'brilliance of sunshine'	Dark and light without color create a shadowy, sinister setting.
'great silence'	'snapping of a twig'	

'a chill stillness'	'the broadening waters flowed'	
'you lost your way on that river'	'as you would in a desert'	

3. How does personification add a sense of threat to the forest? One example has been filled in.

'big trees were kings'	Suggests the trees are powerful and rule the landscape
'vegetation rioted on the earth'	
'a mob of wooded islands'	
'the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return'	

4. How does vocabulary choice affect the presentation of the setting as isolated? Look up the words and comment on:

'an <i>impenetrable</i> forest'	
'you thought yourself <i>bewitched</i> '	