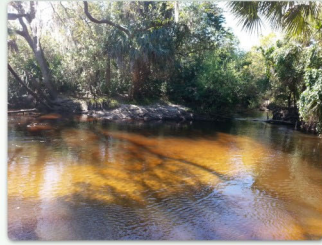


Skill Category 2: Setting



One of the pleasures of literature is its ability to transport the reader to another time and place. Setting—where and when the events of a narrative occur—is a surprisingly significant element in literary works. On the multiple-choice section of the AP exam, you may encounter questions about the setting's details, the values associated with the setting, and the characters' interactions with the setting.

2.A Details Conveying Setting



Setting

The time and place in which a novel or short story's events take place is referred to as setting. For example, the image portrays the dark and menacing river around which some of the events take place in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible*.

Prose passages often include specific details about the setting, such as the time and place. However, it's important to keep in mind that setting can also refer to more abstract concepts, like the attitudes of the characters' society or culture and the values inherent to that environment.

Key Concepts

Setting includes the time and place in which the events take place.

Both can be significant to the author's purposes. Look for clues as you read because questions on the AP exam may ask how the details reveal the setting in which the action occurs. Other questions may ask how sounds or sights enhance the setting.

- For example, in the opening pages of Mark Twain's novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the narrator describes bugle blasts coming from a castle where men-at-arms wearing tunics and metal helmets march under banners displaying a dragon. These details convey the medieval setting of England in the 6th century. Twain's placing of the main character, Hank Morgan, an American from Twain's own time, in medieval England allows Twain to draw sharp contrasts between medieval and modern times.

Setting also includes the social, cultural, and historical situation associated with the time and place of the events.

Look for details that depict the characters' world and their reactions to the setting. Also note how the setting can reveal the nature of a character.

- For example, in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Twain is able to criticize the monarchical system of government by placing Hank Morgan, a modern man with democratic values, in 6th-century England. When Hank is made King's Minister, he sets up schools to teach modern concepts, bringing him into conflict with the medieval church.

What to Look for

As you read prose excerpts, look for the following details and determine what they reveal about the setting:

- Details that describe where the events occur
- Details that reveal when the narrative takes place, such as time of day or year
- Changes in the environment or the timeframe of the events
- Clues indicating the society, culture, or historical period of the narrative

Practice Activity

Directions: As you read the excerpt below from Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel *The Jungle*, highlight details that describe the setting and annotate what those details reveal. In addition to the physical setting, look for clues about the social, cultural, or historical setting. Then, answer the following questions in an annotation:

- What details appeal to the senses—sight, sound, touch, and smell?
- What response does the author intend for the readers to have?
- What is the narrator's tone or attitude toward the setting?

From *The Jungle*

[The buggy] could not move faster anyhow, on account of the state of the streets. Those through which Jurgis and Ona were walking resembled streets less than they did a miniature topographical map. The roadway was commonly several feet lower than the level of the houses, which were sometimes joined by high board walks; there were no pavements—there were mountains and valleys and rivers, gullies and ditches, and great hollows full of stinking green water. In these pools the children played, and rolled about in the mud of the streets; here and there one noticed them digging in it, after trophies which they had stumbled on. One wondered about this, as also about the swarms of flies which hung about the scene, literally blackening the air, and the strange, fetid odor which assailed one's nostrils, a ghastly odor, of all the dead things of the universe. It impelled the visitor to questions and then the residents would explain, quietly, that all this was "made" land, and that it had been "made" by using it as a dumping ground for the city garbage. After a few years the unpleasant effect of this would pass away, it was said; but meantime, in hot weather—and especially when it rained—the flies were apt to be annoying. Was it not unhealthful? the stranger would ask, and the residents would answer, "Perhaps; but there is no telling."

Sample Annotations

[The buggy] could not move faster anyhow, on account of the state of the streets. Those through which Jurgis and Ona were walking resembled streets less than they did a miniature topographical map. The roadway was commonly several feet lower than the level of the houses, which were sometimes joined by high board walks; there were no pavements—there were mountains and valleys and rivers, gullies and ditches, and great hollows full of stinking green water. In these pools the children played, and rolled about in the mud of the streets; here and there one noticed them digging in it, after trophies which they had stumbled on. One wondered about this, as also about the swarms of flies which hung about the scene, literally blackening the air, and the strange, fetid odor which assailed one's nostrils, a ghastly odor, of all the dead things of the universe. It impelled the visitor to questions and then the residents would explain, quietly, that all this was "made" land, and that it had been "made" by using it as a dumping ground for the city garbage. After a few years the unpleasant effect of this would pass away, it was said; but meantime, in hot weather—and especially when it rained—the flies were apt to be annoying. Was it not unhealthful? the stranger would ask, and the residents would answer, "Perhaps; but there is no telling."

-"buggy" indicates 19th or early 20th century setting

-unpaved streets

-stinking water in which children played

-flies and odor make atmosphere very unpleasant

-street formed from dumped garbage

-question about setting indicates residents' lack of concern

- What details appeal to the senses—sight, sound, touch, and smell?

"Unpaved streets"

"stinking green water"

"swarms of flies"

"strange, fetid odor"

"dumping ground for the city garbage"

- What response does the author intend for the readers to have?

Readers are meant to feel revulsion for the living conditions of the residents of the area.

- What is the narrator's tone or attitude toward the setting?

By highlighting the terrible conditions, the narrator conveys his disgust and disapproval of the people who do not seem bothered by the conditions in which the people live and children play.