

The Willows Evaluate Model Answer Thursday 1st February 2018

Blackwood subtly creates a tense, mysterious and unnerving atmosphere throughout the extract. His personification of the trees, the creeping hostility of the land and the growing sense of malevolence through the piece effectively create in the reader a feeling of disquiet and unease.

The passage opens with a “shock” and an “alarm” in the narrator - the land he finds himself in is not “mere ‘scenery’”. However, it is the “whispering willows” that draw most of his attention. Throughout the extract Blackwood personifies these “chattering” giants, not only suggesting that they are conversing about other worlds and “laughing” and “shrilly crying out”, but that they are discussing a “mystery known only to them”. This sense of the supernatural and the unknown, connote a sense of fear and tension, as well as arousing the narrator’s “own keen sense of the horrible.” Further emphasising the fear that the narrator feels is the hostility of these “beings”. Blackwood boldly characterises them as “ a vast army... shaking their innumerable silver spears”, which not only cleverly implies that the men on the island are outnumbered and vulnerable, but that the willows are organised, angry and aggressive.

As the narrator describes the passing of the night, his mind wanders to the place in which the men are camped. Blackwood introduces the island and the willows thus “the waste of wild waters... the ceaseless beating of the tireless wind.” The sibilant sounds of these opening sentences immediately and skilfully immerses the reader in the world being described. The sounds of the wind through the trees, the almost silent river around them, emphasise the otherworldliness of the place, as well as the mystery and the unearthly quality it possesses. The semantic field of the odd is utilised faultlessly throughout: his thoughts are “strange”; his fancies “bizarre”, and these coalesce with the descriptions of the place to create an overall sense of a haunted and haunting location. The “sense of unfamiliarity” that the narrator feels is surely given greater power by the “vast swamps”, the “great plain” and the “utterly alien world” in which he finds himself.

The uncanny nature of the surroundings, as well as the creeping suspicion that the willows may prove to “be alive”, also help immeasurably to successfully contribute to a sense of tension in the piece of writing. The lack of welcome that is felt by the narrators is shared with the readers, who also wonder if the men will survive the night. The juxtaposition of the calm, moonlit scene, with the dark, mysterious and creeping sense of dread that is so brilliantly created by Blackwood further highlights the tension in the both the situation and the speaker.