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AN AFRICAN THUNDERSTORM – David Rubadiri

From the west
Clouds come hurrying with the wind
Turning
Sharply
Here and there 5
Like a plague of locusts
Whirling
Tossing up things on its tail
Like a madman chasing nothing.

Pregnant clouds 10
Ride stately on its back
Gathering to perch on hills
Like dark sinister wings;
The Wind whistles by
And trees bend to let it pass. 15

In the village
Screams of delighted children
Toss and turn
In the din of whirling wind,
Women – 20
Babies clinging on their backs –
Dart about
In and out
Madly
The Wind whistles by 25
Whilst trees bend to let it pass.
Clothes wave like tattered flags
Flying off
To expose dangling breasts
As jagged blinding flashes 30
Rumble, tremble, and crack
Amidst the smell of fired smoke
and the pelting march of the storm.

UNDERSTADING THE POEM

- Rubadiri's poem captures the looming arrival of a fierce storm. The anticipation of its arrival is both exciting and frightening. The wind is described as a mighty force, unpredictable in its direction, and carrying with it ominous clouds. The strength of the wind seems to suggest that worse is to follow once the storm hits.
- The poem describes nature's forces conspiring to bring this powerful storm, and then narrows the focus to its effect on people in its path. The inhabitants of a village are seen reacting to its approach, with the contrasting responses of children and mothers.
- The village is clearly vulnerable to the force of the storm. The poem ends with the storm almost breaking overhead as the flashes of lightning and crack of thunder arrive.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

- The poem is divided into two parts which divide the content into the general and the specific. The first part, made up of stanzas one and two, describes the storm as it gathers momentum, and the third stanza describes its impact on human existence.
- The irregular number of words on a line, with many single-word lines, captures the unpredictable progress of the wind and the accompanying clouds. This technique is also evident in the second part of the poem, where the frantic movement of the village women as they 'Dart about/In and out/Madly' (lines 22 – 24) is physically demonstrated by the line divisions.
- The description of 'The Wind whistles by/And trees bend to let it pass' in the second stanza (line 14 – 15) is almost exactly repeated in the third stanza, in lines 25 – 26, although 'And' has been replaced with 'Whilst' (line 26). The path of the storm has not been diminished by the trees. In fact, the trees give way to allow it to progress unhindered.

POETIC/LANGUAGE DEVICES

- Rubadiri makes use of vivid imagery and figures of speech to convey the various elements of the storm. Line 6 introduces the simile of the approaching 'plague of locusts', underlining the appearance and potentially destructive nature of the storm. It also locates the setting in Africa. The further simile comparing the wind to a monster thrashing its tail about "like a madman chasing nothing' (line 9) emphasises the unpredictable nature of the storm, which adds to its danger. The description of the clouds 'Gathering to perch on hills/Like dark sinister wings' (lines 12-13) makes the clouds reminiscent of some bird of prey waiting for the opportune moment to strike.
- The third stanza continues in its depiction of noise and movement as villagers anticipate the storm's arrival. We notice how the children react with 'Screams' (line 17) of delight, possibly because of the thrill of potential danger. The women hurriedly attempt to prepare for the storm, although it seems that their efforts may be pointless as the 'Clothes wave like tattered flags' (line 27), completely at the mercy of the wind.
- The poem ends with the storm breaking, but stops before it actually hits. The progress of the 'pelting march of the storm' (line 33) tells the reader that this storm cannot be stopped and will be a mighty one.

SOUND DEVICES

- This poem utilises sound effectively. Much use is made of onomatopoeia as the wind is 'whirling' (lines 7 and 19) and it 'whistles' (lines 14 and 25). The noise in the village has the screams of children competing with 'the din of whirling wind' (line 19). As the storm gets closer, its imminent arrival is heralded by the onomatopoeia of the 'Rumble, tremble, and crack' (line 31) of the thunder, and the impact of lightning striking the earth.

SUMMARY

- The poem describes a typical African thunderstorm, with all its intensity.
- In African society, rain is a blessing; everything loves the approach of rain, not just children.
- It is good for the crops and the animals, as it increases the harvest.
- However, in reading this poem, the feeling is that the author is not happy; he concentrates on telling us about the damage that the rain and wind do.
- It calls attention because the poet uses similes while referring to the wind that brings rain, a good thing. Good has a negative side to it?
- Is this poem an analogy between politics/ history/ nature?

ANALYSIS

- The persona describes the approach of the storm.
- The poem reminds us of the ominous presence and unbridled power that is associated with an African thunderstorm.
- This storm is, however, characterised with anarchy, chaos, and disorder.
- The images of locusts, madman, pregnant clouds, sinister wings, suggest the pandemonium that comes with the rain.
- It may have started as a mild wind but then it soon increased in velocity – whirling, tossing and altering every aspect of the landscape it passed through; making its presence profoundly felt.
- Its strange and insane mannerism cannot be easily understood by all yet conversely, cannot be ignored either.
- It seemed to fascinate and delight the innocent and perhaps the naïve who appeared mesmerized by the sheer natural beauty of its rhythmic sounds and movements.
- Its fury created unwelcomed cracks in the landscape and even after the storm had marched on; it left a lingering '*smell of fired smoke*' in the air.
- In stanza two, he goes to the reaction of the people notably the children and women.
- The former are happy and the latter are apprehensive to the approaching storm.
- The last stanza deals with the storm and the anticipated chaos comes to be true as reflected in the choice of words like "*Rumble*", *tremble* and *crack*".
- The dominant image here is kinetic because even though the poet seems to focus on the destructive power of an African thunderstorm, this effect can only be actualised if there is some motion, some movement.
- It must also be emphasised that that poem is not all about the destructive power of the elements.

- There is something of the African community and how it responds to natural disasters.
- It is possible to interpret the poem as the effect of colonial domination on the native land.
- The time that the poet has lived – his country got independent in the early 1960's – can be convincing.
- He was familiar with that part of the history of his country.
- It also alludes to domination by such words as “*trees bend to let the wind pass*”, “*clouds ride stately on the back of the wind*”.
- The tattered flags have a nationalistic connotation.
- It is important to know as much as possible about the historical context in which the poet lived.
- Rubadiri fell out with his president a year after his appointment as ambassador.
- Is he talking about the repressive rule of African leaders?
- Is he referring to colonial rule and the destruction that resulted in African society?
- Is it merely a descriptive poem of a unique weather event?

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. ***Compare the different reactions of the children and the adults in the village to the approaching storm.***
The children are excited and delighted at the imminent storm, while the adults rush about fearfully trying to prepare defences against the storm.
2. ***Quote an image from the poem that suggests the danger and destructive qualities of the coming storm.***
'Like a plague of locusts' (line 6) or 'Like dark sinister wings' (line 13).
3. ***Contrast the different ways in which the wind and the clouds in the storm build up.***
 - 3.1. ***Does the speaker portray these elements as equally powerful?***
No. At the outset, the wind is definitely the more powerful of the elements, as the winds seems to drag the clouds along, as if taking the initiative and being the leader. The 'Pregnant clouds/ Ride stately' (lines 10 – 11) on the back of the wind, so again the wind seems to have the edge.
 - 3.2. ***Do their roles change as the storm approaches? Discuss fully, supporting your answer with evidence from the poem.***
The way the clouds perch on hills 'Like dark sinister wings' (line 13) as if waiting their moment is ominous. At this stage the clouds seem more threatening. The wind makes a lot of noise and announces the coming storm, but the real danger comes along with those clouds. The wind 'whistles by' (lines 14, 25) but it is allowed to pass, whereas it is the 'blinding flashes' (line 30) that pose the real danger.
4. ***Comment on how the form of this poem enhances its content. Note the structure of the stanzas and lines, particularly.***

The contrasting content is reflected in the division into three stanzas. The first and second stanzas describe the coming storm and its build up, while the third stanza turns to the effect of the storm on human existence. The form of the line arrangements also contributes to the impact of the content: The irregular line lengths and one-word lines capture the unpredictable nature of the storm as it changes direction erratically, speeds up, stalls and lingers.

5. ***Do you think the poem ends effectively? Should the speaker not have described the impact of the storm on the people and the village, or the storm's aftermath? Evaluate the poet's intentions in this poem, and say whether you believe they were effectively realised or not.***

The poem follows the build-up of the storm and culminates in its explosive release. This is most effective as the tension builds and the scene is set. It seems evident that this was the purpose of the poet as to describe the aftermath of the storm would be a different poem entirely.

ESSAY QUESTION:

By close reference to the use of **sound devices**, **figurative language** and **setting**, write an essay in which you examine how successfully the poem paints a picture of an approaching storm. [10]

SUGGESTED ANSWER:

- The reference to 'locusts' (line 6), the inhabitants of the 'village' (line 16) where the women 'Babies clinging on their backs' (line 21), the electric ferocity of the approaching storm and the title all tell us that the poem is set in Africa, a rural area.
- The poem contrasts the scene out in the open area with its impact on the unfortunate villagers in its path. The structure of the poem reflects this changing focus as the stanzas hone in on the two settings.
- The figurative language contributes to the vivid scene of the approaching storm. The movement of the wind, with its co-conspirator, the clouds, is metaphorically compared to some wild creature as it makes its scurried journey: It dashes 'here and there' (line 5), 'Turning/Sharply' (line 3-4), 'Whirling' (line 7) and 'Tossing up things on its tail' (line 8).
- The simile comparing the progress of the wind and clouds to the ravenous 'plague of locusts' (line 6) gives the wind a destructive power.
- The simile comparing the wind to a 'madman chasing nothing' (line 9) implies its unpredictable, dangerous quality.
- The heavy clouds seem 'Pregnant' (line 10) and 'ride stately on its back' (line 11); then perch on hills like predatory birds with their 'dark sinister wings' (line 13), waiting for the opportune moment to strike. The trees in the wind's path 'bend to let it pass' (line 15) as if bowing to a superior being.
- The clothes hung out to dry on a line, or the women's clothing as they prepare for the onslaught, 'wave like tattered flags' (line 27) in the face of the wind's strength, and expose vulnerable flesh in the process.
- Adding to the imagery in the poem is the poet's use of sound. The onomatopoeic 'whirling' of the wind as it 'whistles by' (line 14) is answered by the 'Screams' (line 17) of children giddy with the excitement of the looming storm and its accompanying 'din' (line 19).

- The onomatopoeia of the 'Rumble, tremble, and crack' (line 31) of the lightning strikes and thunder adds to the scene as the 'pelting march' (line 33) of the storm begins.

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ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. **Find a synonym from the poem for each of the following:**

1.1 grasshoppers	locusts
1.2 dignified, imposing	stately
1.3 greatly pleased, happy	delighted
1.4 a jerking, or throwing, or spinning movement or action	toss
1.5 evil looking, ominous, threatening	sinister
1.6 a fast turning movement	whirling
1.7 to come to rest after flying	to perch
1.8 sudden, quick forward movement	dart
1.9 worn out, torn	tattered
1.10 a loud continuous noise	din
1.11 to hang and sway loosely	dangling
1.12 to fall down heavily and quickly	pelting
1.13 low, dull, rolling sound	rumble
1.14 having a rough, uneven edge	jagged
1.15 to leave unprotected, to display	expose
2. **Choose the incorrect answer:** (15)

The word **PLAGUE** (line 6) means:

 - a) a quick-spreading, quick-killing disease
 - b) a large harmful or uncontrollable number
 - c) to cause continual bother or irritation
 - d) an affliction regarded as divine punishment** (2)
3. **Identify and EXPLAIN the figure of speech occurring in line 6.** (4)

"Like a plague of locusts"

Simile

The clouds brought by the wind are compared to an unusual infestation of grasshoppers that destroy and devour everything that comes in their way. Thus, the approaching storm is associated with destruction and danger.
4. **Identify and EXPLAIN the figure of speech occurring in line 9.** (4)

"like a madman chasing nothing."

Simile

This simile comparing the wind to a monster thrashing its tail about "like a madman chasing nothing" (line 9) emphasises the unpredictable nature of the storm, which adds to its danger.
- 5.1 **What figure of speech occurs in "pregnant clouds"?** (1)

Metaphor
- 5.2 **What does it tell us about the clouds?** (2)

That the clouds are heavy and brim full with water – drops of rain – and ready to release – give birth to – their heavy load.

- 6.1 Who / what “Rides stately on its back”?** (1)
The clouds are personified as someone riding on the back of the wind.
- 6.2 What does its (line 11), refer to?** (1)
The wind.
- 7.1 What is “gathering”?** (1)
The clouds are coming together, assembling, accumulating on the hills.
- 7.2 Why is the use of the word “perch” in line 12, effective?** (2)
The word perch is effective as it refers to a bird coming in to rest after having flown for some time. In the same way the clouds are settling on the hills where they will release their heavy loads of water.
- 8. Why are the clouds compared to “dark sinister wings”?** (1)
‘Gathering to perch on hills/Like dark sinister wings’ (lines 12 – 13) makes the clouds reminiscent of some bird of prey waiting for the opportune moment to strike. The thunder clouds appear to be “dark” due to their dark blue, grey colour. “Sinister” suggests that the clouds appear to be evil-looking, wicked, threatening and frightening. **Simile**
- 9. How do the babies experience the approaching storm? Motivate your answer.** (3)

The babies appear to be terrified, they are “clinging” to their mothers’ backs. The babies are grasping their mothers’ backs. It is almost as if they stick, are stuck or glued to their backs.
- 10. How do the women react? In your own answer refer specifically to the words “dart” and “madly”** (3)
The women are also terrified. They ran for shelter and safety. “Dart” suggests a sudden, rapid movement. “Madly” implies that the mothers ran in a disorderly and irrational manner. These words suggest that the mothers scurried/hurried quickly, disorderly and terrified in all directions in an attempt to find safety before the storm hits.
- 11.1 What figure of speech occurs in “Whilst trees bend to let it pass”?** (1)
Personification.
- 11.2 Explain line 26 in your own words.** (2)
The trees appear to be bowing in front of the wind, showing it respect, allowing it to pass without putting up a fight/showing no resistance. This obviously refers to the trees being bent over by the force/strength of the wind.
- 12.1 What figure of speech occurs in the last line of this poem?** (1)
Metaphor
- 12.2 Briefly explain this line in your own words.** (2)

The storm is compared to an army with its troops bombarding, showering and peppering the African landscape with small missiles – raindrops.
The rain comes down heavily as the pregnant clouds release their cargo.

13.1 Briefly explain what ONOMATOPOEIA is. (1)

The use of words that imitate and reproduce real-life sounds. The sound effect heightens the visual effect.

13.2 Quote all the examples of onomatopoeia from this poem. (4)

“screams”

“whistles”

“rumble”

“tremble”

“crack”

14. Briefly comment on the form and structure of this poem. (5)

The poem comprises of 33 lines of differing lengths. The poem is divided into three stanzas: stanza 1 has 9 lines, stanza 2 has 6 lines and stanza 3 has 18 lines.

There is no set rhyme scheme which effectively captures the twisting and turning of the clouds and the whirling of the winds.

The shape and form of the poem resembles the shape of a cumulonimbus cloud/ thunder cloud.

The poem is divided into two parts which divide the content into the general and the specific. The first part, made up of stanzas one and two, describes the storm as it gathers momentum, and the third stanza describes its impact on human existence.

The irregular number of words on a line, with many single-word lines, captures the unpredictable progress of the wind and the accompanying clouds. This technique is also evident in the second part of the poem, where the frantic movement of the village women as they ‘*Dart about/In and out/Madly*’ (lines 22 – 24) is physically demonstrated by the line divisions.

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TOTAL: 55