An African Thunderstorm

SUMMARY

The poem opens with storm winds and thunderclouds blowing in from the west, violently churning up items in their path. The storm's senseless destruction is like that of an invading insect swarm (like a biblical "plague of locusts"), or like an insane person running after nothing.

The speaker describes the clouds that ride the wind as "pregnant" and "stately," implying that they're full of rain and possibly full of ominous significance, but are grand-looking as well. These clouds hover over the hilltops like the dark wings of some evil creature. The trees bending in the path of the strong wind that passes by.

The poem turns to the responses of villagers in the storm's path. Children scream with excitement, and the noise is blown around by the wind as it churns. Women frantically scramble, rushing in and out of doors, as the babies they're carrying fearfully cling to them. Nearby trees continue to bend in the strong wind.

The women's clothing is ripped off by the storm, exposing their naked bodies, and then waves in the wind like torn up flags. Lightning flashes vividly, thunder rumbles the ground, the air smells like fire and smoke, and a violent rain begins.

THEMES

COLONIALISM AND SOCIAL TURMOIL

"An African Thunderstorm" is both a vivid description of a gathering storm and a symbolic depiction of social unrest. As the speaker narrates the arrival of a massive downpour in an African village, the poem's language and imagery link this storm "from the west" with the turmoil brought by Western colonization (that is, the invasion, subjection, and exploitation of African peoples by European and majority-European countries). In this way, the poem can be read as an allegory for colonialism, which it depicts as a violent force that destabilizes everything in its path.

"From the west" is a loaded phrase when applied to Africa, where "the West" is often associated with Europe, the U.S., and colonial history. Thus, as the speaker describes the storm's arrival in biblical, almost apocalyptic terms, readers can deduce that the speaker is also talking about upheavals in African history (including in the poet's native Malawi) set in motion by colonialism.

The speaker compares the storm, for example, to a "plague of locusts," which might evoke the biblical Plague of Egypt in which God sends a crop-destroying swarm to force the Egyptian pharaoh to free the Israelites from bondage. As the clouds settle on the hills "like sinister dark wings," the poem might again be evoking the Angel of Death from those same Plagues—or else a predatory or scavenging bird. These details mark the storm as an omen of swift, destructive change. And in doing so, they imply that colonial violence (and the struggles for independence in its wake) has the power to upend life as people know it.

Ultimately, the storm brings violence, violation, and social disruption that parallel colonialism's legacy of military violence, cultural erasure, and economic, environmental, and sexual exploitation. The wind tears off women's "tattered" clothes, for instance, "expos[ing]" their bodies. Symbolically, this image suggests that colonialism is a violation and/or a stripping away of culture. It also evokes the specific violence women faced in these circumstances, including sexual assault.

By comparing the clothes to "tattered flags" and the storm's progress to a "march," the poem further links the storm with war and political change. At the same time, the comparison of the storm to a "madman chasing nothing" links it with irrationality, chaos, and absurdity—suggesting that colonialism itself is irrational, chaotic, and absurd.

While literally conveying the experience of a big storm, these details symbolically suggest an overthrow of human order, the kind that accompanies war and other social upheavals. Again, this "sinister" event "from the west" mirrors the violations and cultural destruction that have accompanied Western violence against African peoples.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-33

HUMANITY VS. NATURE

"An African Thunderstorm" demonstrates human vulnerability in the face of nature's power. As a violent storm slams into an African village, the poem depicts the natural world as more flexible and durable than that created by human beings—as something that can "bend" during a storm, in contrast to the villagers, who might be devastated and broken. At the same time, the poem offers hints of human resilience in the face of the approaching crisis.

The power of the storm speaks to the power of nature more broadly to disrupt human life. The storm's first actions in the poem ("hurrying," "Turning sharply," "Whirling," "Tossing," "chasing") emphasize its speed, restlessness, and ferocity. The thunder, lightning, and rain are "blind[ing]" and "pelting"; they

"rumble," "tremble," and "crack." These words highlight the storm's disruptiveness and violence.

The villagers' response to the storm, meanwhile, suggests their vulnerability to nature's might. Unlike the trees, which can simply "bend to let it pass," the villagers are driven into hurry and fear. Children excitedly scream or cling to mothers; adults rush around performing unspecified activities. The poem does not explain where the men of the village are or what they're doing, nor how the women "Dart[ing] [...] Madly" are preparing for the storm. Instead, it simply shows nature's power causing a breakdown of normal social order. Nature has thoroughly, if temporarily, disrupted human life.

However, the "delight" of the screaming children is an exception to the atmosphere of dread. Their joy might be read as naïve and ironic, but it might also be read as an expression of an irrepressible human spirit. The speaker also mentions the "smell of fired smoke," which is another ambiguous image. This smell might come from outdoor fires getting doused by the rain, from indoor fires of villagers waiting out the storm, or even from lightning strikes. In other words, it might further demonstrate nature's disruptive power, or it might speak to human resilience.

The poem doesn't show the ultimate impact of the storm on the village, instead ending just as the rain begins "pelting." It's clear that nature has enough power to cause human panic. At the same time, the storm seems to do mostly superficial damage: it tears clothes, but for the moment, at least, does not kill people. Thus, the poem illustrates nature's power to destroy the things humans *make*—and by extension, human culture—but does not show the destruction of humanity itself. It portrays nature's power as formidable, but not necessarily as apocalyptic: humanity, in this poem's vision, might be able to endure any chaos nature can throw at it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-9
- Lines 14-15
- Lines 16-26
- Lines 27-33

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

From the west ...
... Here and there

The poem begins by describe the "African Thunderstorm" of the title as it first approaches "From the west."

Already, the poem's form reflects its content. Like the wind blowing "Here and there," this verse is all over the place. The lines vary considerably in length, for example, and are broken up by choppy enjambment. This variability creates an unsettling rhythm suited to the image of a storm "hurrying" nearer. The single-word lines "Turning / Sharply" are themselves sharp and dramatic, ratcheting up the tension.

"From the west" literally means that the storm is approaching from western skies. However, this detail also suggests a symbolic meaning. "The West" is a political term often applied to Europe and former European colonies (especially the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) that retain a majority population of European descent. This "West" has caused centuries of violence and upheaval across the African continent, from the North Atlantic slave trade, through the era of African colonialism, through the postcolonial period. The storm can therefore be read as a symbol of that violence.

This possible meaning might have struck readers as especially relevant around the time of the poem's first publication, when many African countries had recently gained or were still fighting for independence from European colonial powers. Rubadiri's own country, Malawi, gained independence from the UK during this period (1964). Rubadiri also used the directional "west" as a symbol for the political "West" in other poetry from the same period, including "The Tide that from the West Washes Africa to the Bone."

LINES 6-9

Like a plague ...
... madman chasing nothing.

Lines 6-9 present two similes that drive home the sinister nature of the storm. The speaker first compares the storm clouds to "a plague of locusts / Whirling," and then compares *that* scary phenomenon to "a madman chasing nothing."

On the most literal level, these lines describe extremely strong winds churning dark clouds around in the air—almost like a cyclone or hurricane. The storm is also churning up debris from the ground, as if it were an insect swarm "[t]ossing up things on its tail."

But that mention of locusts (which refers to a kind of crop-eating grasshopper) also brings up lots of symbolic connotations:

- Real swarms of locusts sometimes occur in the Middle East and Africa, devastating crops. Their mention here thus speaks to how devastating this storm will be. Like thunderstorms themselves, locusts are a vivid illustration of nature's power over human beings.
- These insects also feature prominently as symbols of doom and destruction throughout literary history, perhaps most famously in the Bible. A "plague of locusts" appears in the biblical Book of Exodus, for example, where it's one of the divinely ordained

disasters that help free the Israelites from slavery.

If the poem is an allegory for colonial violence and/or its stormy aftermath, this allusion might suggest that the political "storm" could have a *liberating* element to it (rather than being purely destructive). Perhaps the storm here represents violence of uprisings in the name of independence, which may ultimately free people from colonial control.

Alternatively, it might just spell disaster. On that note, the "madman" comparison works against the idea that there is some redeeming *reason* for this disaster. Taken together, these two similes portray the storm as an agent of severe and senseless destruction.

Notice that the speaker sometimes characterizes this storm as a singular entity and sometimes as a plural one. The speaker also leaps from one figure of speech to the next in trying to describe it. That shape-shifting quality is intentional: these clouds resemble one thing, then another, then another. The storm is so swift and unsettling that it seems to challenge the speaker's power to "pin it down" through description. And again, the lines vary dramatically in length here, mirroring the storm's restless changes. A flurry of present participles—"Whirling," "Tossing," "chasing"—adds to the sense of frenzied motion.

LINES 10-15

Pregnant clouds ...
... let it pass.

Lines 10-15 present a nightmarish, fantastical, almost surreal mix of images. They compare the thunderclouds first to "Pregnant" creatures that "[r]ide stately" on the wind, and then to the "dark wings" of some evil creature "perch[ing]" on the hills. Meanwhile, the wind is so strong that it "whistles" and forces trees to "bend."

The shifting descriptions make the clouds seem almost like shape-shifting figures from myth. They're metaphorically "Pregnant" with rain, but also, seemingly, with deeper significance. They might call to mind any number of legendary figures that bear monstrous children, or approach on horseback (like "stately" royalty or the horsemen of the apocalypse), or perch in "sinister" fashion (scavenger birds, demons, avenging or death-bringing angels, etc.). The ambiguity is part of the point: the reader is free to project fears onto these vague, "sinister" presences. The bottom line is that the clouds spell trouble.

In the next lines, the alliteration and assonance of "**w**ings," "**w**ind," and "**wh**istles" helps evoke the rushing, whistling sound of the wind (making this /w/ sound requires blowing air through your lips). Like the clouds, the trees that "bend to let [the wind] pass" are personified. It's as if they're bowing in the presence of "stately" passing royalty, or simply ducking to get out of the way of danger.

LINES 16-19

In the village ...
... the whirling wind,

Lines 16-19 shift the scene to a "village" in the path of the storm. For the first time, human beings enter a poem that's been dominated by nature. As if to maximize the contrast, the poet first shows readers "children"—the most vulnerable humans—reacting to this awesome show of nature's power.

In an unsettling touch of dramatic irony, these children are "delighted." This is the only upbeat note in an otherwise somber poem. It may speak to an irrepressible human spirit in the face of disaster; however, the surrounding context suggests that this delight (however refreshing) is naive. It will also contrast with the frantic movement of mothers in the village in the coming lines.

Disturbingly, the children's delight is expressed in "Screams" that the wind "Toss[es] and turn[s]." In other words, that delight may contain an undertone of anxiety, and may turn to screams of terror if the storm gets bad enough. Meanwhile, the storm takes no notice of them and drowns them out in its own "din," or noisy chaos. This again suggests the mercilessness of nature (or, symbolically, the Western powers that have transformed Africa), as well as the comparative the frailty and vulnerability of the villagers.

Alliteration ("**T**oss and **t**urn," "**wh**irling **w**ind") and assonance/internal rhyme ("**I**n the d**i**n of the whirl**i**ng w**i**nd") add emphasis to these lines about noisy tumult. The enjambments and erratic line lengths—some much longer than others—also reflect the way the storm breaks off sounds and whirls them around at random. The lines feel as loud and chaotic as the storm itself.

LINES 20-24

Women — ...
... Madly

While the village children were "delighted" by the storm, their mothers—the "Women" darting around "Madly"—are clearly alarmed by it. As adults, they understand the danger better than their kids (as do the speaker and the reader). The "babies" seem frightened as well; they're "clinging" to their moms, seeming to sense the danger more acutely than the older children.

The poem doesn't say what the women are darting into and out of (Houses? The village? The scene as a whole?) or what they're doing more generally. This lack of explanation heightens the sense of "madness" or chaos of the scene. These women are *probably* preparing for the storm, but the description makes it sound as if they're rushing around in aimless panic. And those babies may be "clinging" tightly because they fear the storm, because their mothers are running so fast, or both.

"Dart about / In and out"—the poem's only rhyming

couplet—evokes the back-and-forth rhythm of the mother's mad sprints. The odd syntax (that is, arrangement of words) and punctuation in these lines contribute to the overall sense of disarray: the detail about the babies is awkwardly inserted between dashes, while the period readers expect to follow "Madly" (or "out") is missing entirely.

In fact, enjambment means that readers aren't entirely sure where lines are meant to end throughout the passage. The sentence that began with "In the village" could feasibly stop after any one of these three lines and still make sense:

> Dart about
> In and out
> Madly

This evokes the chaotic frantic atmosphere of the village before the storm.

Also note that the men of the village aren't mentioned at all. This, too, seems like a significant omission, but the poem doesn't provide enough clues to pin down the significance. Either they're not around or they're not helping the women and children enough to feature prominently. Either way, their absence heightens the impression of social breakdown and human vulnerability as the storm approaches.

LINES 25-26

The wind whistles ...
... let it pass.

Here the poem repeats lines 14-15 almost verbatim. Only one word changes: "And" becomes "Whilst," a variant of "While" that's fairly common in British English. On the one hand, "whilst" simply adds to the alliteration in the phrase "**w**ind **wh**istles," making the wind's rushing, whistling sound even louder as the storm builds.

But the shift also suggests *ongoing* movement. Whereas above that "And" implied that the storm essentially waiting for the trees to bow down *and* let it pass, here it blows right over the trees "Whilst," or as, they bend. These actions are no longer separated, implying that the wind has become more forceful and relentless.

More broadly, the repetition of these two lines serves at least two purposes. First, it conveys the repetitive movement of the gusting wind and thrashing trees. It reminds readers that the oncoming storm is backdrop to all this frantic motion in the village.

Second, it suggests the steadfast continuity of the trees as they withstand the wind's force (again, the builds on the use of the word "whilst" rather than "and"). The storm may transform or wreck other features of the landscape—especially the vulnerable human village—but these personified trees just keep on "let[ting] it pass." No doubt they've survived other storms like it in the past and will survive others in the future.

LINES 27-29

Clothes wave like ...
... expose dangling breasts

The speaker underscores the ferocity of the storm, whose winds are strong enough to tear the clothes off the women of the village. More than ever, human beings seem vulnerable—"exposed"—in the face of nature's power.

These women are protecting their babies, but they seem to have little protection themselves. The men of the village, meanwhile, remain unmentioned, as do the villagers' houses (presumably the women are darting "In and out" of homes, but the poem doesn't specify). Now the women are even losing the clothes off their backs.

These lines also suggest various symbolic and political interpretations. The torn clothes, for instance, are compared to "tattered flags," an image that suggests political crisis and transformation:

- The poem first appeared as Rubadiri's home country of Malawi was transforming from a British colony into an independent, but dictatorial, state. That those flags are "Flying off" thus might represent a loss of national or cultural identity—which might be liberating, distressing, or both!
- Those flags may refer to the flags of *colonizers* being torn down and ripped up in the course of a rebellion or uprising. In this reading, colonialism isn't just violent in itself, but also sets the stage for later violence and unrest as colonial subjects fight for their independence.
- Or, perhaps, those "tattered flags" speak to the *colonized* people's national and cultural identities, which colonialism destroys.
- Either way, there's clearly violence and chaos involved.

The ripping off of clothes might also suggest assault or violation (for example, the military invasions and sexual violence that infamously accompanied colonialism). It might also suggest a loss of material comfort, or a loss of civilization and return to a supposedly "primitive" state. This, in turn, might recall the way racist colonizers scorned African societies as "primitive" while pillaging their cultural riches.

Overall, it's a disturbing image that sets up the ominous, militaristic imagery of the final lines: the "smell of fired smoke" and "the pelting march of the storm."

LINES 30-33

As jagged blinding ...
... of the storm.

Lines 30-33 conclude the poem with images of thunder, lightning, and driving rain. The clouds have opened up and begun drenching the village.

The sound effects of assonance ("jagged," "flashes," "crack"), consonance ("Rumble, tremble") and onomatopoeia ("Rumble," "crack") help conjure up the explosive, reverberating noise of the storm. These lines also provide the poem's first *scent-related* imagery, describing "the smell of fired smoke" in the air. What's causing this odor is unclear. Are these fires burning outdoors? Indoors? Being extinguished by the rain? Lit in fireplaces or kitchens to dry clothes, cook food, or keep people warm? Is the lightning creating a smoky smell in the atmosphere?

Readers don't know for sure, and this uncertainty makes the image—like many of the poem's details—ominous and unsettling. The smoky smell might be another sign of destruction to come, or it might be an image of human survival during turbulent times. "The pelting march of the storm" (line 33) makes the storm sound like an invading army, as if the storm is making war on the villagers. The "smell of fired smoke" (whatever its real cause) thus might be evocative of gunsmoke.

The poem breaks off here, so it's impossible to know whether or to what extent the village withstands the devastation. Again, all of these elements highlight the power nature holds over human works and lives, while mirroring other forms of violence and instability Africa has suffered—particularly at the hands of the West.

SYMBOLS

THE WEST

The storm's approach "from the west" may be the poem's most important symbolic detail. In global politics, the "Western world" is associated with Europe and countries of majority European descent, such as the U.S., Canada, and Australia. The history of Africa, including the poet's native Malawi, has included long periods of colonization, exploitation, and cultural "Westernization" by Western powers. The storm can be read as a symbol of this violence, and of the larger social upheaval it's caused.

Of course, the storm could also just be a storm and "the west" could just mean "the west." But the context of Rubadiri's other poetry argues in favor of the symbolic reading. He uses a more blunt version of the same symbolism in another of his early-career poems, "The Tide that from the West Washes Africa to the Bone":

> The tide that from the west
> With blood washes Africa
> Once washed a wooden cross.

Here is a disaster "from the west" that's clearly symbolic (the continent has never literally been engulfed in blood) and associated with colonial violence, Christianity, etc. "An African Thunderstorm" is likely using a subtler variation of the same idea.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "From the west"

CLOUDS

Clouds are a shape-shifting symbol in this poem. Indeed, clouds themselves are symbolically associated with shape-shifting and change!

Storm clouds, like those that turn up in line 2, are traditionally a symbol of impending danger. The poem leans into that symbolism:

- This village is *literally* about to experience a bad thunderstorm, and, symbolically, the clouds seem to represent some larger, destructive societal change on the horizon.
- In personifying these clouds as pregnant women "rid[ing] stately" on the wind, the speaker suggests that they're heavy and swollen with the rain they're about to shed. But they're also pregnant with *meaning*: they're "sinister," like omens. They seem to signal a momentous change—a new season, or maybe a new era, that's about to be "born."

The speaker also compares the clouds to "hurrying" figures and to "dark wings" that "perch" on the "hills." (The jumbled syntax of the first stanza leaves some ambiguity as to whether it's the clouds or just the wind being compared to "locusts" and a "madman.") This series of comparisons helps the reader visualize the clouds swiftly approaching, then seeming to slow and settle over the village. It also calls to mind various sinister presences from African, Middle Eastern, and European myths and religions—shape-shifting gods, spirits of the dead, horsemen of the apocalypse, birds that foreshadow death, and so forth—without necessarily evoking one in particular.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-9:** "Clouds come hurrying with the wind / Turning / Sharply / Here and there / Like a plague of locusts / Whirling / Tossing up things on its tail / Like a madman chasing nothing."
- **Lines 10-13:** "Pregnant clouds / Ride stately on its back / Gathering to perch on hills / Like sinister dark wings;"

LOCUSTS

The speaker compares the storm to "a plague of locusts"—that is, to a swarm of crop-eating grasshoppers. This image symbolizes impending disaster for the village that the storm is about to hit. By extension, it may symbolize *political* disaster for Africa, though perhaps with some possibility of liberation implied.

The locust symbolism in this poem builds on that fact that locusts have appeared as omens of devastation or doom in literature for thousands of years. For example, locusts show up on numerous occasions on the Bible, always in the context of disaster. Sometimes they're associated with the thwarting of human efforts (as in Deuteronomy 28:38: "Thou shalt carry much seed out into the field, and shalt gather but little in; for the locust shall consume it."). In the Book of Revelation, they appear in monstrous form as a sign of the apocalypse.

Most famously, they appear in Exodus as one of the Plagues of Egypt that God sends to compel the Egyptian Pharaoh to release the Israelites from bondage. If the poem is read as a political allegory, then these locusts links the storm with the political crises and freedom struggles of modern Africa.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-8:** "Like a plague of locusts / Whirling / Tossing up things on its tail"

DARK WINGS

The poem compares the storm clouds to "sinister dark wings" that "perch on hills." These wings link the storm with horror and death:

- They might make readers think of a bird traditionally associated with death, such as a vulture or raven. (Vultures are scavengers that feed on carcasses; they're also a familiar form of wildlife in many parts of Africa. Ravens, crows, and blackbirds are unlucky omens in many cultures.) Bats are another dark-winged creature associated with death, especially in Gothic and horror literature.
- Alternatively, these may represent the dark wings of an angel, such as the "Angel of Death," which appears in some versions of the Exodus story containing the "plague of locusts." (As a final plague, God, or his angel, kills the Egyptians' first-born sons while sparing those of the Israelites.)

That biblical symbolism, in turn, may be politically loaded. Christianity, as spread through missionaries, was a major element in Western colonizers' efforts to "civilize" and "save" the African peoples they considered inferior. If this poem is read as an allegory for Western political violence, perhaps it's drawing an unflattering, ironic comparison between Western colonizers and the deadly plagues from their own Bible.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "Gathering to perch on hills / Like sinister dark wings;"

CLOTHES

At the end of the poem, clothes become a complex symbol. As the wind tears at them, they "wave like tattered flags." And as the wind rips them away, they "expose" the bare bodies of the village women.

On one level, then, these clothes are associated with protection and privacy; with human-made objects (as opposed to natural ones, such as the "trees" that withstand the storm); with human culture, including political culture ("flags"); and perhaps even with civilization itself. This storm seems capable of damaging or destroying all these things. In this way, it's a vivid demonstration of nature's power over humanity.

Reading the poem allegorically, these flying, "tattered flags" might also be a reference to the devastation of colonialism, which many Africans experienced as political chaos, cultural destruction, and even physical violation. The eras of colonization and decolonization brought many *literal* changes in the flags (and clothing) of African peoples. The speaker may also intend some irony with respect to colonizers' claims that they were "civilizing" Africans. Here the impact from "the west" is *de*-civilizing—a savage assault on dignity, privacy, and safety. In other words, colonialism is ripping up the social fabric of this society.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 27-29:** "Clothes wave like tattered flags / Flying off / To expose dangling breasts"

WIND

Wind is symbolically linked with change, including political change. Think of political sayings such as "the way the wind is blowing" or "putting your finger to the wind" (i.e., testing public opinion). The word also appeared in the "Wind of Change" speech British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan delivered in 1960, when a number of African countries (including Rubadiri's) were still under British control:

- In this speech, Macmillan treated the independence movements sweeping Africa as a kind of unstoppable force, suggesting that British colonialism in the region was nearing its end: "The wind of change is blowing through this continent."

- Thus, the "wind" in the poem may be symbolically linked with particular changes in Africa during the time Rubadiri was writing.
- At the same time, it may also be linked with prior turbulence originating "From the west."

Strong wind is also associated with the power of nature in general, and sometimes with divine power (as in the case of the winds that bring and remove the "plague of locusts" in Exodus). The wind in this poem is linked with merciless and overwhelming force, whether that force is interpreted as natural, divine, or political. It has the power to stir up chaos, transform its surroundings, reduce human communication to mere noise ("Screams"), and damage or destroy markers of human culture and identity ("Clothes," "flags").

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-9:** "From the west / Clouds come hurrying with the wind / Turning / Sharply / Here and there / Like a plague of locusts / Whirling / Tossing up things on its tail / Like a madman chasing nothing."
- **Lines 14-15:** "The wind whistles by / And trees bend to let it pass."
- **Lines 17-19:** "Screams of delighted children / Toss and turn / In the din of the whirling wind,"
- **Lines 25-26:** "The wind whistles by / Whilst trees bend to let it pass."
- **Lines 27-29:** "Clothes wave like tattered flags / Flying off / To expose dangling breasts"

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

Most of the poem's figurative language occurs in the form of similes, but it contains several metaphors as well.

For example, the thunderclouds are metaphorically "pregnant": they're heavy with the rain they're about to release, and apparently with some larger significance as well. (Compare the phrase "a pregnant pause," meaning a pause that's likely to be followed by some meaningful statement.) The speaker also says that these pregnant clouds "Ride stately" on the "back" of the wind: that is, the wind blows them along, and they look impressive and grand as they approach.

- Note that both of these metaphors are more specifically a kind of personification. This, in turn, supports an allegorical reading of the poem wherein the storm clouds represent the looming thread of political violence.

Another important metaphor also occurs in the last line of the poem, which describes "the pelting march of the storm." As the thunderstorm advances and brings a hard-driving rain, the speaker compares it to a "march[ing]" army that's "pelting" the village with bullets or other projectiles. This imagery subtly links the storm with other forms of violence Africa has suffered during its history, including military violence "from the west" (that is, the political West).

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "Pregnant clouds / Ride stately on its back"
- **Line 33:** "the pelting march of the storm"

SIMILE

The poem contains four similes, the first three of which illustrate the motion and appearance of the storm:

- First, the cloud-bearing winds are turning "Like a plague of locusts";
- Then they're "Whirling" and tossing up debris "Like a madman chasing nothing";
- Finally, the clouds are "Gathering to perch on hills / Like sinister dark wings."

These three comparisons help the reader visualize the storm rushing toward and appearing to settle over the village. At the same time, they characterize the storm as an ominous force of senseless destruction, even a threat to the survival of this human community.

In particular, the biblical "plague of locusts" image suggests an apocalyptic threat—though the Plagues of Egypt story concerns the freeing of one people (the Israelites) as well as the devastation of another (the Egyptians). If the poem is an allegory for political violence in Africa, it might therefore encompass liberating as well as devastating conflict.

The fourth simile illustrates the storm's effect on the village women, whose "Clothes wave like tattered flags" while "Flying off / To expose dangling breasts." The image of tattered flags again symbolically links the storm with political violence and change. The "expos[ure]" of the village women is also a disturbing, complex image. On the literal level, it illustrates the terrible power of the storm, while on the symbolic level, it primarily suggests violation—the stripping away of physical protection, privacy, and/or culture. Again, this would align with a reading of the poem as an implied critique of (Western) political violence.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-7:** "Clouds come hurrying with the wind / Turning / Sharply / Here and there / Like a plague of locusts / Whirling"
- **Lines 8-9:** "Tossing up things on its tail / Like a madman

chasing nothing."
- **Lines 12-13:** "Gathering to perch on hills / Like sinister dark wings;"
- **Lines 27-28:** "Clothes wave like tattered flags / Flying off"

ENJAMBMENT

"An African Thunderstorm" contains frequent, striking enjambments. Due to Rubadiri's creative punctuation choices, it's hard to know exactly how many lines are enjambed. But it's safe to say that it's an important device in the poem, adding a sense of instability and unpredictability to the lines that reflects the chaos of the impending storm.

In fact, enjambment makes it so that sometimes readers aren't even sure what words belong to what clauses, as in lines 23-25:

> In and out
> Madly
> The wind whistles by

Here, it's not clear whether the word "Madly" describes the way the women move "In and out" or the way "The wind whistles."

Sometimes enjambment evokes the poem's content more directly. For example, the enjambment at the end of line 3 divides the words "Turning" and "Sharply," such that the line break mimics the sharp turning of the wind:

> Turning
> Sharply

The enjambments at the ends of lines 8 and 12 divide similes in half, separating the image from the thing it's being compared to—and making these surreal comparisons all the more startling and emphatic:

> Tossing up things on its tail
> Like a madman chasing nothing.
> [...]
> Gathering to perch on hills
> Like sinister dark wings;

The enjambments at the ends of line 17 and 18 seem to echo the way the wind cuts off and "toss[es]" around the children's "Screams":

> Screams of delighted children
> Toss and turn
> In the din [...]

In general, the frequent enjambments make the verse rough, cacophonous, unpredictable, and full of startling "breaks." Again, all of these qualities mirror the noise, chaos, and violence of the storm.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "west / Clouds"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Turning / Sharply"
- **Lines 5-6:** "there / Like"
- **Lines 8-9:** "tail / Like"
- **Lines 10-11:** "clouds / Ride"
- **Lines 12-13:** "hills / Like"
- **Lines 14-15:** "by / And"
- **Lines 16-17:** "village / Screams"
- **Lines 17-18:** "children / Toss"
- **Lines 18-19:** "turn / In"
- **Lines 23-25:** "out / Madly / The "
- **Lines 25-26:** "by / Whilst"
- **Lines 27-28:** "flags / Flying"
- **Lines 28-29:** "off / To"
- **Lines 29-30:** "breasts / As"
- **Lines 30-31:** "flashes / Rumble"
- **Lines 31-32:** "crack / Amidst"
- **Lines 32-33:** "smoke / And"

ALLITERATION

The poem uses frequent alliteration to help evoke the sound of the storm. In particular, it uses many /w/ sounds to capture the rushing, whistling wind: "west," "wind," "Whirling," "wings," "whistles," "Women," and "Whilst." Zooming in on lines 19-20, notice how "whirling wind, / Women" also links the "wind" and the "women" (nature and humans) thematically, as both rush madly around.

The many /t/ sounds in the poem add to the sense of mounting chaos, with words such as "Turning, "Tossing," and "tail" in the first stanza and "toss and turn" capturing the sharp, repetitive motions of the wind.

Alliteration can also help simply draw attention to certain images in the poem, as with "Babies" and "backs" in line 21. These babies are "clinging" so tightly to their moms' backs that it's as if they're fused together—a connection the shared /b/ sound helps emphasize.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "west"
- **Line 2:** "wind"
- **Line 3:** "Turning"
- **Line 7:** "Whirling"
- **Line 8:** "Tossing," "tail"
- **Line 13:** "wings"
- **Line 14:** "wind whistles"
- **Line 18:** "Toss," "turn"

- **Line 19:** “whirling wind”
- **Line 20:** “Women”
- **Line 21:** “Babies,” “backs”
- **Line 25:** “wind whistles”
- **Line 26:** “Whilst”
- **Lines 27-28:** “flags / Flying”
- **Line 31:** “Rumble,” “tremble”
- **Line 32:** “smell,” “smoke”
- **Line 33:** “storm”

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration and consonance, assonance helps evoke the sound of the storm and draw thematic links between words. For example, the speaker strongly links the sound of the wind with the short /i/ vowel. Notice how often this sound appears in lines 12-14:

> [...] hills
> Like sinister dark wings;
> The wind whistles by

And in lines 19-25:

> In the din of the whirling wind,
> Women —
> Babies clinging on their backs —
> [...]
> The wind whistles by

Often this assonance combines with consonance and alliteration to make words stand out all the more clearly to readers, as in "wings," "wind," "Women," and "whistles." It's as if the sounds in the *word* "wind" have pervaded the entire poem, much as the wind itself is sweeping through the landscape. Also notice how this /i/ assonance combines with nasal, liquid, and sibilant consonants here—/n/, /l/, and /s/—to draw out the thin, high-pitched, streaming, whistling qualities of all this wind.

A similar kind of illustrative assonance crops up in lines 30-31. The short /a/ vowel repeats in "jagged," "flashes," and "crack," conjuring up the percussive, repetitive sound of lightning and thunder. ("Crack" in this context is also an onomatopoeia.) Through all these effects, the speaker helps the reader "hear" the storm.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** “hills”
- **Line 13:** “sinister,” “wings”
- **Line 14:** “wind whistles”
- **Line 19:** “In,” “din,” “whirling,” “wind”
- **Line 20:** “Women”
- **Line 21:** “clinging”
- **Line 23:** “In”
- **Line 25:** “wind,” “whistles”
- **Line 30:** “jagged,” “flashes”
- **Line 31:** “crack”

ONOMATOPOEIA

"An African Thunderstorm" uses onomatopoeia several times to evoke the sound of the storm. The breathy /w/ and sibilant /s/ sounds of "whistles," for example, mimic the high-pitched hiss of the wind. (Although they're not true onomatopoeia, "whirling," "whilst," and "wind" itself add to this effect through alliteration.)

Later, the words "Rumble" (whose sounds rumble up from low in the throat to the lips) and "crack" (a monosyllable ending on a sharp, explosive consonant) evoke the sounds of thunder and lightning, respectively. As with "whistles," these words are echoed by surrounding, non-onomatopoeia words with similar vowel or consonant sounds: "jagged," "flashes," and "tremble." In particular, "Rumble, tremble" sounds like an extended reverberation.

These sound effects combine with visual effects—such as uneven lines and "missing" punctuation—to make the poem *echo* and *mirror* the experience of an intense, chaotic storm.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** “whistles”
- **Line 25:** “whistles”
- **Line 31:** “Rumble,” “crack”

PERSONIFICATION

The poem describes the storm through a variety of metaphors and similes, some of which involve personification. First, the clouds and wind "come hurrying" as if they're in a rush to reach the village; then they're compared to "a madman chasing nothing." These phrases establish a mood of tension, anxiety, and even frenzy in the poem. They depict nature as a violent, irrational force capable of swift destruction. (And, if readers take the poem as a political allegory, they also compare the political West to an irrational force of nature.)

Immediately afterward, the clouds are personified as "[p]regnant" women "rid[ing] stately" on the wind. The comparison suggests there is a grandeur to this force of nature even as it remains (as the next lines say) "sinister." Visually, the storm seems to slow and pause over the village. It's full of rain but also heavy with significance, bringing a great and ominous change that will soon be "born."

The trees are personified, too: they "bend to let [the storm] pass." On the literal level, this image shows that the wind is

strong enough to bend tree trunks. But the personification suggests that the trees, as part of nature, are strong and flexible enough to withstand the storm—even if they have to defer to its greater strength. They can "bend"; it's the humans who are vulnerable enough to break. (This might also suggest that the African land is less vulnerable than African peoples to other forms of violence, such as Western colonialism.)

The poem's final phrase suggests personification as well: "the pelting march of the storm" sounds like an attacking army. Here, again, nature (and/or the political West) is imagined as a violent and invasive force.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Clouds come hurrying"
- **Line 9:** "Like a madman chasing nothing"
- **Lines 10-11:** "Pregnant clouds / Ride stately on its back"
- **Line 15:** "trees bend to let it pass"
- **Line 26:** "trees bend to let it pass"
- **Line 33:** "the pelting march of the storm"

REPETITION

The poem uses repetition to depict the storm as an unstoppable force. Both the first and second stanzas, for example, begin with the image of storm clouds on the wind, setting a mood of tension and anticipation. In fact, the poem mentions the "wind" four separate times, as if to emphasize its relentlessness. The speaker also uses the adjective "whirling" twice, and in doing so evokes the cyclical wind itself, the way it swirls around and around.

An entire phrase then repeats almost verbatim at the end of the second and third stanzas:

> The wind whistles by
> And trees bend to let it pass.

This later becomes:

> The wind whistles by
> Whilst trees bend to let it pass.

On the one hand, this repetition reminds readers of the wind's arrival and evokes the intense thrashing motion of the trees. At the same time, the slight tweak in wording here—moving from "And" to "Whilst"—subtly suggests that the storm has grown more powerful and insistent, actively pushing through the trees even as they try to "bend to let it pass."

In an example of polyptoton, the word "madman" in the first stanza finds an echo in the "Madly" darting women of the third (though note that this "Madly" might equally refer to the whistling wind; the poem's lack of punctuation keeps things ambiguous). This storm, such repetitive suggests, is making the village act as wildly and "madly" as itself.

Finally, the poem also contains no fewer than twelve present participles, or "-ing" verbs that function as verbs or adjectives: "hurrying," "Turning," "Whirling," "Tossing," "chasing," "Gathering," "whirling," "clinging," "Flying," "dangling," "blinding," and "pelting." This pileup of words that signify ongoing action creates the impression of constant, frantic motion.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Clouds come hurrying with the wind"
- **Line 3:** "Turning"
- **Line 7:** "Whirling"
- **Line 8:** "Tossing"
- **Line 9:** "madman," "chasing"
- **Lines 10-11:** "Pregnant clouds / Ride stately on its back"
- **Line 12:** "Gathering"
- **Lines 14-15:** "The wind whistles by / And trees bend to let it pass."
- **Line 19:** "the whirling wind"
- **Line 21:** "clinging"
- **Line 24:** "Madly"
- **Lines 25-26:** "The wind whistles by / Whilst trees bend to let it pass."
- **Line 28:** "Flying"
- **Line 29:** "dangling"
- **Line 30:** "blinding"
- **Line 33:** "pelting"

VOCABULARY

Locusts (Line 6) - Locusts are grasshoppers that can, under certain climate conditions, form massive, crop-destroying swarms. These swarms (or "plagues") sometimes occur in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and other regions.

Din (Line 19) - A big uproar, a confused jumble of noises.

Whilst (Line 26) - While. This version of the word is common in British English and rare in American English.

Fired (Line 32) - "Fired" suggests that this smoke is coming, or came, from some sort of actively fueled flames (as opposed to, say, an electric stove burner or mist in the air). The rain may be extinguishing outdoor fires such as cook fires, or the villagers may be lighting fires indoors (for light, warmth, etc.) as they wait out the storm.It's also possible that the poet is characterizing the smell of the storm itself, including the ozone smell produced by lightning.

Pelting (Line 33) - To "pelt" is to bombard with small projectiles such as raindrops, stones, or even bullets. Here, the storm is pelting the village with a heavy rain (and perhaps hail as well).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"An African Thunderstorm" is a free verse poem that does not follow any specific form. It emerged from a period when many East African poets were abandoning traditional English form and meter as a gesture of independence from their former colonizers.

That said, the poem contains a number of interesting formal features that evoke the wildness of the storm and the frantic hubbub of the villagers. For example, the lines vary widely in length, from one to seven words and two to eight syllables per line. Their irregularity and unpredictability fit the turmoil of the scene.

The short lines, frequent enjambments, and lack of expected punctuation also give the verse a breathless quality that mirrors the breathless anticipation of the villagers. It's as if the text itself is chaotically blowing around in the wind.

At the same time, there's regularity in the way each stanza comes to rest on a period, as if the poem were pausing to catch its breath. Also note that two stanzas also end with "The wind whistles by / [And/Whilst] trees bend to let it pass," making this phrase almost a refrain. This repeated image highlights a contrast between the frantic humans and their natural environment: for the trees, these storms aren't unique disasters but repetitive events that can be easily withstood.

METER

"An African Thunderstorm" does not use regular meter. It's written in a free verse marked by short lines and frequent enjambments. (The longest lines in the poem contain eight syllables, while the shortest contain only two.) The irregular line lengths and unpredictable verse rhythms reflect the chaotic nature of the storm.

At the same time, the verse contains some interesting rhythmic qualities. Many of the lines begin with a stressed syllable, as in the first stanza:

> **Clouds** come [...]
> **Turn**ing
> **Sharp**ly
> **Here** and there
> [...]
> **Whirl**ing
> **Toss**ing [...]

This gives the poem a punchy, percussive quality appropriate to a description of a violent storm. Meanwhile, the mini-couplet "**Dart** a**bout** / **In** and **out**" in the third stanza offers a brief flash of meter and rhyme, capturing the rhythm of women running in and out of doors.

Rubadiri's use of free verse may also have political significance. Many East African poets of the 1960s abandoned traditional English-language meter as a way of breaking from the British colonial past. As a poem from 1960s Malawi, which had recently won independence from the UK, "An African Thunderstorm" reflects this trend.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "An African Thunderstorm" contains no rhyme scheme. It does contain one small instance of end rhyme, however: the phrase "Dart about / In and out" in the second stanza. These rhyming lines help evoke the repetitive, back-and-forth motion of women darting and in and out of their homes (or in and out of the scene).

In general, the poem's lack of rhyme—and other formal devices, such as meter and uniform stanza length—mirrors the unpredictability and disorder of the storm. Rather than unfolding according to any fixed way, it unfolds as a succession of uneven lines and jarring images.

SPEAKER

The poem is narrated in the third person, and readers don't learn anything about the speaker. That said, the poem is likely an allegory for the impact of Western colonial powers on Africa, and in that way, it reflects the poet's personal perspective: David Rubadiri was a native of Malawi (formerly Nyasaland) who saw his country achieve independence from British colonial rule, as well as a diplomat with a keen awareness of broader political trends in Africa.

The poem also contains moments when the third-person voice is slightly less "objective" and the poet's personality or judgment peeks through:

- The speaker describes the storm clouds in brooding, biblical, almost apocalyptic terms, comparing them to "a plague of locusts" and to "sinister dark wings."
- The speaker also compares them to a hallucinating "madman" and describes women scurrying "Madly" in response.
- The detail about the "Screams of delighted children" rings with dramatic irony as well: the speaker, and therefore the reader, understands better than these children how dangerous the storm is. (It's hardly a cause for delight, unless the adults are overreacting, which would be another irony.)

Clearly, then, the speaker views the storm not as an ordinary weather event but as a more ominous force of chaos and social breakdown.

SETTING

The poem's setting is given only as "Africa," which encompasses a wide range of countries and climates. Rubadiri may have in mind a climate similar to that of his native Malawi, a landlocked country in the tropical zone of East Africa. Countries in this zone typically experience dry seasons followed by intense rainy seasons, which can bring destructive storms of the kind portrayed in the poem. Indeed, the title may suggest that this storm is both *happening* in Africa and *characteristic* of Africa.

Rubadiri's home country, like many in Africa, also has a history of colonization and exploitation by "Western" countries. This background charges the storm "From the west" with political symbolism.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"An African Thunderstorm" was first published in the 1960s, an era when many African countries were fighting for, or had recently achieved, independence from European colonizers. (Rubadiri's native Malawi was no exception; it gained independence from the UK in 1964.) At the same time, many writers from these countries were finding ways to assert their independence from European literary traditions, whether by employing pre-colonial languages and traditions, inventing new forms and effects in European languages, or some combination of both.

"An African Thunderstorm" fits this trend: it avoids meter and rhyme while employing distinctly "African" scenery and imagery. Moreover, it allows for an allegorical reading that likens the Western world's effect on Africa to that of a vicious storm. (Some of Rubadiri's other poetry from this period, such as "The Tide that from the West Washes Africa to the Bone," makes the commentary on the political "West" more obvious.)

Storms of the kind described in the poem are characteristic of Rubadiri's region, which experiences drought seasons followed by rainy seasons. They appear in other literature of the region as well. For example, Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o describes a similar downpour in his novel *A Grain of Wheat* (1967).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

On the surface, "An African Thunderstorm" seems timeless. It could be describing any African village experiencing a thunderstorm during any year. However, as a symbolic commentary on the political "West," it reflects the history of European imperial colonialism in Africa, as well as the immediate post-colonial period.

This history is too complex to summarize in full, but it's dominated by racism and violence. During the major phase of European colonization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, competing European countries forced most of the continent under their control. Only Liberia and Ethiopia remained independent. With colonization came a variety of abuses, including military aggression, political oppression, economic exploitation, sexual violence, and cultural erasure.

Moreover, the early phase of this invasion followed the last phase of the transatlantic slave trade, during which millions of West and Central Africans were captured and sold into slavery in the Americas and Europe. The colonial period ended with a period of "decolonization" in the mid-to-late 20th century, during which a series of African political movements and uprisings secured independence for peoples across the continent.

All these events hover in the background of "An African Thunderstorm," even if the poem doesn't comment on them explicitly. In fact, the poem's political commentary contains deliberate ambiguity. It never openly attacks Western countries (or the poet's home country), instead cloaking criticism in symbolism.

As a symbol, however, this storm "from the west" speaks volumes. It would have had special resonance for its first audiences in the 1960s, when many African independence struggles were recent or still ongoing. Rubadiri's own country, Malawi (formerly Nyasaland), achieved independence from the UK in 1964; however, this victory was followed by a dictatorship that lasted decades.

"An African Thunderstorm" can thus be read as a commentary on Western colonialism, its aftermath, or both. Its mood of tense anticipation reflects its stormy era; its portrait of alarmed and vulnerable women and children reflects several generations of traumatic experience in the region.

Some of its imagery may stem from specific events, such as the landmark 1960 "Wind of Change" speech in which British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan acknowledged the independence movements sweeping Africa:

> The wind of change is blowing through this continent and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact.

The poem may, in part, dramatize this transformative "wind."

Rubadiri himself was deeply involved in politics. He served Malawi as its first U.N. ambassador until his conflicts with the dictatorial Banda regime forced him into exile in 1965. (After the regime fell in the 1990s, he resumed his ambassadorship.) He understood the power and risks of political speech, and his personal experience likely informed the sharp—though not overt—political commentary of "An African Thunderstorm."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Video Interview with the Poet — Watch a 1964 interview with David Rubadiri via Indiana University Media Collections. (https://media.dlib.indiana.edu/media_objects/p8418p57f)
- A Biography of the Poet — Read an obituary and biography of David Rubadiri. (https://www.kenyans.co.ke/news/33155-victoria-rubadiri-mourns-her-grandfather-prof-david-rubadiri)
- The Poet in 1966 — Read a magazine interview with David Rubadiri from 1966, around the time thispoem was written. (https://books.google.fr/books?id=2TkDAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA39&dq=david+rubadiri&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiu4ca3sNPvAhURnBQKHcEjAZAQ6A
- Malawi's History — Learn about the history of colonial and post-independence Malawi, the poet's home country. (https://www.britannica.com/place/Malawi/History#ref281535)

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