



**ENGLISH HL
GRADE 12**

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POETRY NOTES ON AN AFRICAN THUNDERSTORM

Presented by Mrs Stevens

1. AN AFRICAN THUNDERSTORM

David Rubadiri

- 1 From the west
- 2 Clouds come hurrying with the wind
- 3 Turning sharply
- 4 Here and there
- 5 Like a plague of locusts
- 6 Whirling,
- 7 Tossing up things on its tail
- 8 Like a madman chasing nothing.

- 9 Pregnant clouds
- 10 Ride stately on its back,
- 11 Gathering to perch on hills
- 12 Like sinister dark wings;
- 13 The wind whistles by
- 14 And trees bend to let it pass.

- 15 In the village
- 16 Screams of delighted children,
- 17 Toss and turn
- 18 In the din of the whirling wind,
- 19 Women -
- 20 Babies clinging on their backs -
- 21 Dart about
- 22 In and out
- 23 Madly;
- 24 The wind whistles by
- 25 Whilst trees bend to let it pass.
- 26 Clothes wave like tattered flags
- 27 Flying off
- 28 To expose dangling breasts
- 29 As jagged blinding flashes
- 30 Rumble, tremble and crack
- 31 Amidst the smell of fired smoke
- 32 And the pelting march of the storm.

DICTION

WORD	MEANING
Line 5 - plague	an affliction/disease regarded as divine punishment; an invasion
Line 5 - locusts	grasshoppers
Line 7 - tossing	a jerking, or throwing, or spinning movement or action
Line 9 - stately	dignified, imposing
Line 11 - to perch	to come to rest after flying
Line 12 - sinister	evil looking, ominous, threatening
Line 16 - delighted	greatly pleased, happy
Line 18 - din	a loud continuous noise
Line 18 - whirling	a fast turning movement
Line 21 - dart	sudden, quick forward movement
Line 26 - tattered	worn out, torn
Line 28 - dangling	to hang and sway loosely
Line 28 - expose	to leave unprotected, to display
Line 29 - jagged	having a rough, uneven edge
Line 30 - rumble	low, dull, rolling sound
Line 31 - pelting	to fall down heavily and quickly

BACKGROUND OF POET

David Rubadiri was born in 1930, in Malawi. He studied in Uganda and Cambridge. In 1964, when Malawi gained independence, Rubadiri was appointed Malawi's first ambassador to the United States of America and the United Nations. He left the government in 1965 when he and President Hastings Banda had a disagreement, but he later returned to the Washington embassy after Banda's removal from power.

SUMMARY

An African thunderstorm is a poem that deals with the theme man versus nature and it is centred in a village in Africa. The poem describes a typical African thunderstorm, with all its intensity. In African society, rain is a blessing; everything loves the approach of rain. It is good for the crops and the animals as it increases the harvest. The children scream in delight, and due their innocence, are completely unaware of the dangerous and destructive nature of the storm whereas their mothers dart with their children to find safety. The mighty winds pass through the village even making nature bow to its power until the storm hits.

In **STANZA 1**, the images of **the storm and its elements** (the **clouds** and the **wind**) are frightening:

- ▶ The **clouds** are compared to a '*plague of locusts*' (line 5).
This simile suggests destruction, because of the way locusts descend on fields and crops and wipe out everything that is growing, in a matter of minutes, causing starvation.
- ▶ The **wind** is compared to a powerful animal '*tossing up things on its tail*' (line 7).
This metaphor reinforces the animal savagery in the simile of the '*locusts*' (line 5).
- ▶ In the last line the wind is compared to a '*madman chasing nothing*' (line 8) and this simile tells us about the frightening unpredictability of the coming storm.

In **STANZA 2** the images reinforce the **comparisons with frightening creatures** and introduce a **new image of the storm**:

- ▶ The **clouds** are personified in the first three lines: they are '*pregnant*' (line 9), which suggests the weight of water they will release onto the land, and they '*ride stately*' (line 10), like queens. In line 11 they are '*gathering*', like a group that has strength in numbers.
- ▶ In line 12, the poet continues with an *animal comparison*, '*Like dark sinister wings*', suggesting in this simile that the clouds are frightening birds of prey.
- ▶ The image of the **wind** in line 14, in which the '*trees bend to let it pass*' tells us that the wind meets no resistance, which heightens its power.

In **STANZA 3**, the **storm** reaches a **climax** and the images of **chaos and destruction** reflect the **impact on humans**:

- ▶ **Initially**, in line 16, there is a sense that the **storm is fun**, because we hear '*screams of delighted children*'.
- ▶ But this happy image is **contrasted** with the **restlessness and uncertainty of the women** who, as they '*Dart about/In and out/Madly*' (lines 21–23) are at the mercy of the storm.
- ▶ The simile in line 25 of the **women's clothes** being **torn off** them '*like tattered flags*' is an image of **loss** and underlines the sense of the **storm** as **all-powerful and ruthless**.
- ▶ In the last line, the metaphor in which the **storm is compared to an army** ('*the pelting march of the storm*') confirms the storm as a **destructive force**.

SOUND DEVICES

Storms are **noisy events** and **thunderstorms** are particularly **frightening** because of the noise. The poet has used a range of **sound devices** to create the **effects of the wind, rain, thunder and lightning**.

In **Stanza 1**, there is onomatopoeia in lines 2 and 6, with the words ‘*hurrying*’ and ‘*whirling*’, which sound like wind rushing through the air.

In **Stanza 2**, the poet uses onomatopoeia in line 13, with ‘*whistles*’.

In **Stanza 3** there are many sound devices to emphasise the arrival of the storm:

- ▶ The alliteration in line 17, ‘*Toss and turn*’, suggests chaotic movement created by the strong wind.
- ▶ In line 18, the onomatopoeia of ‘*din*’ emphasises the deep noise, and of ‘*whirling*’ continues the powerful movement and sound of the wind.
- ▶ The word ‘*whistles*’ appears again in line 24, and this repetition emphasises the ongoing noise.
- ▶ The alliteration in lines 26 – 27 (‘*flags/flying off*’) conjures up the sounds of the clothes flapping uncontrollably in the wind.
- ▶ Line 30 is dense with onomatopoeia: ‘*rumble*’ is the noise of the thunder, ‘*tremble*’ is the shaking effect of the thunder and ‘*crack*’ is the loud, frightening noise when the thunder is very close. The interplay of words that produce harsh sounds are known as Cacophony.

DICTION

The choice of verbs helps to build the momentum of the storm. The verbs relate to movement and are in a present participle form (ending in ‘*-ing*’), which makes the verb seem more vivid:

Stanza 1: ‘*Hurrying*’, ‘*turning*’, ‘*whirling*’, ‘*tossing*’ and ‘*chasing*’ all create a sense of chaotic movement.

Stanza 2: The action continues with ‘*ride*’, ‘*gathering*’, ‘*whistles*’ and ‘*bend*’.

Stanza 3: The climax of the storm is reached with verbs such as: ‘*Toss and turn*’, ‘*dart*’, ‘*whistles*’, ‘*wave*’, ‘*flying*’, ‘*Rumble, tremble and crack*’.

REPETITION:

- ▶ The repetition of words emphasise the power of the wind and the powerlessness of everything in its wake: ‘*The Wind whistles by/And trees bend to let it pass*’ in **Stanza 2** is repeated as, ‘*The Wind whistles by/Whilst the trees bend to let it pass*’ in **Stanza 3**.
In **Stanza 1**, the poet uses the word ‘*madman*’ in line 8 and the word ‘*madly*’ in **Stanza 3** and line 23 to emphasise how irrational the storm is.

- Finally, the words associated with the children and women emphasise their helplessness in the face of the storm: The children ‘*scream*’, babies are ‘*clinging*’, the women ‘*Dart about/Madly*’ and their clothes are torn off by the wind and ‘*wave like tattered flags*’.

CONTRAST: ‘*screams of delighted children*’ emphasises the contrast between the happy screams of the innocent children who don't know the true danger of the storm to the women who fear for their lives and the lives of their children who try to ‘*Women babies clinging on their backs dart*’.

TONE AND MOOD

- This poem echoes the energy of the storm; the tone is ominous (suggesting something bad is going to happen): words like ‘*plague*’ and ‘*madman*’ in **Stanza 1**, ‘dark sinister’ in **Stanza 2**, and ‘*madly*’, ‘*jagged blinding*’, ‘*Rumble, tremble, and crack*’ in **Stanza 3** all contribute to an uneasy, uncomfortable mood.
- The short, uneven lines, especially in **Stanza 3**, which brings the climax of the storm, help create a mood of chaos and devastation.

IMPORTANT POINTS

	FORM	CONTENT	POETIC DEVICES	EFFECT
Stanza 1	Free verse; varying line lengths	The speaker describes the <u>approaching storm</u> .	Comparisons (similes) to a <u>plague of locusts</u> and a <u>madman</u> Extensive use of verbs denoting physical action	It <u>warns of bad things to come</u> . The power of the storm is felt.
Stanza 2	Free verse; longer and more even lines	The speaker describes the <u>approaching clouds and wind</u> .	Personification: ‘ <i>pregnant clouds</i> ’ are heavy with water Metaphor: the clouds ‘ <i>perch</i> ’ and have ‘ <i>wings</i> ’, like an animal	It suggests a possibility of a life-giving force, but then this is overridden by their ‘ <i>sinister wings</i> ’.
Stanza 3	Free verse; very uneven lines to emphasise the chaos	The storm hits the village and we see the <u>effects on the women and children</u> .	Similes and metaphors that compare the storm to a very <u>destructive force</u> Sound devices like onomatopoeia and alliteration ‘ <i>din</i> ’ and ‘ <i>whirling</i> ’	We feel the <u>fear</u> that the <u>people felt</u> in the face of this brutal <u>violence and chaos</u> . These harsh sounds underline <u>the fear</u> and <u>devastation the storm causes</u> .

FORM AND STRUCTURE

- ✓ The poem has three stanzas and is written in free verse. It is divided into two parts which divide the content into the general and the specific. The first part (stanzas 1 and 2) describes the storm as it gathers momentum (tension), and stanza 3 describes its impact on human existence.
- ✓ The irregular number of words on a line, with many single-word lines, mirror the unpredictability and chaos of the storm.
- ✓ 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. This sets out the advancing aspects of the storm and build up the tension.
- ✓ The description of '*The Wind whistles by/And trees bend to let it pass*' in the second 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 away to allow it to progress unhindered.
- ✓ The last stanza is longer and describes the effects of the storm on people and how they are at the mercy of the power of the elements.