Football at Slack

SUMMARY

In the deep spaces between the hills, on a naked stretch of high ground, men dressed in bright colors bounced around just as their ball was bounced around by the wind.

When the windswept ball bounced up into the air, the men, dressed in happy colors, erupted like jets of water in order to hit it with their heads. But the ball was carried off by the wind.

The buoyant men chased after it. The ball kept bouncing all around before getting pinned in place by the wind over a group of trees. The men all yelled at once, and then the wind sent their ball back to them.

Wind pounded down from burning gaps in the sky (perhaps a reference to lightning or to the vivid colors of the sun in gaps between storm clouds) and the hills were growing dark. The storm was trying to amaze the men. Its harsh light was like a crazed artist mixing paints and flinging splatters of darkness. The rain pounded the ground with the force of a machine that presses steel into shape.

Their hair flattened against their scalps, the men splashed around in puddles, sending up glittering droplets of water. Their yells floated up through the air, barely audible above the storm, and the men were cleansed by the rain and happy.

Meanwhile, the hills kept filling with water and sinking, the valleys between them becoming an incredible shade of blue below the storm, which had formed over the Atlantic ocean.

But the men kept jumping, their legs revolving in the air, and the goalkeeper flew across his side.

And eventually the sun—that golden inferno—lifted up the edge of the clouds so that it could watch these men playing their game.

THEMES

THE POWER OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

"Football at Slack" depicts a group of men playing "football" (i.e., soccer) on a stormy day. Rather than being put off by the strong "winds" and "rain," the men take enthusiastic pleasure in the weather. Even as the world itself seems to be drowning in the deluge of the storm, the men carry on with their game until the sun returns, drawn out by their merriment. Through its depiction of the men's unflappable delight, the poem celebrates the indomitable strength of the human spirit. It also suggests the value of pleasure, wonder, and play as means of weathering the metaphorical "storms" of life.

The speaker describes a soccer game that has been interrupted by "wind," "rain," and darkness. "[M]erry-coloured men" (a reference to their brightly colored uniforms and, perhaps, their happy dispositions) are running after their "ball" as it's blown about by the wind. The storm grows fiercer, winds pummelling down "from fiery holes in heaven" as gloomy darkness sweeps across the hills.

Yet the men don't seem to resent this interruption to their game. When their ball gets stuck in the trees, for instance, they simply "shout[] together" until the wind blows it back—as though the wind were just another player. They're outright wonderstruck by the storm, in fact, whose swirling winds "awe" them. The speaker treats the storm like an artist wildly mixing paints across the canvas of the sky and tossing about splashes of darkness.

Even when the rain pounds so heavily it's like "a steel press" pressing down on the earth, and when the men's hair is "plastered" (or completely flattened) against their heads, they still don't get upset or abandon their game. Instead, they tread "water / to puddle glitter"—that is, stomp through puddles and delight in the scintillating, beautiful splashes thrown up.

The speaker describes these men as "washed and happy"—they're soaking wet, but they're still having a good time, refreshed and cleansed rather than beaten down by the storm. Even as the rest of the world seems to sink like a "foundering" ship, the men remain immersed in their game. The players "leap[]" and "bicycle[]" (or kick their legs) and fly through the air. They're animated and lively, undeterred by the "Atlantic depression" (i.e., the storm).

Soon enough, the storm subsides; the speaker describes the sun peeling back "the cloud's edge to watch them." By this, the poem might be implying that it is the men's joy that has subdued the storm; the personified sun seems to be so captivated by their happiness that it can't help but come out to see them play.

The fact that the men recognize but don't cower to nature's might reflects the power of the human spirit. Reading the poem metaphorically, "Football at Slack" might also imply that maintaining a sense of pleasure, wonder, and play is essential to enduring the obstacles of life. If one can approach such disruptions with curiosity and awe, the poem suggests, they might even find these difficult moments inspiring.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10
- Lines 16-18
- Lines 22-25

THE MAJESTY AND POWER OF NATURE

The speaker describes a football (in American English, soccer) game that gets interrupted by intense storm. Seeming to recognize nature's furious power, the men in this poem don't fight against the elements but rather allow themselves to be moved and even awed by them. The men's response to the storm suggests that there's wonder and beauty to be found even in nature's fiercest, most frightening moments.

The speaker describes "[w]inds from fiery holes in heaven" wreaking havoc on the game. These "winds" not only blow the players' ball "away downwind," but they seemingly "bounce[]" the men themselves, as if they were no more than toys for *nature* to play with. The speaker also describes the "rain" as a "steel press," suggesting that this storm could very well crush the men beneath it. And at the height of this deluge, it is all these men can do to "tr[ead] water." Clearly, the players are subject to nature's whims.

But instead of fighting against or resenting the storm, the men are "awe[d]" by it. They let the wind and rain "pil[e]" (or barrage) them, "plaster[ing]" their "hair" to their heads. And no matter how dangerous and terrifying the storm may be, the speaker presents it as something beautiful. They admire the "glare light" and "glooms" of the turbulent skies as they would the "oils" of a painting. And as the men splash about in the rain, the speaker says they "puddle glitter." In this way, the poem suggests that even nature's most terrifying displays of power and violence can be incredible to behold.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 11-15
- Lines 19-21

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Between plunging valleys, ...
... blown ball bounced.

The poem's title gives readers context for these opening lines: some men are playing "football" (what some countries call *soccer*) in or near Slack, a village in England.

The poem itself then opens right in the middle of the action: this game takes place "Between plunging valleys, on a bareback of hill" (i.e., a hill with no trees). Referring to this place as the "bare**back** of hill" subtly personifies the landscape, bringing the natural world to life around the players.

The players, meanwhile, are dressed "in bunting colors." "Bunting" can refer to a small, colorful songbird or to festive, decorative flags; as an adjective, it means that the men are boldly dressed (perhaps in the colors of the British flag).

This is a joyful, energetic game: both these men and the ball they're kicking around are bouncing around the field. Check out the use of diacope/epistrophe in line 3:

> **B**ounced, and their blown ball **b**ounced.

The repetition of "bounced" highlights the relationship between the men and their ball. On the one hand, the men "bounce" simply in the sense that they jump around after their ball. But this line also implies that the men, like the "blown ball," are *being* "bounced"—that they, too, are being "blown" about by the wind. Both men and ball are playthings for the natural world.

The poem is written in free verse, meaning it does not use a regular meter or rhyme scheme. Instead, Hughes uses sonic devices to evoke the energetic rhythms of this game. Listen, for example, to the striking /b/ alliteration of these lines, which adds an appropriately **b**ouncy rhythm to the poem's first stanza:

> **B**etween plunging valleys, on a **b**areback of hill
> Men in **b**unting colours
> **B**ounced, and their **b**lown **b**all **b**ounced.

Note, too, how the first two lines here are both enjambed. As a result, the poem moves swiftly down the page, subtly mirroring the men's playful energy. The stanza then comes to rest at a reflective full stop in line 3.

LINES 4-6

The blown ball ...
... blew away downwind—

The second stanza begins with anadiplosis, as the speaker repeats words from the preceding line:

> Bounced, and their **blown ball** bounced.
> The **blown ball** jumped, and the merry-colored men

This repetition pulls the reader down the page; it's almost as though that ball is jumping between stanzas!

Those "merry-colored men," the speaker continues, zoom up into the air after the ball like water "spouting" from a fountain. This vivid simile conveys the men's strength and excitement as they jump straight up, trying to hit the ball with their heads. The alliteration of "**m**erry-colored **m**en" adds to the playful music of the scene as well, again depicting the men as a festive, joyful presence in the landscape (merry-colored might refer to their bright uniforms and/or to the men's cheerful dispositions).

The scene is full of vibrant movement, aided by the speaker's use of personification: the speaker imbues the ball with life,

giving it the ability to jump (rather than simply be kicked by the men). Note, too, the use of chremamorphism (essentially the opposite of personification) as the speaker compares the men to "water." This blurring of the animate and inanimate, the human and the non-human, might suggest that the men are moved by something stronger than themselves (i.e., by the natural world) just as the ball is moved by the men.

Finally, the speaker then says, "The ball blew away downwind." Here, the ball isn't being moved by the men but rather by the *wind*. The dash at the end of line 6 suggests that this is an interruption; the wind is taking the ball out of the men's control.

LINES 7-10

The rubbery men ...
... ball blew back.

After their ball gets blown "away downwind," the speaker says that the "rubbery men" bound along "after it." So far, the men have bounced like a ball blown about by the wind and "spouted like water"; now, they're "rubbery," another word that conveys their energetic, skillful, flexible movement along the football field.

The /b/ sound in "rubbery" also echoes the /b/ alliteration in "bounced" and "ball," continuing to evoke all the lively movement of the men at play. And with "rubbery," the speaker again turns to a word usually used to describe *objects* rather than people. The speaker continues to personify the men's ball too, now saying that it "jumped" (rather than was "bounced")—as though it's capable of moving *itself*.

The poem thus keeps blurring the distinctions between the men and their ball, making the men seem a little less powerful and in control. They seem, perhaps, at the mercy of the same "wind" that now pulls their ball out of reach.

The enjambment across lines 8 and 9, meanwhile, evokes the imagery of the ball hovering above the trees. Note how the line containing the "ball" hovers over the blank space of the page:

> The ball jumped up and out and hung in the wind
> Over a gulf of treetops.

It seems almost like the wind is taunting the men by holding their ball out of reach—like the wind is *playing* with the men just as the men play with their ball! The men "all shout[] together," coming together as a team in a moment of camaraderie. And, as though in response, the wind blows the ball back their way—again acting as a kind of player in the men's game.

Notice that this stanza is a line longer than the first two. As the wind becomes more forceful, the poem will continue to expand, subtly evoking the increasing power of the storm.

LINES 11-15

Winds from fiery ...
... a steel press.

The fourth stanza has five lines, making it the longest in the poem so far. Not coincidentally, this is also the moment when the storm is at its most violent. The swelling stanza length reflects the growing power of the storm as "[w]inds from fiery holes in heaven" pound down.

Just a moment earlier, the wind seemed to be casually playing with the men before blowing their ball back to them. Now, however, the wind seems ferocious. Those "fiery holes in heaven" refer to the swirling oranges and reds of storm clouds in the sky (and perhaps call to mind distant lightning strikes). There are also mythological/religious undertones as the speaker describes these "fiery holes," things one might associate with hell and yet which are swirling "in heaven." The storm is clearly a mighty, even violent force, one that seems to attack the very hills the men play on. The winds pile up in these hills, which grow ever darker.

Notice how, at this point in the poem, the bouncy /b/ alliteration gives way to husky /h/ alliteration ("holes in heaven," "hills"), suggesting that the wind is no longer a playful friend but a wrathful adversary. At the same time, however, the speaker says that the winds do all this to "awe" the men—that is, to astound them. The natural world is showing off, in other words, trying to fill the men with a sense of amazement at its power.

Indeed, the storm isn't simply powerful but *beautiful*. The speaker compares its strange, striking light to an artist mixing "its mad oils" and throwing "glooms"—feverishly mixing paints across the canvas of the sky. This personification imbues the natural world with agency and will, while the specific image of a crazed artist suggests that such intense weather can be terrifying and stunning at the same time.

The speaker uses another metaphor in line 15, saying that "the rain lowered a steel press." A steel press is a machine that, well, presses steel—that is, that's used to shape metal (and specifically to shape steel into nuts and bolts). In other words, the rain is slamming down on the earth—and the men—with immense, even crushing strength.

LINES 16-18

Hair plastered, they ...
... washed and happy

That "steel press" of the rain plasters the men's hair to their scalps, but they don't seem to mind. Instead, they metaphorically tread water, as though the landscape has become a sea in which the men splash about.

To "tread water" can also mean to stay in place; its use here suggests that these men aren't making any progress in their game, but they're not abandoning it either. Their hair may be flattened against their scalps from heavy rain, but that's not enough to put an end to their fun.

They also "puddle glitter," sending up sparkling water droplets

as they muck about in the rain. This phrase reflects the beauty of the storm, and splashing through "puddle[s]" is also something people generally associate with childhood. The landscape and the men alike may be drenched, but the players are clearly still enjoying themselves!

The men's voices "bob" up, meanwhile, another phrase associated with being immersed in water. The men's voices rise above the rain like buoys, their sounds "fine and thin, washed and happy."

The adjectives before the comma ("fine and thin") suggest that the storm has made the men feel rather insignificant in relation to the overpowering winds and rain. The adjectives after the comma, however, reveal that this sense of insignificance isn't a bad thing. On the contrary, the men feel as though the rain has rinsed them *clean*; it's been a refreshing invigorating experience.

Indeed, the use of parallelism here—the grammatically parallel clauses on either side of the comma—emphasizes the *relationship* between the two sets of adjectives. That is, the poem implies that this feeling of insignificance is in fact what makes the men feel so clean and "happy." It's as if the storm has brought out their childlike sense of wonder, revealing to them just how grand the world is.

Finally, note that this stanza consists entirely of enjambed lines. The lack of end-stops allows the poem to pick up momentum, much like the storm that's sweeping over the hills and valleys of this landscape.

LINES 19-21

While the humped ...
... of Atlantic depression—

The speaker turns from the buoyant, "happy" men to their surroundings. The speaker describes the hilly landscape as being "humped," or hunched over; the hill on which the footballers play seems almost like a human figure recoiling from the storm. This "humped world" is sinking beneath the heavy rainfall, "foundering" like a ship that's taken on too much water.

The "valleys" between the hills, meanwhile," have been "blued unthinkable"—an odd phrase that suggests the valleys have filled with water or that an unimaginable murkiness has set in. To be "blue" can also mean to be sad or down, and the poem picks up on this connotation of moodiness in the next line:

> Under the depth of Atlantic depression—

The valley is *literally* "under" the "Atlantic depression" in the sense that it's beneath a weather pattern that formed over the Atlantic Ocean. But this phrase is also a pun: the landscape seems like a person hunched over with "unthinkable" melancholy under the weight of *psychological* depression.

The poem's sounds help to evoke this less-than-cheerful setting through with heavy, thudding alliteration, assonance, and consonance:

> Under the depth of Atlantic depression—

Notice, too, that the stanzas are getting shorter towards the end of the poem, reflecting the fact that the storm is starting to wane.

LINES 22-25

But the wingers ...
... to watch them.

Even though the world around them is soggy and miserable, the speaker says, the men have already returned to their game. "The wingers" (offensive players) "leap[]" and "bicycle[] air," while "the goalie" (or goalkeeper) "fl[ies] horizontal." The men seem almost weightless in comparison to the sinking, saturated world around them, and the enjambment across lines 22-24 evokes the men's joyful, lively movements:

> [...] they bicycled in air
> And the goalie flew horizontal
> And once again a golden holocaust
> Lifted [...]

In the poem's last stanza, the speaker once again personifies the natural world: the sun (a metaphorical "holocaust," a fiery, destructive force burning away the clouds) peels back the clouds in order "to watch" the men. It's as though the men's unshakeable joy has drawn the sun's attention, coaxing it out from behind the storm clouds.

It's possible to interpret this moment symbolically: the men's joyful "awe" reflects the power of the human spirit and can serve as a model for figuratively weathering any challenging experience. In this way, the poem suggests the value of play and pleasure, of staying open to wonder, and of embracing difficulty rather than fighting against or running from it.

Yet these final lines aren't entirely positive: the description of the sun as a kind of catastrophe lurking in the background of this game might suggest that nature's more violent impulses are always nearby and may again sweep in at any moment. Human beings, in other words, are never *really* in control—they will always be subject to nature's capricious moods. The only solace in all this is that there is beauty and majesty to be found in these shows of terrible strength.

SYMBOLS

THE STORM

There is, of course, a *literal* storm in the poem:

swirling winds and driving rains really do interrupt the men's football game. But it's also possible to read this storm as representing dark or difficult moments in life, which have the power to metaphorically crush people under their weight.

The speaker calls attention to this potential symbolism in line 21, referring to the storm as an "Atlantic depression." Literally, this refers to a weather pattern formed over the Atlantic Ocean. Of course, "depression" can also refer to a psychological disorder or general misery. That the world seems to sink and founder under the weight of this "depression" might represent the way people struggle to overcome darkness and obstacles in their life. The footballers, by contrast, embrace the storm, letting themselves be bounced around by its winds and even finding beauty in its fierceness. Read symbolically, this suggests that people must embrace, rather than fight against or cower from, life's hardships.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Line 6
- Lines 8-9
- Lines 11-21
- Lines 24-25

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

There's quite a bit of alliteration in "Football at Slack," which adds music, rhythm, and moments of emphasis to the poem.

For example, the first three stanzas are filled with bouncy /b/ sounds (primarily as alliteration but also as consonance) that evoke buoyant movements of the "blown ball" and the men running after it. Take a look at lines 1-3, for example:

> Between plunging valleys, on a bareback of hill
> Men in bunting colours
> Bounced, and their blown ball bounced.

The alliteration here is unmissable, all those bold /b/s calling readers' attention to the men's—and the ball's—energetic movements. These alliterative /b/ sounds pop up again and again in the next seven lines, in "blown ball," "ball blew," and the tongue-twistery "blown ball blew back." The language feels bright and playful.

In the fourth stanza, however, this /b/ alliteration gets replaced with a variety of other sounds as the storm interrupts the men's game. Take the husky /h/ alliteration in lines 11-12, for instance, which evokes the heavy, huffing winds that tear through the landscape:

> Winds from fiery holes in heaven
> Piled the hills darkening around them

The next few lines feature throaty /gl/ alliteration and tight-lipped /m/ alliteration, intensifying the poem's language in response to the growing power of the storm:

> [...] The glare light
> Mixed its mad oils and threw glooms.

Notice, too, the /oo/ assonance in "threw glooms," which also adds yet more intensity and emphasis to this image of darkness being violently tossed across the landscape like a splatter of paint.

Thudding assonance and alliteration combine again towards the end of the poem, evoking the "depth" of the storm:

> [...] unthinkable
> Under the depth of Atlantic depression—

Finally, the shared sounds in "goalie" and "golden" and "horizontal" and "holocaust" create a kind of bridge between the last two stanzas of the poem. Readers can envision the football player temporarily suspended in midair, the ferocious sun almost timidly peeking out from behind a cloud to behold him.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Between," "bareback"
- **Line 2:** "bunting"
- **Line 3:** "Bounced," "blown," "ball," "bounced"
- **Line 4:** "blown," "ball," "merry," "men"
- **Line 6:** "ball," "blew"
- **Line 7:** "bounced"
- **Line 8:** "ball"
- **Line 10:** "blown," "ball," "blew," "back"
- **Line 11:** "holes," "heaven"
- **Line 12:** "hills"
- **Line 13:** "glare"
- **Line 14:** "Mixed," "mad," "glooms"
- **Line 15:** "press"
- **Line 16:** "plastered"
- **Line 17:** "puddle"
- **Line 20:** "unthinkable"
- **Line 21:** "Under," "depth," "depression"
- **Line 23:** "goalie," "horizontal"
- **Line 24:** "again," "golden," "holocaust"

REPETITION

The poem uses repetition in its first three stanzas to evoke the football players' buoyant, back-and-forth movements. At times, repetition also establishes a sense of harmony between the men and the natural environment in which they're playing.

The most obvious repetitions revolve around the words ball, bounced, and blown/blew. For example, note the diacope/epistrophe in line 3:

> Bounced, and their blown ball **bounced**.

This repetition bookends the line, and in doing so helps to bring the poem's imagery to life: the word itself seems to "bounce" across the line just as the ball bounces through the landscape.

Note, too, how that first "bounced" refers to the *men* and the second to their *ball*. This repetition suggests the complete immersion of the men in their game; they're almost one with this bouncing ball! It also implies that the men *themselves* are no more than a toy to the "wind"—that just as the ball "bounced" by the men, the men are "bounced" by the wind.

Next, listen to the anadiplosis in lines 3-4:

> Bounced, and their **blown ball** bounced.
> The **blown ball** jumped, and the merry-colored men

This repetition links the two stanzas and creates a sense of movement. That is, that phrase "blown ball" seems to blow across the white space of the page. The intense repetition of similar phrases in the next few lines brings to mind the kicking/blowing of the ball back and forth. Note how the readers' eyes seem to track the movement of that ball and the men chasing it:

> The **blown ball jumped**, and the merry-coloured **men**
> [...]
> The **ball blew** away downwind—
> The rubbery **men bounced** after it.
> The **ball jumped** up and out and hung in the wind
> [...]
> Then they all shouted together, and the **blown ball blew** back.

There's also an example of polyptoton in these lines: "Men in bunting **colours**" and "merry-**coloured** men." The men go from *wearing* bright colors to *being* brightly colored themselves! This repetition emphasizes the men's vivacity and joy.

Finally, note that all this repetition in the first few stanzas of the poem makes the sudden *lack* of repetition in stanza 4 impossible to ignore. This shift emphasizes the sudden intensity of the storm and the interruption of the men's game.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Men," "colours"
- **Line 3:** "Bounced," "blown," "ball," "bounced"
- **Line 4:** "blown," "ball," "jumped," "coloured," "men"
- **Line 6:** "ball," "blew"
- **Line 7:** "men," "bounced"
- **Line 8:** "ball," "jumped"
- **Line 10:** "blown," "ball," "blew"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses both personification and the opposite device, chremamorphism (treating a person like an object), to blur the line between humanity and nature and between the men and the ball they're playing with.

In the first stanza, for example, the speaker personifies the landscape by describing the treeless "hill" as a "bareback" (as though the men are playing on a giant's hunched back). The men, meanwhile, "bounce" around just like their football bounces. The natural world feels human, while the players are akin to the very "bouncing" ball they're playing with.

A similar thing happens in line 7, where the speaker calls the men "rubbery"—another word that readers might normally associate with the *ball* more than the people kicking it. And in lines 4-5, the speaker says:

> The blown ball jumped, and the merry-colored men
> Spouted like water to head it.

Here, the speaker grants the ball the ability to jump seemingly of its accord (as opposed to being kicked or carried by the wind). And again, the men are being compared to an inanimate object—this time, a spray of water. The players here come across as part of the natural landscape.

All of this personification and chremamorphism make it difficult to tell what is *moving* on its own and what is *being moved* by something else. It suggests a kind of harmony between the men, the environment, and the ball, while at the same time implying nature's power over humanity; the wind bounces the men about just as the men bounce their ball about.

In lines 13-15, the speaker explicitly personifies the storm to emphasize nature's might:

> [...] The glare light
> Mixed its mad oils and threw glooms.
> Then the rain lowered a steel press.

It's as if the storm is a crazed artist swirling intense, vibrant colors onto the canvas of the sky and throwing darkness across the landscape like black paint. The "rain" then becomes a steelworker trying to "press" the men into different shapes. The storm is vibrantly, vividly alive in both of these images.

In the poem's final stanza, the speaker personifies the sun as it peeks out from behind the storm clouds: it metaphorically "Lift[s] the cloud's edge, to watch" the men play. Nature, here, is intrigued by the men and perhaps even takes pleasure in watching them! This final image perhaps speaks to the power of

the human spirit, which can imbue the world itself with joy and wonder.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "on a bareback of hill"
- **Lines 2-3:** "Men in bunting colours / Bounced"
- **Lines 4-5:** "The blown ball jumped, and the merry-coloured men / Spouted like water to head it."
- **Line 7:** "The rubbery men bounced after it."
- **Line 8:** "The ball jumped up"
- **Lines 13-14:** "The glare light / Mixed its mad oils and threw glooms."
- **Line 15:** "Then the rain lowered a steel press."
- **Lines 24-25:** "a golden holocaust / Lifted the cloud's edge, to watch them."

IMAGERY

The poem is filled with evocative imagery that brings both the players' game and the storm to life on the page.

Readers can easily picture the windy world where the men's football game takes place: they're playing on a treeless "hill" that rises up between "plunging valleys." The hills are tall and the valleys between them are deep. The men are exposed to the elements, the poem makes clear, and their "ball" gets "blown" around by the players' kicks and the wind alike. The men wear bright outfits as they run and jump about, creating vivid flashes of color across the landscape.

The imagery of the storm, meanwhile, becomes all the more frightening as the poem moves along. The wind pummels down "from fiery holes in heaven," a striking image of the swirling oranges and reds of violent storm clouds. This wind "pile[s]" up in the hills, which grow ever darker around the men. The storm's furious light is like a crazed artist splashing oil paints across the sky and casting dark shadows across the land below. The rain comes down so heavy it's like "a steel press"—an image that connotes both its sheer force and the icy, gray world it creates.

All this intense imagery allows readers to envision the terrifying power of the storm—and, in turn, to better appreciate the men's refusal to abandon their joy. The men aren't fazed by the glaring lights and pummeling downpour; they don't seem to mind as their hair gets plastered to their skulls and the air grows so thick with rain that they seem to be treading water where they stand.

Instead, the men find beauty in the storm. They splash through puddles, sending up glittering water droplets. And while the hills and valleys seem to sink and slump and flood beneath the storm, the men go on playing. The poem's imagery makes it easy for the reader to imagine themselves right there in the dim, soggy, murky world surrounding the men, with its "humped" hills (hunched over as though trying to avoid the storm) and "blued" valleys. That the men soar through the air amidst all this gloom is all the more impressive. And as the "golden holocaust" of the sun begins to peek out at the poem's end, readers can perhaps sense its subtle warmth piercing through the gloom.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-25

METAPHOR

Metaphors help to bring the poem's imagery to life. In lines 13-15, for example, the speaker says that the surreal "light" of the storm "Mixed its mad oils and threw glooms." This metaphor (which is also an example of personification) treats the storm as a crazed artist tossing splashes of paint across the sky and landscape. While a frightening image, this metaphor also suggests that there's beauty and wonder to be found in the storm—that it's a work of art.

The speaker uses another metaphor in line 15, saying that "the rain lowered a steel press." A "steel press" is a machine that shapes steel (usually into nuts and bolts). This metaphor relays the sheer power of the rain as it relentlessly pummels the earth.

Lines 16-17 then use an idiom and a metaphor. The speaker says the men "all just trod water / To puddle glitter." To literally "tread water" is to kick one's legs and move one's arms so that one stays in one place in the water. The metaphor thus speaks to just how drenched the men and the landscape are; it's as though the men are surrounded by water and trying to stay afloat.

As an idiom, to "tread water" means to hold one's position without making any progress towards one's goals. The phrase thus also suggests that men are just hanging out and waiting for the storm to pass, unable to play their game but unwilling to quit and go home.

That the men "puddle glitter," or splash about and toss up glittering droplets of water, suggests that these men are holding their positions *because* they're getting something beautiful out of staying put and watching the storm.

In lines 19-21, the speaker says:

> While the humped world sank foundering
> And the valleys blued unthinkable
> Under the depth of Atlantic depression—

Here, the speaker uses a bit of hyperbole to describe the effect of the storm, as the whole "world" isn't *literally* sinking and "foundering" (or filling with water/being submerged). Instead,

the metaphor conveys the overwhelming might of the storm, which seems to flood the entire world under its weight. The phrase "Atlantic depression" might also be a bit of a pun: "depression" here might refer both to a weather cycle that formed over the Atlantic Ocean and to psychological misery. This moment might make readers consider the rest of the poem on a metaphorical level: perhaps the speaker isn't just talking about men enjoying a football game in the rain, but also about how to survive life's difficulties.

Finally, the speaker refers to the sun as "a golden holocaust" peeling back the storm clouds to watch the players. This metaphor implies that the sun is a blazing, scorching force capable of burning up the cloud cover. At the same time, the word "holocaust" connotes war and genocide. Perhaps the appearance of the word at the poem's end, at a moment when light and warmth are returning to the poem's world, suggests that the potential for natural violence is always lurking in the background.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "The glare light / Mixed its mad oils"
- **Line 14:** " and threw glooms"
- **Line 15:** "Then the rain lowered a steel press."
- **Lines 16-17:** "they all just trod water / To puddle glitter"
- **Lines 19-21:** "While the humped world sank foundering / And the valleys blued unthinkable / Under the depth of Atlantic depression—"
- **Lines 24-25:** "And once again a golden holocaust / Lifted the cloud's edge, to watch them."

SIMILE

The poem uses one simile in lines 4-5, where the speaker describes the way the men jump after their bouncing ball:

> [...] the merry-colored men
> Spouted like water to head it.

The simile compares the men to a surging jet of water, conveying the fluid speed and strength with which the men leap into the air in order to "head" the ball (i.e., to hit it with their heads).

The comparison of the men to "water" perhaps foreshadows the storm's downpour, which arrives a couple of stanzas later. Soon enough, the landscape will be pummelled by driving rain, to the point that the hills themselves will appear to sink.

Yet though the "rain" seemingly attempts to crush these men, they end up taking pleasure in the storm rather than running from it. The poem might be implying that part of the reason that these men are so unfazed by the storm is that they don't fight against it. Instead, they welcome it as if it is simply part of their game.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "the merry-coloured men / Spouted like water to head it."

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses quite a bit of enjambment. Look at the first two lines, for example, where enjambment evokes the swift movement of the football players:

> Between plunging valleys, on a bareback of hill
> Men in bunting colors
> Bounced [...]

The poem's first half features a few end-stopped lines as well, however, which interrupt this building momentum. Note, for example, the back and forth between enjambments and end-stops in lines 4-10:

> [...] and the merry-coloured men
> Spouted like water to head it.
> The ball blew away downwind—
> The rubbery men bounced after it.
> The ball jumped up and out and hung in the wind
> Over a gulf of treetops.

It's as though the men's energetic gameplaying keeps getting interrupted as the wind snatches their ball away from them.

By contrast, the second half of the poem is bursting with enjambments. The poem moves swiftly down the page, its energetic pace evoking the building power of the storm. Just as there are no trees to slow these powerful winds, there is little punctuation throughout these stanzas to slow the reader:

> Winds from fiery holes in heaven
> Piled the hills darkening around them
> To awe them. The glare light
> Mixed [...]

Finally, the enjambment in the last two stanzas evokes the imagery being described:

> [...] they bicycled in air
> And the goalie flew horizontal
> And once again a golden holocaust
> Lifted the cloud's edge [...]

The lines thrust off into the white space of the page, subtly mimicking the men's soaring movements through the air and the sun's rays piercing through the clouds.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "hill / Men"
- **Lines 2-3:** "colours / Bounced"
- **Lines 4-5:** "men / Spouted"
- **Lines 8-9:** "wind / Over"
- **Lines 11-12:** "heaven / Piled"
- **Lines 12-13:** "them / To"
- **Lines 13-14:** "light / Mixed"
- **Lines 16-17:** "water / To"
- **Lines 17-18:** "up / Coming"
- **Lines 18-19:** "happy / While"
- **Lines 19-20:** "foundering / And"
- **Lines 20-21:** "unthinkable / Under"
- **Lines 22-23:** "air / And"
- **Lines 23-24:** "horizontal / And "
- **Lines 24-25:** "holocaust / Lifted"

VOCABULARY

Football () - A sport in which players score points by kicking or heading the ball into the opposing team's net. Known as soccer in the U.S.!

Slack () - *The Slack* is a village in Northeast England.

Plunging (Line 1) - Deep.

Bunting (Line 2) - There are two definitions that might work here: *bunting* can refer to a category of colorful songbirds or to colorful, decorative flags used for festivities.

To head it (Lines 4-5) - In soccer, players will *head* an airborne ball—that is, hit it with their heads.

Spouted (Line 5) - Erupted or spewed.

Piled (Lines 11-12) - Accumulated; amassed. The speaker is saying that all these winds" came together in the hills.

Glare light (Lines 13-14) - A *glare* is when there is so much brightness one is temporarily unable to see; *the glare light* is a really intense light of the storm!

Glooms (Lines 13-14) - Darkness.

Steel press (Line 15) - A machine that presses steel into various shapes.

Plastered (Line 16) - Flattened.

Puddle (Lines 16-17) - Splashed around in shallow puddles of water.

Trod water (Line 16) - Literally, *treading water* is when one stays in place in a body of water by kicking their legs and moving their arms. As an idiom, the phrase means to maintain one's current status/situation but not make any kind of progress or improvement.

Foundering (Line 19) - Filling with water and sinking or being submerged.

Humped (Line 19) - Arced or curved.

Atlantic depression (Line 21) - A *depression* is when low pressure causes air to rise, resulting in clouds, rainfall, and winds. So an *Atlantic depression* would describe such weather coming in from the Atlantic ocean. Basically, a storm that formed over the sea.

Wingers (Line 22) - In football/soccer, a *winger* is a member of the offense (in other words, they're responsible for scoring against the other team).

Goalie (Line 23) - In football/soccer, a *goalie*, or goalkeeper, guards the goal against the opposite team.

A golden holocaust (Line 24) - This is a metaphorical description of the sun coming out. A *holocaust* can refer to either a sacrifice that is burned by fire or to massive, large-scale destruction.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Football at Slack" consists of 25 lines of free verse spread out over eight stanzas. These stanzas range from two to five lines apiece, gradually building up in length until the poem reaches its midpoint and then tapering down again. Here are the stanza lengths in the order they appear:

- 3
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 3
- 3
- 2
- 2

In this way, the poem's form mimics the rhythm of a storm. Storms often start out being relatively mild (some drizzles and a crack of thunder, perhaps); they then build in intensity as the winds pick up about and the rain pounds down; and, finally, they fade away as the clouds clear and the sun starts to peek out.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't follow a regular meter. The poem's lines and stanzas vary in length, and this dynamic language subtly reflects nature's unpredictability. A consistent meter might suggest humanity trying to impose order on the storm's chaos, whereas the *absence* of meter suggests that people must bend and flow along with the rhythms of nature.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Football at Slack" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. Where a rhyme scheme would offer clear musicality and a predictable rhythm, the *lack* of rhyme scheme is more fitting for a poem that details the *unpredictability* of nature! To the speaker, nature is a powerful and inspiring, if sometimes terrifying, force, and the beauty of these men is that they are embracing its whims rather than struggling against them or running home defeated.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is anonymous, genderless, and impartial. They describe the football (a.k.a. soccer) players and the storm that "awe[s]" them, but they themselves aren't actually participating in the sport. For the most part, readers aren't really thinking about the speaker; instead, the poem's focus remains on the scene the speaker is describing.

One might assume that the speaker feels somewhat separate from the men's pleasure; after all, the speaker isn't playing this game and takes care to note the men's camaraderie (they're "all shout[ing] together" and seem "washed and happy"). Perhaps the speaker is part of the "humped world" that seems to be drowning "Under the depth of Atlantic depression." In other words, the speaker might be as curious about (and even envious of) these happy, playful men as the sun that "[l]ift[s] the cloud's edge, to watch them."

SETTING

The poem is set "at Slack," a village in Northeast England. (All of the poems in *Remains of Elmet*, the book in which this poem was published, deal in some way with the Calder valley, an area close to where Hughes was born.)

In the poem, this place is described as having "plunging valleys," and the football game takes place on a "bareback of hill" (a treeless hilltop). At first, the storm doesn't seem all that treacherous. The wind almost playfully tosses the men's ball about, and the men enthusiastically chase after it.

As the poem continues, however, the wind and rain grow stronger and more chaotic. Winds pummel the earth "from fiery holes in heaven," the speaker says, imagery that feels almost mythological. The speaker also personifies the light of the storm as a crazed painter mixing "its mad oils" and tossing darkness over the landscape.

While the men seem "happy" enough, splashing around in puddles and admiring the storm's beauty and strength, the rest of the world "s[inks] foundering," like a ship that's taken on seawater. The "valleys" are "blued unthinkable," a strange yet vivid phrase that suggests the whole world is growing incredibly murky and wet beneath the storm.

A peek of sunshine appears in the poem's final moments: the speaker describes the personified sun lifting up "the cloud's edge" so that it can "watch" the players. On one level, this imagery suggests that the men's playfulness has drawn the sun out of hiding. But the speaker also calls the sun "a golden holocaust"—a fiery, shining disaster. Nature, the poem makes clear, is a force to be reckoned with.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Ted Hughes (1930-1998) is considered one of the most important writers of the 20th century. His arrival on the scene with his 1957 debut, *The Hawk in the Rain*, was a shock to the system of British poetry; Hughes's raw imagery challenged the dominance of more restrained and formal poets like Philip Larkin. To this day, Hughes remains one of the most widely read poets in the English language.

Hughes grew up in West Riding, Yorkshire, a relatively rural part of England, and he cultivated an early interest in the natural world that would influence his poetry. Hughes was both reverent and unsentimental about nature, seeing it not just as a source of wisdom and beauty (as the 19th-century Romantics like William Wordsworth often did), but also as a place full of instinctive violence and danger. Animals also occupy a central role in Hughes's poetry (most famously in the "Crow" series of poems), where they often symbolically reflect the human psyche.

"Football at Slack" was first published in Hughes's 1979 collection, *Remains of Elmet*. The poems in this collection were written in response to photographs taken by Fay Godwin of the Calder Valley (once known as Elmet), where Hughes lived as a young child.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hughes wrote in his preface to *Remains of Elmet:*

> The Calder valley, west of Halifax, was the last ditch of Elmet, the last British Celtic kingdom to fall to the Angles. For centuries it was considered a more or less uninhabitable wilderness, a notorious refuge for criminals, a hide-out for refugees. Then in the early 1800s it became the cradle for the Industrial Revolution in textiles, and the upper Calder became 'the hardest-worked river in England'. Throughout my lifetime, since 1930, I have watched the mills of the region and their attendant chapels die. Within the last fifteen years the end has come. They are now virtually dead, and the population of the valley and the hillsides, so rooted for so long, is changing rapidly.

Remains of Elmet is, in part, a lament for the specific peoples that once inhabited this region and also for a rapidly changing world in general. At the same time, the collection is filled with awe for the way nature has reclaimed many of these spaces people left behind.

Hughes himself was born in Mytholmroyd in Yorkshire, England, in 1930. Much of his work was influenced by the rural landscape of his upbringing. *Remains of Elmet* also contains many allusions to both world wars. Hughes's father served in WWI, and though Hughes was too young to fight in World War II, he grew up in its shadow. These experiences informed his observations of the natural world, as readers can see in "Football at Slack." For example, even though the word "holocaust" in the final stanza is being used metaphorically, it still might call to mind the genocide of WWII. It adds a dark layer to an otherwise relatively uplifting poem: even in this "happy" moment, the memory of unthinkable violence lingers in the background.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Ted Hughes Timeline — An in-depth timeline of Hughes's life and work. (https://ann.skea.com/timeline.htm)
- Ted Hughes Society Book Review — Read a review of Hughes's eighth collection of poetry, Remains of Elmet. (http://thetedhughessociety.org/elmet)
- The Landscapes of Elmet — Check out a copy of the collection in which "Football at Slack" was published, which includes original photography by Fay Godwin alongside Hughes's poems. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/remains-of-elmet-by-ted-hughes-with-photographs-by-fay-godwin)
- Ted Hughes: Stronger Than Death — Watch a BBC Documentary that explores the impact Hughes's real-life experiences had on his work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbAGbjXPCP8&t=163s)
- The Calder Valley — Peruse photographs of the Calder Valley, where "Football at Slack" (and other poems in Hughes's collection) take place. (https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/calder-valley-yorkshire.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER TED HUGHES POEMS

- A Picture of Otto
- Bayonet Charge
- Cat and Mouse
- Hawk Roosting
- Relic
- Roe-Deer
- Snowdrop
- Telegraph Wires
- The Harvest Moon
- The Jaguar
- The Thought Fox
- Wind

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