The Storm-Wind

POEM TEXT

When the swift-rolling brook, swollen deep,
Rushes on by the alders, full speed,
And the wild-blowing winds lowly sweep
O'er the quivering leaf and the weed,
And the willow tree writhes in each limb,
Over sedge-beds that reel by the brim—

The man that is staggering by
Holds his hat to his head by the brim;
And the girl, as her hair-locks outfly,
Puts a foot out, to keep herself trim,
And the quivering wavelings o'erspread
The small pool where the bird dips his head.

But out at my house, in the lee
Of the nook, where the winds die away,
The light swimming airs, round the tree
And the low-swinging ivy stem, play
So soft that a mother that's nigh
Her still cradle may hear her babe sigh.

SUMMARY

The stream rolls swiftly by, grown deep with storm waters, rushing past the alder trees along its banks as fast as it can. The wild winds blow low across the ground, over the trembling leaves and grasses. The willow tree's branches twist above the wobbling grasses along the riverbank.

A man struggles to walk past, holding onto his hat by the brim to stop it from flying away. And there's a girl, her hair flying all over the place, who tries to keep herself steady. Trembling ripples spread across the small pool of water from which a bird drinks.

But here at my house, which is in a sheltered alcove, the winds die down. A gentle breeze blows around the tree and the dangling stalk of an ivy plant. It blows so softly that a mother, watching over a cradle, can hear her sleeping baby sigh.

THEMES

THE AWESOME POWER OF NATURE

"The Storm-Wind" illustrates the power of nature as it whips up a storm. The speaker describes the "storm-wind" of the title tearing through the landscape, creating chaos and danger. A heaving brook rushes past its banks; waves ripple through the small pool of water from which a little bird tries to drink; leaves quiver, as though in fear, and the willow tree "writhes" as if in agony. Nature, in the poem, is capable of great terror and destruction.

Everything, including humanity, is at the mercy of this storm the poem describes: a man caught outside has to hold onto his hat to prevent it from flying away while a passing girl, hair swirling all around, must try to steady herself after almost getting knocked over by the wind. These scenes suggest the general fragility of human beings in the face of nature's awesome might.

And yet, the poem ends with a tender scene that illustrates nature's *protective* power. The speaker's house is located in "the lee / Of the nook"—that is, in a sheltered alcove—"where the winds die away." It's "so soft" and quiet inside the speaker's house that "a mother" (perhaps the speaker's wife) can hear the "sigh" of her sleeping baby. Knowing nature's capacity for destruction makes this peaceful scene seem all the more precious and fragile. The poem perhaps reminds people to be humble in the face of nature: to know its power far exceeds humanity's own and to appreciate the beauty and serenity of its calmer moments.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

THE COMFORT AND SAFETY OF HOME

"The Storm-Wind" contrasts the chaos and terror of a storm with the serenity and peace inside the speaker's house. Read as a kind of allegory, the poem presents home as a calming and reassuring place to be—as a shelter from the metaphorical "storm-winds" of life.

The world outside in the storm and that inside speaker's home could hardly be more different. The storm is wild, fierce, and, potentially, destructive. Its winds rile up the waters of the "swift-rolling brook," make tree limbs "writhe[]" as though in pain, and make leaves and puddles "quiver" as though terrified. Those people unlucky enough to get caught outside in the storm seem fragile in the face of nature's might, described as tightly gripping their clothing and trying to keep their balance

while "staggering by."

The speaker's house, meanwhile, is a refuge of quiet and calm. Within the little "nook" that surrounds and physically shelters this house, those violent winds dwindle to a pleasant breeze. They play gently with the "low-swinging ivy," showing none of the menace described earlier in the poem. In fact, it's so calm inside the speaker's house that a woman, presumably the speaker's wife, can hear the restful sighs of her own sleeping baby.

The soothing sweetness of this scene suggests the comforting power of home and family. Both act as a refuge from the inevitable "storms" of life, offering peace and perspective in the face of hardship.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

When the swift-rolling brook, swollen deep,
Rushes on by the alders, full speed,
And the wild-blowing winds lowly sweep
O'er the quivering leaf and the weed,
And the willow tree writhes in each limb,
Over sedge-beds that reel by the brim—

The poem begins with powerful imagery that captures the violence and power of the "storm-winds" of the title. These winds, this stanza makes clear, transform a landscape that might otherwise sound rather pleasant and bucolic into something chaotic and frightening.

The "swift-rolling," or quickly moving, "brook" is "swollen deep" with stormwater. A brook is usually a small stream, but the storm has turned this brook into something heaving and ferocious. The smooth alliteration of "swift" and "swollen" and the round assonance and consonance of "rolling" and "swollen" help to bring this imagery of a bloated, roiling stream to life.

The brook barrels past the alder trees along its banks "at full speed" as the winds blow low and "wild" across the land, rushing over "quivering" little plants. The word "quivering" connotes fear, suggesting that this "leaf" and "weed" are shaking in terror as the wind sweeps across the land.

The sounds of these lines again make the scene at hand more vivid for readers. Here, listen to the whooshing /w/ alliteration, the liquid /l/ sounds, and the long /ee/ and /o/ assonance:

And the wild-blowing winds lowly sweep
O'er the quivering leaf and the weed,

The poem simply *sounds* intense, evoking the force of that mighty wind.

Next, the speaker turns to "the willow tree" that "writhes in each limb." In other words, its branches twist and contort as though in pain, looking like flailing arms and legs. The "sedge-beds" or rushes/grasses also convulse in the wind, "reel[ing]" (or shivering/swaying/staggering) "by the brim," or banks of the brook.

Quiver, writhe, reel—these are all words typically used to describe *human* movements. The speaker is subtly personifying various parts of the scene in order to dramatize the wind's frightening, devastating power. And again, thick sound patterning makes the imagery more striking: here, listen to the assonance of "sedge-beds," and the alliteration/consonance of "beds," "reel," "by," and "brim."

By line 6, readers have a clear sense of the poem's rhyme scheme. Each stanza follows the pattern ABABCC. The shift from an alternating rhyme pattern to a swift rhyming couplet ("limb/brim"). The poem's meter, meanwhile, is a rough anapestic trimeter: lines of three anapests, poetic feet with three syllables that follow a da-da-DUM pattern. For example:

And the wil- | low tree writhes | in each limb,

The meter isn't perfect throughout the poem, but it adds a galloping rhythm that helps to convey the storm's power as it blasts through the landscape.

LINES 7-12

The man that is staggering by
Holds his hat to his head by the brim;
And the girl, as her hair-locks outfly,
Puts a foot out, to keep herself trim,
And the quivering wavelings o'erspread
The small pool where the bird dips his head.

The first stanza set the stormy scene by focusing on the wind's violent effects on nature. In the opening lines of the second stanza, the speaker considers what it's like for a person caught in the storm.

First, the speaker notes that there's a man "staggering by," or stumbling past. He must literally hold onto his hat, gripping it "by the brim" so that it won't blow away. The repetition of the phrase "by the brim," used in the previous stanza to describe the grasses by the riverbed, emphasizes the connection between the man and the landscape at this moment: both are equally subject to the "storm-wind's" wrath. The breathy alliteration of "Holds his hat to his head" also helps to convey just how much this man is struggling, the line filled with the sounds of huffing effort.

This man isn't the only one caught in the storm. There's also a girl walking past, her hair swirling around her head in the wind

(her "hair-locks outfly" whatever hat she's put on them or whatever hairdo she's done to keep them tidy). That her hair is all over the place reflects her lack of control. She "Puts a foot out, to keep herself trim," with "trim" here meaning steady or firm. She's trying not to wobble too much despite the wind's attempts to knock her down.

Next, the speaker describes the "quivering wavelings" that spread over a "small pool" from which a bird is drinking. This pool might be a little pond or even a puddle. The wind spreads rippling "wavelings," or little waves, across its surface. The return of the word "quivering" again suggests that the rest of the world is terrified by the "storm-wind"—that it trembles in fear.

LINES 13-18

But out at my house, in the lee
Of the nook, where the winds die away,
The light swimming airs, round the tree
And the low-swinging ivy stem, play
So soft that a mother that's nigh
Her still cradle may hear her babe sigh.

The wild "storm-wind" abruptly disappears in the third stanza. The poem signals this shift with the word "But," setting up a juxtaposition between nature's capacity for violence and the reassuring safety of the speaker's home:

> But out at my house, in the lee
> Of the nook, where the winds die away,

The speaker's house sits in a little corner of the land that's sheltered from the winds. What once seemed ferocious transforms into something pleasant and peaceful: "light swimming airs" gently swirl "round the tree" and through "the low-swinging ivy." The wind becomes playful and musical here rather than threatening, but it plays "so soft" that a mother who's "nigh" (that is, near) the cradle of her soundly sleeping child can "hear her babe sigh."

It's not entirely clear if the speaker is simply using this image of a mother and sighing baby figuratively—that is, that they're not *really* there, and the speaker is using them as an analogy to illustrate just how delicate and delightful the wind is. It's also possible that this "mother" is in fact the speaker's wife and that "babe" is the speaker's child, and that they're right there alongside the speaker.

In any case, it's hard to believe that this scene takes place so close to the "swift-rolling brook" or the man desperately trying to hold on to his hat. Peaceful moments like this are perhaps all the more precious in light of knowing what exists beyond the "nook" that contains the speaker's house. This image also might symbolize the comfort of home and family: the mother and child provide *metaphorical* shelter from the storms of life.

SYMBOLS

THE STORM-WIND

On one level, the poem is about a literal storm: the winds howling through the first two stanzas reflect the very real power and ferocity of the natural world. It's also possible to read the poem as an allegory, however, and to interpret the "storm-wind" of the title as symbolizing the trials and tribulations of life. Life can get "stormy," the poem suggests in this reading; it can feel as destabilizing and frightening as a vicious wind that whips up brooks and makes trees tremble. The fact that these winds "die away" around the speaker's house, becoming nothing more than "light swimming airs," suggests that home and family can provide a refuge from life's pain and uncertainty.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "the wild-blowing winds"
- **Line 14:** "the winds"
- **Line 15:** "light swimming airs"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration helps to conjure up the sounds of the whipping "storm-wind." In the first stanza, for example, the hissing sibilance of "swift," "swollen," "speed," and "sweep" combines with frequent /w/ sounds to evoke the whoosh and rush of the wind as it billows across the landscape. Many of these /w/ sounds are alliterative ("wild," "weed," "willow," etc.), while others are an example of broader consonance. The stanza simply *sounds* like a storm:

> When the swift-rolling brook, swollen deep,
> Rushes on by the alders, full speed,
> And the wild-blowing winds lowly sweep
> O'er the quivering leaf and the weed,
> And the willow tree writhes in each limb,

There are other alliterative words here as well, such as "sedge-beds" and "by the brim." These bold, forceful sounds evoke the strength of the wind. Assonance ("swift-rolling brook, swollen," "leaf and weed," "sedge-beds") makes the stanza yet more intense.

In the next stanza, the /h/ alliteration of "Holds his hat to his head" conveys the immense effort it takes this man to hold himself together: those /h/ sounds fill the line with puffs of air, as though to mirror the man's huffing effort while "staggering by."

Many of the same sounds appear in the final stanza—but here their effect is quite different. The /h/, /w/, and /s/ alliteration of the poem's final lines convey the peace and gentleness of the world within the speaker's house. For example, listen to the poem's closing couplet:

> So soft that a mother that's nigh
> Her still cradle may hear her babe sigh.

The breathy /h/ and smooth /s/ sounds are lilting and gentle, evoking the sleeping baby's soft breath rather than the fearsome power of the storm.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "swift," "swollen"
- **Line 2:** "speed"
- **Line 3:** "wild," "winds," "sweep"
- **Line 4:** "weed"
- **Line 5:** "willow"
- **Line 6:** "beds," "by," "brim"
- **Line 8:** "Holds his hat," "his head," "by," "brim;"
- **Line 9:** "her hair-locks"
- **Line 12:** "his head"
- **Line 14:** "where," "winds"
- **Line 15:** "light," "swimming"
- **Line 16:** "low-swinging," "stem"
- **Line 17:** "So soft"
- **Line 18:** "still," "hear her," "sigh"

REPETITION

"The Storm-Wind" features lots of repetition. Most obviously, the speaker begins many lines with the phrase "And the," an example of anaphora. All these "ands" create momentum and anticipation: the storm does this *and* this *and* this. The poem seems to build *excitement* as the storm builds in *power*.

Note, too, how lines 3-6 feature broader parallelism:

> And the wild-blowing winds lowly sweep
> O'er the quivering leaf and the weed,
> And the willow tree writhes in each limb,
> Over sedge-beds that reel by the brim—

This parallel language reflects the fact that the storm's influence is felt far and wide, affecting every inch of the landscape.

The speaker also repeats the phrase "by the brim" in lines 6 and 8. The first time this phrase appears, it refers to the location of the grasses along the riverbank. In the next stanza, it refers to the edge of a man's hat. By repeating this phrase, the poem emphasizes that the landscape and human beings are equally subject to the storm's power.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "And the"
- **Line 4:** "O'er," "quivering"
- **Line 5:** "And the"
- **Line 6:** "Over," "by the brim"
- **Line 8:** "by the brim"
- **Line 9:** "And the"
- **Line 11:** "quivering," "o'er"
- **Line 16:** "And the"

IMAGERY

"The Storm-Wind" contains dramatic imagery throughout as the speaker describes the storm's power. The storm swells the waters of "the swift-rolling brook," which speeds past the trees that line its banks. The winds are "wild" and "lowly sweep" across the land, making plants tremble, tree limbs twist, and grasses bend. It sends ripples across the "small pool" from which a bird is trying to drink. These vivid descriptions make it easier for readers to envision the storm as it whips across every bit of the landscape, affecting delicate grasses and thick tree branches alike.

Imagery helps readers *feel* the storm too, whose fierce winds threaten to topple those unlucky enough to be caught outside. The speaker describes a man gripping onto his hate as he staggers by and a girl with her hair whipping about as she tries to remain steady. Such imagery might make the reader feel a little wobbly themselves!

The imagery of the final stanza is quite different, however. Here, the winds "die away" to become "light swimming airs" that blow gently and sweetly around the speaker's house. There's a clear juxtaposition between this calm imagery and the violent, chaotic imagery in the previous stanzas. The storm's power seems to be snuffed out in an instant, replaced by a soothing breeze.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 7-10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-17

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses some subtle personification as it describes the effects of the violent "storm-wind" of the title. The speaker says that the "leaf and weed" are quivering, for example, a word the poem returns to in the next stanza with its mention of "the quivering wavelings" that ripple across "the pool" from which a bird drinks. While the verb "quiver" just means to tremble or shake rapidly, it's a term often associated with *human* movement and emotion; people quiver with fear or anxiety.

Here, the word suggests that the plants and water are *frightened* by the storm.

Similarly, the speaker says that a "willow tree writhes in each limb." In other words, the trees' branches twist and contort. Again, the word "writhes" more typically refers to people (or, maybe, animals) and is associated with discomfort and pain. It sounds as though the tree is being tortured by the storm.

This personification emphasizes just how powerful this storm is. It makes the poem more dramatic and, indeed, frightening—in turn allowing the imagery of the final stanza to feel more comforting. The speaker turns to personification again here, saying that "the winds die away" and the "light swimming airs"—the gentle breeze—"play / So soft." The word "play" suggests that the wind frolics and delights in its surroundings (or that its sounds are like music). The wind becomes a pleasant presence here rather than a menace.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "the quivering leaf and the weed"
- **Line 5:** "the willow tree writhes in each limb"
- **Line 11:** "the quivering wavelings"
- **Lines 14-17:** "where the winds die away, / The light swimming airs, round the tree / And the low-swinging ivy stem, play / So soft"

VOCABULARY

Swift-rolling brook (Line 1) - Quickly moving stream.

Alders (Line 2) - A type of tree commonly found in England.

Lowly (Line 3) - Close to the ground.

O'er (Line 4) - A contraction of "over."

Quivering (Line 4, Line 11) - Shaking or trembling.

Weed (Line 4) - Plants/grasses growing by the water.

Writhes (Line 5) - Twists or contorts, as though in pain.

Sedge-beds (Line 6) - Grassy areas along the riverbank.

Reel (Line 6) - Lurch from side to side.

Brim (Line 6, Line 8) - In the first stanza, this refers to the edge of the riverbank. In the second stanza, it refers to the rim of the "staggering" man's hat.

Outfly (Line 9) - Fly out of her hat/hairdo.

Trim (Line 10) - Steady/balanced.

Wavelings (Line 11) - Little waves or ripples.

O'erspread (Line 11) - Spead over.

Lee (Line 13) - An area facing away from the wind.

Nook (Line 14) - A recess in the land (here, it provides shelter for the speaker's house).

Nigh (Line 17) - Near to.

Babe (Line 18) - Baby.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Storm-wind" contains three sestets (six-line stanzas). These can each be broken up further into a quatrain followed by a couplet, based on the poem's rhyme scheme.

At first, this steady, musical form seems at odds with the poem's content: the poem's first two stanzas both describe a storm's violent power, which makes both the landscape and people caught outside stagger and tremble. Yet the final stanza reveals that the speaker is safe and sound at home. The poem's predictable, controlled form perhaps reflects the calm the speaker feels in the sheltered "nook" of his house.

METER

The dominant meter in "The Storm-Wind" is anapestic trimeter. Anapests are metrical feet that follow an unstressed-unstressed-stressed pattern of syllables (da-da-DUM), and trimeter means there are three of these feet in each line. Here are lines 5 and 11 to illustrate this meter in action:

And the wil- | low tree writhes | in each limb
And the qui- | vering wave- | lings o'erspread

The poem's meter is rough, however, with few lines following anapestic trimeter perfectly. Many lines are also open to interpretation. Line 1, for example, *could* be read as anapestic trimeter—and was probably intended as such:

When the swift- | rolling brook, | swollen deep,

But it's also possible to read line 1 as having a stressed beat on "roll." Other lines contain even clearer variations, as is the case with line 7:

The man | that is stag- | gering by

The first foot here drops a syllable, turning it into an iamb (da-DUM). Such variations keep readers on their toes. Broadly, though, there's a galloping rhythm flowing through the poem that evokes the ferocious power of the "storm-wind."

RHYME SCHEME

"The Storm-Wind follows an ABABCC rhyme scheme. Each quatrain, then, starts with four lines of alternating rhymes followed by a couplet that adds a sense of finality to the close of each stanza. Some rhyme sounds repeat across stanzas as well.

For example, lines 5, 6, 8, and 10 all rhyme (and lines 6 and 8 in fact repeat the exact same word—an example of identical rhyme):

> And the willow tree writhes in each **limb**,
> Over sedge-beds that reel by the **brim**—
> [...]
> Holds his hat to his head by the **brim**;
> [...]
> Puts a foot out, to keep herself **trim**,

Accounting for these shared sounds, the scheme of the first two stanzas is more accurately written as: ABABCC DCDCEE. Those "D" rhymes then reappear at the end of the third stanza in "night"/"sigh." In returning to the same rhyme sounds, the speaker creates a link, a kind of sonic throughline, between all three stanzas.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker doesn't appear in the first two stanzas at all. These lines focus instead on the way the "storm-wind" whips across the land, riling up the "swift-rolling brook," twisting tree limbs, and almost knocking over an unlucky "man" and "girl" caught outside.

The speaker only appears in the third stanza, when the poem reveals that he's safe and cozy inside his house "in the lee / Of the nook" (that is, in a little recess or alcove that's sheltered from the wind). The poem implies that the speaker's wife and child are in the house too and that the speaker is grateful to be home rather than caught in the wind.

SETTING

The poem takes place during a mighty storm. On any other day, the landscape in the poem sounds like it might be peaceful and lovely: there's a rolling brook lined by willow trees and grasses. Yet the powerful "storm-wind" of the title riles everything up: the brook becomes "swift-rolling" and "swollen deep," a "willow tree writhes in each limb," and leaves tremble. The few people caught outside in the storm might hold tight to their clothing as they "stagger[]" through the wind.

The setting abruptly shifts in the third stanza, moving to the speaker's house. This house is located in a little alcove that's sheltered from the storm; as such, the winds "die away," becoming nothing more than a pleasant, playful breeze. The world in and around the speaker's house seems all the more serene and precious in light of the storm's violence.

While the poem never specifies where it's set, it was undoubtedly inspired by the weather and landscapes of Dorset in southwest England, where Barnes spent most of his life.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Barnes (1801 to 1886) was many things: poet, priest, literary critic, linguist, mathematician, artist, and inventor. He was born in Dorset in southwest England, where he stayed for the majority of his life. It's likely that Dorset's landscapes inspired the setting of "The Storm-Wind."

With its steady stanza lengths and regular rhyme scheme, "The Storm-Wind" is very much a typical Victorian-era poem in terms of its style. Victorian poets' approach to nature, however, was more varied. By and large, writers of the era had a less idealistic outlook than that of their Romantic forbears. Many depicted the world in bleak, cynical terms, an approach that contrasted the celebratory tone employed by the Romantics. This was largely the result of the Victorian desire to address changes taking place in the 19th century (including rapid industrialization).

Poets like Gerard Manley Hopkins, a contemporary of Barnes, viewed nature through a religious lens, praising its majesty. Poems like "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold, on the other hand, found an emptiness in nature that he felt echoed humankind's loss of religious faith. "The Storm-Wind" perhaps sits somewhere in between, noting nature's capacity for destruction while also cherishing the shelter provided by a natural "nook" in the land.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

England toward the end of the 19th century was in the midst of the Second Industrial Revolution, a period of rapid technological advancement in both manufacturing and transportation. The Second Industrial Revolution also led to widespread degradation of nature from the exploitative mining and harvesting of natural resources, pollution emitted by factories, and the expansion of urban and suburban spaces into what was formerly wilderness. Many artists and writers (and people from all walks of life) viewed this destruction of nature with alarm and despair.

This was also a period of strict morals and religiosity on the one hand and scientific challenges to the accepted dogma on the other; geological discoveries and Darwin's theories of evolution led to a crisis of faith as many questioned the biblical account of the world's creation. Barnes's own Christian faith remained strong, however, and he was famously energetic as a religious leader.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Remembering William Barnes — Watch a

recent celebration of Barnes's life and work, which includes numerous readings of his poems. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fHDBA74H-L0)

- Victorian Nature Poetry — Learn more about Victorian poets' attitudes towards the natural world. (https://sites.udel.edu/britlitwiki/nature-in-the-late-victorian-imagination/)
- Visit Dorset — Check out the tourism website for Barnes's hometime (which likely inspired the scene in "The Storm-Wind"). (https://www.visit-dorset.com/)
- The William Barnes Society — Learn more about the poet's life and work from the society set up in his name. (https://www.williambarnessociety.org.uk)

HOW TO CITE

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