

Meow

manor house or the cottage or the weary traveler lashed and battered?

You may say that every story needs a setting and that weather is part of the setting. That is true, by the way, but it isn't the whole deal. There's much more to it. Here's what I think: weather is never just weather. It's never just rain. And that goes for snow, sun, warmth, cold, and probably sleet, although the incidence of sleet in my reading is too rare to generalize.

So what's special about rain? Ever since we crawled up on the land, the water, it seems to us, has been trying to reclaim us. Periodically floods come and try to drag us back into the water, pulling down our improvements while they're at it. You know the story of Noah: lots of rain, major flood, ark, cubits, dove, olive branch, rainbow. I think that biblical tale must have been the most comforting of all to ancient humans. The rainbow, by which God told Noah that no matter how angry he got, he would never try to wipe us out completely, must have come as a great relief.

We in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic world have a fair chunk of mythology invested in rain and its most major by-product. Clearly rain features in other mythologies as well, but for now let this be our cornerstone. Drowning is one of our deepest fears (being land creatures, after all), and the drowning of everything and everybody just magnifies that fear. Rain prompts ancestral memories of the most profound sort. So water in great volume speaks to us at a very basic level of our being. And at times Noah is what it signifies. Certainly when D. H. Lawrence has the Flood go crashing through the family homestead in *The Virgin and the Gypsy* (1930), he's thinking of Noah's flood, the big eraser that destroys but also allows a brand-new start.

Rain, though, can do a lot more. That dark and stormy evening (and I suspect that before general illumination by street-light and neon all stormy evenings were pretty darned dark)

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It's More Than Just Rain or Snow

IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT. What, you've heard that one? Right, Snoopy. And Charles Schulz had Snoopy write it because it was a cliché, and had been one for a very long time, way back when your favorite beagle decided to become a writer. This one we know: Edward Bulwer-Lytton, celebrated Victorian popular novelist, actually did write, "It was a dark and stormy night." In fact, he began a novel with it, and not a very good novel, either. And now you know everything you need to know about dark and stormy nights. Except for one thing.

Why?

You wondered that, too, didn't you? Why would a writer want the wind howling and the rain bucketing down, want the

has worlds of atmosphere and mood. Thomas Hardy, a considerably better Victorian writer than Edward B.-L., has a delightful story called "The Three Strangers" (1883) in which a condemned man (escaped), a hangman, and the escapee's brother all converge on a shepherd's house during a christening party. The hangman doesn't recognize his quarry (nor do the members of the party), but the brother does, and runs away, leading to a manhunt and general hilarity, all of which is taking place on a, well, dark and stormy night. Hardy doesn't call it that, but he has great fun describing, in his ironic and detached tone, the rain lashing down on hapless wayfarers, forcing them to seek shelter where they can; hence the appearance of our three gentlemen callers. Now the Bible is never very far from Hardy's thoughts, but I daresay he has no idea of Noah when he's writing about this storm. So why does he bring rain into it?

First of all, as a plot device. The rain forces these men together in very uncomfortable (for the condemned man and the brother) circumstances. I occasionally disparage plot, but we should never discount its importance in authorial decision-making. Second atmospherics. Rain can be more mysterious, muckier, more isolating than most other weather conditions. Fog is good, too, of course. Then there is the misery factor. Given the choice between alternatives, Hardy will always go for making his characters more miserable, and rain has a higher wretchedness quotient than almost any other element of our environment. With a little rain and a bit of wind, you can die of hypothermia, on the Fourth of July. Needless to say, Hardy loves rain. And finally there is the democratic element. Rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. Condemned man and hangman are thrown into a bond of sorts because rain has forced each of them to seek shelter. Rain can do other things as well, but these are the reasons, it seems to me, that Hardy has chosen a nice, malicious rainstorm for his story.

What other things? For one, it's clean. One of the paradoxes of rain is how clean it is coming down and how much mud it can make when it lands. So if you want a character to be cleansed, symbolically, let him walk through the rain to get somewhere. He can be quite transformed when he gets there. He may also have a cold, but that's another matter. He can be less angry, less confused, more repentant, whatever you want. The rain that was upon him—figuratively—can be removed. On the other hand, if he falls down, he'll be covered in mud and therefore more stained than before. You can have it either way, or both ways if you're really good. The problem with cleansing, though, is the problem with wishes: you have to be careful what you wish for, or for that matter what you want cleansed. Sometimes it backfires. In *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison gives her poor jilted lover, Hagar, an encounter with cleansing rain. Having been thrown over by her longtime lover (and cousin—it's very awkward), Milkman, for a more "presentable" love interest (with looks and especially hair nearer the "white" ideal), Hagar spends a desperate day buying clothes and accessories, visiting hair and nail salons, and generally turning herself into a simulacrum of the woman she thinks Milkman wants. After spending all her money and psychic energy in this mad plunge into a fantasy image, she is caught out in a rainstorm that ruins her clothes, her packages, and her coiffure. She is left with her despised, kinky "black" hair and her self-loathing. Rather than washing away some taint, the rain cleanses her of illusions and the false ideal of beauty. The experience, of course, destroys her, and she soon dies of a broken heart and rain. So much for the salutary effects of cleansing rains.

On the other hand, rain is also restorative. This is chiefly because of its association with spring; but Noah once again comes into play here. Rain can bring the world back to life to new growth, to the return of the green world. Of course, now-

elists being what they are, they generally use this function ironically. In the ending of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Hemingway, having killed off Frederic Henry's lover during childbirth, sends the grieving protagonist out of the hospital into, you guessed it, rain. It might be ironic enough to die during childbirth, which is also associated with spring, but the rain, which we might properly expect to be life-giving, further heightens the irony. It's hard to get irony too high for Hemingway. So, too, with Joyce's "The Dead." Near the ending, Gretta Conroy tells her husband about the great love of her life, the long-dead Michael Furey, a consumptive boy who stood outside her window in the rain and died a week later. One might argue that this is simply verisimilitude: if the story is set in the west of Ireland, it almost requires rain. No doubt there is justice in this view. But at the same time, Joyce knowingly plays off our expectations of rain as an agent of new life and restoration because he also knows that we have another, less literary set of associations for rain: the source of chills, colds, pneumonia, death. These come together and clash intriguingly in the image of the boy dying for love: youth, death, replenishment, desolation—they're all rattling around in the figure of poor Michael Furey in the rain. Joyce likes his irony about as high as Hemingway's.

Rain is the principal element of spring. April showers do in fact bring May flowers. Spring is the season not only of renewal but of hope, of new awakenings. Now if you're a modernist poet and therefore given to irony (notice that I've not yet alluded to modernism without having recourse to irony?), you might stand that association on its head and begin your poem with a line like "April is the cruellest month," which is exactly what T. S. Eliot does in *The Waste Land*. In that poem, he plays off our cultural expectations of spring and rain and fertility; better, readers don't even have to ask if he is

doing it deliberately, since he very thoughtfully provides notes telling us that he's being deliberate. He even tells us which study of romance he's using: Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920). What Weston talks about in her book is the Fisher King mythology, of which the Arthurian legends are just one part. The central figure in this set of myths—the Fisher King figure—represents the hero as fixer: something in society is broken, perhaps beyond repair, but a hero emerges to put things right. Since natural and agricultural fertility is so important to our ability to feed and sustain ourselves, much of the material Weston deals with has to do with wastelands and the attempts to restore lost fertility; needless to say, rain figures prominently. Following Weston's lead, Eliot emphasizes the absence of rain from the beginning of his poem. On the other hand, water generally is a mixed medium in his text, the river Thames being polluted and a scene of corruption, complete with a slimy-bellied rat on the bank. Moreover, the rain never quite arrives. We're told at the end that rain is coming, but that's not the same as rain actually hitting the ground around us. So then, it isn't quite happening, and we can't be sure of its effect when it does fall, if it does, but its absence occupies a major space in the poem.

Rain mixes with sun to create rainbows. We mentioned this one before, but it merits our consideration. While we may have minor associations with pots of gold and leprechauns, the main function of the image of the rainbow is to symbolize divine promise, peace between heaven and earth. God promised Noah with the rainbow never again to flood the whole earth. No writer in the West can employ a rainbow without being aware of its signifying aspect, its biblical function. Lawrence called one of his best novels *The Rainbow* (1916); it has, as you would guess, a certain amount of flood imagery, along with all the associations that imagery conveys. When you read about a

rainbow, as in Elizabeth Bishop's poem "The Fish" (1947), where she closes with the sudden vision that "everything / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow," you just know there's some element of this divine pact between human, nature, and God. Of course she lets the fish go. In fact, of any interpretation a reader will ever come up with, the rainbow probably forms the most obvious set of connections. Rainbows are sufficiently uncommon and gaudy that they're pretty hard to miss, and their meaning runs as deep in our culture as anything you care to name. Once you can figure out rainbows, you can do rain and all the rest.

Fog, for instance. It almost always signals some sort of confusion. Dickens uses a miasma, a literal and figurative fog, for the Court of Chancery, the English version of American probate court where estates are sorted out and wills contested, in *Bleak House* (1853). Henry Green uses a heavy fog to gridlock London and strand his wealthy young travelers in a hotel in *Party Going* (1939). In each case, the fog is mental and ethical as well as physical. In almost any case I can think of, authors use fog to suggest that people can't see clearly, that matters under consideration are murky.

And snow? It can mean as much as rain. Different things, though. Snow is clean, stark, severe, warm (as an insulating blanket, paradoxically), inhospitable, inviting, playful, suffocating, filthy (after enough time has elapsed). You can do just about anything you want with snow. In "The Pedersen Kid" (1968), William H. Gass has death arrive on the heels of a monster blizzard. In his poem "The Snow Man" (1923), Wallace Stevens uses snow to indicate inhuman, abstract thought, particularly thought concerned with nothingness, "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," as he puts it. Very chilling image, that. And in "The Dead," Joyce takes his hero to a moment of discovery; Gabriel, who sees himself as superior to other people, has undergone an evening in which he is

broken down little by little, until he can look out at the snow, which is "general all over Ireland," and suddenly realize that snow like death, is the great unifier, that it falls in the beautiful closing image, "upon all the living and the dead".

This will all come up again when we talk about seasons. There are many more possibilities for weather, of course, more than we could cover in a whole book. For now, though, one does well to remember, as one starts reading a poem or story, to check the weather.