

The Voice of the Rain



POEM TEXT

- 1 And who art thou? said I to the soft-falling shower,
- 2 Which, strange to tell, gave me an answer, as here translated:
- 3 I am the Poem of Earth, said the voice of the rain,
- 4 Eternal I rise impalpable out of the land and the bottomless sea,
- 5 Upward to heaven, whence, vaguely form'd, altogether changed,
- 6 and yet the same,
- 7 I descend to lave the drouths, atomies, dust-layers of the globe,
- 8 And all that in them without me were seeds only, latent, unborn;
- 9 And forever, by day and night, I give back life to my own
- 10 origin, and make pure and beautify it;
- 11 (For song, issuing from its birth-place, after fulfilment, wandering,
- 12 Reck'd or unreck'd, duly with love returns.)

thereby functions as an [extended metaphor](#) for poetry itself, asserting that poetry not only shares a rain-like life cycle, but is also vital and nourishing for the world.

In response to the speaker's question "Who art thou?", the rain identifies itself as "the Poem of Earth," establishing the rest of the poem as an extended metaphor. The rain then describes the three stages of its life cycle, the first being evaporation: "Eternal I rise impalpable out of the land and the bottomless sea." The rain has not yet taken physical form, much like the initial thoughts behind a poem exist before taking shape on a page. This line may also refer to the poetic tradition of drawing inspiration from the natural world, as though a poem is rising from nature itself (the "land" and "sea").

The next stage is condensation: "Upward to heaven, whence, vaguely form'd, altogether changed, and yet the same." The rain is now a cloud, which corresponds to the poet's initial composition of a poem, when their ideas come together to form a visible work.

The final stage is precipitation, the point at which the rain at last falls to the Earth: "I descend to lave the drouths, atomies, dust-layers of the globe." Here, the rain is crucial to the world's health and survival, nourishing it after drought. Continuing the extended metaphor, the poem makes it clear that poetry shares this vital role, replenishing humanity with life just as rain replenishes the Earth.

Towards the end of the poem, the rain again highlights its role as a life-sustaining force, claiming that poetry is just as essential. The rain explains how seeds would remain "seeds only, latent, unborn" without its help, and how it gives back life to its "own origin;" that is, it evaporates from one place and later returns water to the same place. Similarly, poetry brings inspiration to readers, who may be inspired to write their own poems and thus continue the creative cycle. The rain's mention of unborn seeds also situates poetry as a life source, suggesting that humans need poetry to grow, just like seeds need rain.

The final two lines draw another direct link between poetry and rain: "For song, issuing from its birth-place, after fulfillment, wandering, / Reck'd or unreck'd, duly with love returns." Like rain, poetry ("song") rises from a point of origin, wanders (perhaps like a cloud) as it assumes a form, and then returns to its creator with love, regardless of whether it was noticed or appreciated ("reck'd or unreck'd").

The word "love" further enriches the connection that the poem draws between poetry and rain. Until this point, the rain described its life cycle as natural and perhaps unavoidable, but here it seems instead like an act of love. The rain's personification was already clear from the poem's onset, and yet the rain now seems like a more complex, soulful being, for it



SUMMARY

"Who are you?" I asked the light rain, which, oddly enough, replied with the following: "I am the Poem of Earth," the rain said. "In an everlasting cycle, I rise as vapor from the land and sea to the sky. From there, while in the form of a cloud, both different and the same from what I was before, I fall to wash away the Earth's drought and fill every part of it with water. Without me, everything on Earth was like a seed that couldn't grow. Forever, throughout day and night, I replenish the places I come from, making them beautiful and clean (just as songs, well after being written, eventually return lovingly to the places or people they came from, regardless of whether they were heard or appreciated).



THEMES



THE NOURISHING NATURE OF POETRY

In Walt Whitman's "The Voice of the Rain," the [personified](#) figure of the rain compares itself to poetry. In describing its own cyclical nature, the rain also illuminates the essential characteristics of poetry. The rain

is capable of loving the Earth on which it falls (and from which it rises). This characteristic is perhaps made more beautiful by the fact that the speaker is standing directly in the rain (amidst a "soft-falling shower") while the rain is speaking. The speaker perceives directly that poetry, like rain, is an act of love on the part of the Earth, sustaining and enriching its occupants just as rain sustains the land.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-12



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

*And who art thou? said I to the soft-falling shower,
Which, strange to tell, gave me an answer, as here translated:*

The poem opens with an instance of [apostrophe](#), albeit an unconventional one. Apostrophes are typically addressed to imagined presences, or things or people not actually present. However, as even the speaker seems a bit surprised to discover, the rain responds to the speaker's question: "And who art thou?" It's unclear, then, whether the speaker expected an answer to the opening question or if the speaker asks it in more of a musing manner, as if simply thinking aloud. Either way, the encounter is decidedly "strange to tell" from the speaker's point of view. The speaker, like the reader, seems not to know yet what to make of hearing the rain speak.

Intriguingly, the speaker also notes that the rain's speech is "translated," but does not actually reveal what kind of language the rain uses to communicate with the speaker. Perhaps the "soft-falling shower" or the rhythm of falling droplets is itself the "voice of the rain," or maybe it is something else—the speaker's imagination, perhaps. It is important, in any case, that the reader does not genuinely hear the rain speak in this poem, for every word is translated through the speaker. This connection between the speaker and the rain seems almost intimate: meeting the speaker in the gentle form of a "soft-falling" shower, the rain eventually describes itself as an act of "love" on the part of the Earth and its occupants.

LINE 3

I am the Poem of Earth, said the voice of the rain,

This line is arguably the most important line of the poem, because it contains the [extended metaphor](#) that serves as the poem's thematic crux. Because the metaphor relies on the rain speaking about itself in the same way that a human might, this line also sets up the [personification](#) that runs through the rest of the poem.

The metaphor introduced here illuminates two basic, yet

critical, points about the poem: First, the rain is not simply likening itself to a poem; it *is* a poem; and second, the preposition "of" can signal ownership, as though the "Poem" (rain) *belongs* to the Earth, or it can signal material composition, as though the Poem is actually made *of* the Earth. Of course, both interpretations can be true, and each is supported throughout the rest of the poem. The larger connection between rain, the Earth, and poetry itself is this line's key takeaway, and it sets up the argument that the poem will go on to make about how similar poetry and rain are.

This line also contains the poem's title, "the voice of the rain." Whitman could have written "I am the Poem of Earth, said the rain" and created a more concise line with the same literal meaning, so the word "voice" stands out as slightly odd. In conventional dialogue, adding the phrase "the voice of" is redundant because it is implied that if someone is saying something, they are using their voice. So by emphasizing "the voice of the rain," the speaker adds a sense of distance from the rain's presence, as though its "voice" is the only thing the speaker has access to (rather than the rain's total being, whatever that may be). This distancing helps situate the rain as a mythical or ethereal element in the poem, or something beyond humans' full understanding, which makes the rain's voice more potent and intriguing.

LINES 4-6

*Eternal I rise impalpable out of the land and the bottomless
sea,
Upward to heaven, whence, vaguely form'd, altogether
changed,
and yet the same,*

Here, the rain describes the beginning of its water cycle. The first word of line 4, "eternal," introduces the cyclical element of the rain's existence, as it is evidently something that continues forever. The word "impalpable" describes the rain in its vapor state as it rises from the "land" and "sea." At the same time, following the [extended metaphor](#) of rain as "the Poem of Earth," these lines also make a point about how poetry starts its life cycle. For example, poetry in its own "vapor state," being "impalpable," corresponds to the early stages of the poetic writing process, when the poet is still forming thoughts and the poem lacks a discernible structure or shape.

The next line suggests the next stage of the water cycle, which is condensation. In the corresponding stage of a poem's life cycle, the poem might take a "vaguely form'd" shape, like a scribbled draft, just as water takes on the form of a cloud. Both the poem and the cloud are "altogether changed" from their previous forms (since they didn't use to have distinct shapes), but they are also "the same," since they're made of the same components as before (water vapor in the cloud's case, and the poet's ideas in the poem's case). During composition, however, the poem is still subject to change and may continue to shift on

the page, just like a cloud shifts in the sky.

LINES 7-8

*I descend to lave the drouths, atomies, dust-layers of the globe,
And all that in them without me were seeds only, latent, unborn;*

These lines correspond to precipitation, the final stage of the water cycle when rain falls from the sky. They also highlight rain's capacity to nourish and revitalize the Earth, an ability that the poem suggests poetry has as well.

In line 7, the Earth is made to seem especially parched and dry, as it contains "drouths" and "dust-layers" in need of water. The use of [asyndeton](#) also makes it seem as if these parched areas are everywhere, extended without interruption. Here, the rain is not falling in a casual or calm manner—the "soft-falling shower" of the poem's opening line—but rather is so necessary that the world would turn to dust without it. This line strongly suggests that rain not only *provides* life and nourishment, but is in fact needed to *prevent* death. The word "atomies" in particular, an archaic word for "skeleton," even suggests that the Earth is somehow emaciated in its dehydrated state, showing its bones as if it were starving.

All of this more dramatic language suggests that, in keeping with the [extended metaphor](#) of the rain as poetry, poetry is also a crucial component of humans' survival. Building on this idea of necessity, the next line likens the contents of the Earth to "latent, unborn" seeds, underlining rain's capacity to fuel life. Again, this important role indicates that poetry is similarly vital for humanity.

LINES 9-10

And forever, by day and night, I give back life to my own origin, and make pure and beautify it;

Arriving at the end of the rain's description of the water cycle, these lines highlight that the cycle is indeed a never-ending process. The word "forever" echoes the word "Eternal" from line 4, underlining that from start to finish, the cycle remains unbroken. The water cycle's critical component is that the rain returns "life" to its "origin," and is itself the material that allows life to exist. Specifically, the word "origin" describes the "land" and "sea" (line 4) that the rain came from, which makes sense given that the rain "makes pure" and beautifies Earth with hydration and lushness.

Continuing the poem's [extended metaphor](#), however, yields a slightly less obvious conclusion. The "origin" of a poem should be its writer, but it is difficult to imagine how a poem could "make pure and beautify" that writer in the same way that rain beautifies land. Nonetheless, the poem seems to say that a work of poetry *does* return to have a positive effect on its writer, whether that effect comes about in the form of publication, praise from readers, or perhaps even a thematic

aspect of the poem showing up in the poet's real life. Using this poem's metaphor, the poem's "return" would then inspire the writer to write more poetry, just as rain, after precipitating, would once again evaporate into the sky.

LINES 11-12

*(For song, issuing from its birth-place, after fulfilment, wandering,
Reck'd or unreck'd. duly with love returns.)*

Despite being in parentheses, these somewhat strangely-worded last two lines are some of the most important in the poem. With the exception of line 3, they are the only other lines that explicitly link the rain to poetry (or "song," which is, after all, a form of poetry).

Using [asyndeton](#), these two lines describe a sped-up version of the rain's complete water cycle as applied to verse. According to these lines, poetry starts by stemming from a "birth-place" and then enters a period of "fulfilment," which likely means its evolution into a final shape or form. Then, it moves into a period of "wandering," during which readers encounter it via publication or performance. The phrase "Reck'd or unreck'd" is an archaic way of saying "heard or unheard" or "felt or unfelt," meaning that only some of the poem's readers will care much about it.

But regardless of how many people did or didn't derive meaning from the poem, the poem returns to its origin with "love," granting its creator a sense of satisfaction with having written it. The word "love" also adds a new layer of meaning to the roles of both the rain and poetry; it seems that their respective connections to the earth and to humanity are emotional, rather than simply natural and unpreventable.

Although the parentheses help to visually distinguish these lines from the rest of the rain's speech, they also make the lines come across as almost endearing, as though the rain is saying, "I want to be sure that you, the listener, understand that poetry and I are the same thing."



SYMBOLS



RAIN

Although this poem, through [extended metaphor](#), makes explicit that the "rain" is "the Poem of Earth," we can consider the "rain" to be a symbol for actual poetry itself. Each time the rain describes itself, it is also describing poetry. For example, when the rain says that it descends "to lave the drouths, atomies, dust-layers of the globe," it is referring to the cleansing and nourishing power of poetry upon humankind. Without itself (and therefore, without poetry), the rain says, people on Earth are but "seeds only" and cannot grow. The ending of the poem also makes the symbol explicit by

referencing "song," which is just another kind of poetry. After "song" leaves its "birth-place," it returns to its song-writer with "love," just as rain returns with love to hydrate and revitalize the Earth.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Line 3
- Lines 4-12



POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

This poem is rooted in [apostrophe](#), which occurs when the speaker addresses the rain directly. This isn't a traditional apostrophe, however, because the imagined entity being addressed actually does respond. The speaker even admits that the encounter was "strange to tell"; perhaps these words demonstrate the speaker's own surprise that the rain does indeed answer. What's more, the question being asked ("And who art thou?") is itself slightly strange because it immediately [personifies](#) the rain (the rain is a "who," not a "what"). This unique combination of personification and apostrophe shapes the structure of the rest of the poem, as it nests the voice of one speaker (the rain) within the voice of another (the original speaker who asks the question).

The word "translated" complicates this apostrophe, however, because we do not know if the speaker really understood the rain as it was speaking. "Translated" of course could be more in line with "transcribed," indicating that the speaker is simply relaying the exact words the rain said, but it could also mean that the rain's speech was not originally comprehensible and had to be translated into English by the speaker. If the latter is true, then it might be that the apostrophe is actually being used in the traditional sense, because the speaker could be imagining a "translation" of what the rain *seems* to say, rather than claiming that the rain literally did respond to the speaker's question.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "And who art thou? said I to the soft-falling shower, / Which, strange to tell, gave me an answer, as here translated."

ASYNDETON

The use of [asyndeton](#) in the rain's descriptions of itself and its life gives the rain's [monologue](#) a kind of wandering, musing tone. When describing its precipitation in line 7, for example, it says that it descends to wash the "drouths, atomies, dust-layers" of the globe, all without using the word "and" to connect

the objects it lists. It also says in line 8 that the Earth's contents were "seeds only, latent, unborn," and uses similarly flowing, uninterrupted descriptions in line 4-5 and 11-12.

The form of these descriptions matches and reinforces the content of the poem, as though the rain is "wandering" through its language just as it wanders about the Earth. The slight change from a more traditional use of language also helps situate the rain as an unusual kind of entity. If it used normal conjunctions to connect its thoughts, it might seem a bit too human to be believable as a more spiritual, ethereal being.

Furthermore, the omission of conjunctions allows the poem's lines to flow more seamlessly. In the last two lines, the rain essentially describes a complete life cycle of a poem, an effort that could have sounded too clunky and slow with smaller words to fill the gaps between the more important descriptions. Interestingly, the word "and" is used instead at the beginnings of lines 1, 8, and 9 to connect the actual stages of the water cycle with one another; the poem is, after all, a single, flowing sentence, and it uses "and" to highlight this flow rather than breaking it up. The overall effect seems to mirror the way the fluid rain might actually speak, underscoring its eternally flowing life cycle.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "bottomless sea, / Upward to heaven, whence, vaguely form'd, altogether changed, "
- **Line 7:** "drouths, atomies, dust-layers"
- **Line 8:** "seeds only, latent, unborn"
- **Lines 11-12:** "(For song, issuing from its birth-place, after fulfilment, wandering, / Reck'd or unreck'd. duly with love returns.)"

IMAGERY

This poem balances both beautiful and harsh [imagery](#), conveying the full spectrum of the rain's effect on the world. Word choices like "heaven" instead of "sky" as well as adjectives like "soft-falling shower" give the rain an elegant and ethereal feel. Later on, however, the rain describes the Earth as having "drouths, atomies, dust-layers," each of which conjures a raw, powerful image of a barren planet. These harsher descriptions highlight just how necessary the rain is to the Earth, and the extent to which it can replenish it by making it "pure" and beautiful again.

Yet while the poem is full of visual imagery, it is perhaps odd that it does not contain a description of sound or sonic imagery, given that it is all about a "voice." The closest it gets to describing sound is with the phrase "soft-falling shower." It is of course easy enough to imagine what rain sounds like, but throughout this poem, the "voice of the rain" is largely confined to the actual words it uses to communicate. It's possible that this lack of sonic imagery could further the [personification](#) of

the rain. That is, if the rain sounded too much like rain over the course of this poem, it might take away from its human-like speech, or "voice," the main communicating feature of the poem.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-10

EXTENDED METAPHOR

In line 3, the rain declares, "I am the Poem of Earth," setting off a long description of how its life cycle and purpose are similar to that of poetry. After this line, the entire poem becomes an [extended metaphor](#) comparing rain and poetry.

The rain begins by describing each stage of the water cycle (evaporation, condensation, and precipitation) and compares each one to a corresponding feature of poetry. Like rain, a poem can "rise impalpable" as a series of loosely formed thoughts, eventually taking on a specific shape and structure as its writer puts those thoughts down on paper. A poem's "precipitation" is a bit more complex, as it could come about in the form of a poem's publication, finally "descending" on the world and nourishing readers, or it might occur as praise raining down on the poet after the work becomes public. Either way, the rain makes it clear that poetry is necessary to "make pure and beautify" the world and humanity, just as the rain itself nourishes the land.

After these descriptions, the rain becomes more specific about poetry. Using the last two lines explicitly outline poetry's life cycle, which mirrors its own. Perhaps the most important (and explanatory) aspect of the extended metaphor is the word "love" in line 12, which makes it clear that poetry and rain not only share similar life cycles, but are each acts of love upon their respective worlds, nourishing them with life.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-12

END-STOPPED LINE

The majority of the poem's lines are [end-stopped](#). This device reinforces and clarifies the idea that the rain is describing separate stages of its life cycle; it makes sense that it would separate them with punctuation, since they're all conceptually distinct from one another. These end-stopped lines also draw attention to the fact that the poem is just one sentence, as there is no period until the last line. Although each line, when read aloud, ends with an easy place to pause or breathe, it is not quite as substantial a pause as a period would create, allowing them to flow together more seamlessly than they would if they were individual sentences. This flowing speech seems appropriate for the "voice of the rain" (a fluid, natural entity),

and so it subtly reminds the reader the rain is the one speaking.

There is technically one instance of [enjambment](#) between lines 9 and 10, but given that line 10 is indented (as is line 6), the enjambment is more likely a consequence of line 9 being too long to fit it on one line, as you can see in this [digital version](#) of the poem's original publication. (In other words, line 9 is technically the same line as line 10, given the latter's subsequent indentation—a common formatting feature in older poems.) Line 11 could also be argued as being enjambed despite its final comma, given that the full content of this line spills over onto line 12 where the sentence finally ends. Neither reading really changes the overall feel of the poem, however.

In any case, the consistency of end-stopped lines throughout gives the poem a measured, yet flowing, cadence, perhaps not unlike the "soft-falling shower" pattering on the ground around the speaker.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ^{(⁾} ,
- **Line 2:** ^{(⁾} ."
- **Line 3:** ^{(⁾} ,
- **Line 4:** ^{(⁾} ,
- **Line 6:** ^{(⁾} ,
- **Line 7:** ^{(⁾} ,
- **Line 8:** ^{(⁾} ;
- **Line 10:** ^{(⁾} ."
- **Line 12:** ^{(⁾} .

PERSONIFICATION

This poem relies on [personification](#) to give the rain a voice and, consequently, a chance to explain its connection to poetry. The title of "The Voice of the Rain" establishes personification from the outset, for the rain has a "voice" in the same way that a human might. Even the first line treats the rain as if it were a human being, combining personification with [apostrophe](#) as the speaker addresses the rain directly. The speaker asks, "And *who* art thou?" instead of "And *what* art thou?", implying that the rain has a specific identity to be explored.

This personification is also historically fitting, for many major aspects of the natural world (including Earth itself) have been personified since poetry's invention. This trend is likely rooted classical literature, when gods and goddesses were said to personify various parts of the natural world (e.g. the sun was not merely the sun, but rather Helios, the Greek god of the sun). The rain even describes its cyclical journey as involving "heaven" (rather than merely the sky), which may, too, be a small [allusion](#) to this tradition of connecting nature with god-like or spiritual forms.

Although rain is the main example of personification in this poem, there is actually one more, much smaller instance as well. When the rain describes the Earth's "seeds," it says they are

"unborn." Plants are not typically thought of as being capable of "birth," even though they do go through something like birth when they germinate and scatter seeds for future growth. The word "unborn" helps us view the seeds not merely as seeds but rather, following the poem's [extended metaphor](#), as human beings who can grow only with the aid of poetry. If rain is poetry, then the seeds are the people positively affected by the way it nourishes them.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

CAESURA

The act of reading this poem aloud makes apparent its many [caesuras](#), which are scattered throughout the poem. The frequent pauses, accomplished usually via commas, give the poem a consistently airy quality (in that each pause grants a breath in the middle of the line). The rain, after all, becomes a kind of air during the water cycle's stage of evaporation, and relies on air to become a cloud and later precipitate, so the poem's form matches its content.

Take, for example, lines 5-7:

Upward to heaven, whence, vaguely form'd,
altogether changed,
and yet the same,
I descend to lave the drouths, atomies, dust-layers of
the globe,

These lines reference the rain's process of evaporating, condensing, and later precipitating, all while containing a total of eight commas, or eight small spaces for the reader to take a breath. The poem relies on commas and frequent pauses to separate the different ideas within this long sentence rather than periods, a strategy that lets it flow like rain through a water cycle. Notice, too, that the poem contains only one period, which comes only in its final line as if underscoring the end of this cycle.

The caesuras also help to differentiate the rain's "voice" from a typical human voice. Most people would not use this many commas or semi-colons to speak, or even write, and so readers can more easily distinguish the rain's speech from that of a human being. The rain's voice may be "translated" into comprehensible language, but it is still very much the rain's.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "?"
- **Line 2:** " " " "
- **Line 3:** "
- **Line 5:** " " " " "

- **Line 6:** "
- **Line 7:** " " " "
- **Line 8:** " " " " " "
- **Line 9:** " " " "
- **Line 10:** "
- **Line 11:** " " " " "
- **Line 12:** "

ASSONANCE

Like several of the aforementioned literary devices, the [assonance](#) in this poem gives it a pleasant-sounding, flowing quality that helps align it with rain, and the way it moves through its water cycle. Note, for example, the /aw/ sounds in the first line with "soft" and "falling," which seem to mimic the gentle nature of the rain. In the same line, the /ow/ of "thou" and "shower" add a subtle sonic connection between these words, both of which constitute the poem's addressee; the thou—or the "you"—to whom the speaker is talking is the shower, and the shared sounds thus reflect the [personification](#) of the rain in the poem.

Notice also how "rain," "changed," and "same," share long /a/ sounds. Though spaced a bit further apart than the previous moments of assonance, these sounds again draw readers' attention to meaningful links between the words themselves. For example, "rain," in the context of this poem and in real life, is something that "changes" when it assumes the form of a cloud, yet also stays the "same," for it is still made up of water vapor. The assonance in these three words accentuates this fact.

Strong assonance again appears with the closely repeated long /i/ sound in the following line:

And forever, by day and night, I give back life to my
own

Here, the assonance underscores the active, personified power of the rain—the shared sounds echo the fact that, in the poem, the rain is an "I," a singular being with the potential to give "life" and nourish the world.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ou," "o," "a," "o"
- **Line 2:** "a," "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 3:** "ai"
- **Line 4:** "I," "I," "a," "a," "o," "o"
- **Line 5:** "ea," "e," "e," "a"
- **Line 6:** "a"
- **Line 8:** "e," "ee," "o"
- **Line 9:** "o," "y," "i," "I," "I"
- **Line 10:** "i," "i"
- **Line 11:** "o," "a"

- **Line 12:** "e," "e"



VOCABULARY

Thou (Line 1) - Thou is an archaic form of "you."

Impalpable (Line 4) - An impalpable substance is one that is intangible, or unable to be touched.

Whence (Line 5) - Whence is an archaic way of saying "from which."

Lave (Line 7) - Lave means to wash (usually with water).

Drouths (Line 7) - Drouth is another word for "drought."

Atomies (Line 7) - Atomy is an old word for skeleton. In context, "atomies" describes the bone-dry, emaciated state of the Earth before rain arrives.

Dust-layers (Line 7) - Dust-layers are large clouds of dust on the Earth's surface. They seem here to indicate harsh, dry weather conditions.

Latent (Line 8) - Something that is latent is full of potential, but undeveloped and still waiting to grow.

Beautify (Line 10) - To beautify something is to make it beautiful and attractive.

Issuing (Line 11) - Issuing, in this context, means "going out from" or "arising from."

Rek'd or unreck'd (Line 12) - "Reck'd or unreck'd" means "heard or unheard" or "felt or unfelt."

Duly (Line 12) - Duly means "appropriately" or "fittingly."

comes from its mixture of [asyndeton](#) and [end-stopped lines](#).

For example, lines 5-6 split up many of their descriptors with commas instead of using conjunctions, and so these lines read in a lilting manner, as though even the rain itself is not sure when it will end the sentence. At times, just when it seems that a complete description or idea is coming to a close, the poem continues with the word "And..." in the following line (for example, in lines 8 and 9), continuing its free-flowing feel. The commas and colons at the ends of each line separating the poem's thoughts somewhat, but there is no period until the poem ends. Every thought is therefore connected and flows in a steady rhythm that feels almost like a meter.

RHYME SCHEME

This [free-verse](#) poem does not have a formal [rhyme scheme](#), but it does have some [slant rhyme](#) (mostly in the form of [assonance](#)) that comes up as both [end rhyme](#) and [internal rhyme](#).

For example, "shower" and "answer" in the first two lines share slant internal rhyme with the /er/ sound, and "answer" and "translated" are connected in a similar way, with assonance on the long /a/ sound. "Rain," "changed," and "same," have assonant slant rhymes at the ends of lines 3, 5 and 6, as do "globe" and "own" with the long /o/ sound. "Unborn" and "origin" also share this /o/ sound, though they are not technically slant rhymes because this assonance is not in the final syllable of both words.

While not frequent enough to create a consistent rhyme scheme, these less obvious forms of rhyme create a pleasant, melodious feel throughout the poem—which perhaps reflects the "soft-falling shower" in line 1.



SPEAKER

There seem to be two speakers in this poem, although you could also argue that there is technically only one, since the rain's speech is "translated" through the voice of the first speaker. The first speaker is the "I" in line 1, who asks of the rain: "And who art thou?" The only other detail we know about this speaker is that the speaker found the rain's speech "strange to tell" about, which suggests that the speaker wasn't expecting it to respond to the initial question. Although only the first two lines of the poem are clearly in this speaker's voice, this speaker also notes that the rain's words are "translated," which may mean that the rain's "voice" is actually something this first speaker imagined or embellished, rather than a literal voice that the speaker heard. Accordingly, it may be that the seeming second speaker who narrates the rest of the poem is really still this first speaker all along.

Either way, the main speaker is the rain, who takes on a [personified](#) form throughout the poem, using its "voice" to speak. The rain speaks gently and uninterruptedly (using only



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem's form, like most of Whitman's poetry, is [free verse](#). In other words, it does not follow any particular stanza or line structure, rhyme scheme, or meter.

While there could be a multitude of reasons that a poet might choose to write in free verse, free verse seems especially fitting for *this* poem given that the poem is mostly told not by a human being, but by "the voice of the rain." The rain, being an ever-fluctuating part of the natural world, is unbounded, falling wherever the wind sweeps it. The poem even references the "wandering" nature of both poetry and rain, so it makes sense that the form of the poem would be similarly wandering and free-flowing.

METER

Although this poem does not have a formal meter, as is typical of [free verse](#), it does have a particular kind of cadence that

one flowing sentence), perhaps reflecting the way it descends in a "soft-falling shower." Importantly, it also speaks with confidence, saying that without it, the Earth's contents are "seeds only, latent, unborn." Words like these give the rain an experienced, wise tone, which makes sense given that it is just as old as the Earth it replenishes.



SETTING

The poem is set in two places. The first is wherever the speaker is while standing amidst the "soft-falling shower," which speaks back to them in "the voice of the rain."

The second setting is the entire Earth. Even though the poem describes an encounter between two beings (which would have to occur in one, specific location), this encounter includes a wide-ranging discussing of the whole planet, and even of the skies and atmosphere surrounding it ("heaven"). The rain spends the majority of the poem describing its water cycle, which occurs over land, sea, and sky; thus the poem's setting cannot be confined to an exact location, given the rain's widespread presence.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Although "The Voice of the Rain" lacks the political and social commentary that pervades much of Walt Whitman's work, it nevertheless has characteristics of his style and poetic voice. The poem is written in [free verse](#) and is in the first-person (even though it is mostly the rain that this first-person perspective belongs to), both of which Whitman relied on extensively throughout his work. These techniques, as well as a passion for democracy and social progressivism, are major parts of the collection *Leaves of Grass*, in which this poem was eventually published. *Leaves of Grass* is Whitman's major collection of poetry that he continually revised and added on to until his death.

Other writers during Whitman's time, particularly Oscar Wilde, found Whitman's passion for democracy and freedom of expression appealing, so much so that the two met in America. Later on in the 20th-century, famous novelist Jack Kerouac and poet Gary Snyder would be influenced by these democratic ideals, as well as Whitman's reverence for the natural world, in producing their own work. Today, Whitman is heralded as one of the most "American" poets for his focus on democracy and freedom of expression, both in poetic form and content. Ezra Pound, a modernist poet of the early 20th-century, even went so far as to say that Whitman "is America."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Walt Whitman lived in 19th-century America and was affected

by the politics surrounding the Civil War, as well as by the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of cities. Although "The Voice of the Rain" does not outwardly seem to connect to a particular historical time period, it nevertheless conveys the democratic ideals that were a crucial part of Whitman's worldview. Whitman championed democracy and equality during a time of slavery, and while this poem may not be about slavery specifically, it is nevertheless "democratic" in that it makes a case for valuing the entirety of the Earth and all its occupants. Whitman placed great importance on the right to freely express oneself (one reason for his preference for writing in free verse) and believed that everyone should be able to do so. In this poem, he takes his democratic ideals to a kind of extreme: even the rain gets a chance to speak and express itself.

This poem can also be read as a kind of ode to the beauty and authority of the natural world, which may have been a response to the growing development of urban centers and industry in America. Overall, the 19th century was an identity crisis of sorts for the United States (which was of course not "united" for much of this time period), a reality that provided artists the challenge of capturing the nation's shifting and embattled spirit. This poem hints at both Whitman's concern over industrial progress and his belief in the value of human rights and freedoms.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Leaves of Grass \(audio\)](#) — A full audio recording of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, read by multiple performers. (<http://www.laits.utexas.edu/leavesofgrass/>)
- [Walt Whitman Page \(Academy of American Poets\)](#) — The Academy of American Poets website has information about Whitman's biography and notable works. (<https://poets.org/poet/walt-whitman>)
- [Walt Whitman Museum](#) — Walt Whitman's birthplace in Huntington Station, NY is now a museum that you can visit. (<https://www.waltwhitman.org/>)
- [The Science of the Water Cycle](#) — NASA's education website describes the water cycle in detail, providing scientific context for the rain's description of its life cycle. (<https://pmm.nasa.gov/education/water-cycle>)
- [The Walt Whitman Archive](#) — This digital archive contains copies of Whitman's original works, including letters and other hand-written documents, as well as biographical information, portraits, photos, and literary criticism. (<https://whitmanarchive.org/>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WALT WHITMAN POEMS

- [A Noiseless Patient Spider](#)

- [I Hear America Singing](#)
- [O Captain! My Captain!](#)
- [When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer](#)



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