Close Reading of Adrienne Rich’s “Storm Warnings”

Adrienne Rich’s poem, “Storm Warnings,” uses many poetic devices such as structure, imagery, extended metaphor, and concrete details to reveal the poem’s literal and metaphorical meanings. The organization of the poem is written in chronological order to reveal both the literal and metaphorical meanings in the poem, allowing her to explain both the external and internal conflict held by the speaker because the emotions of the speaker are parallel to the external storm happening outside. The use of imagery depicts the literal meaning of an approaching storm; however, metaphorically, the storm represents the speaker’s emotions.

1. Meter – Unrhymed iambic pentameter with an incomplete line at the end of each stanza

2. Appearance – 4 equal length stanzas of 7 lines

3. Rhyme – No continuous rhyme, there is an occasional end rhyme

4. Texture and Sound – The alliterative sounds of the “w” and “s” words create a continuous motif in the poem, which functions to imitate the sound of the wind. The overall effect is a sense of uneasiness and unrest as one would feel with an approaching storm.

5. Punctuation – Heavy use of enjambment, long flowing sentences ending toward the end of each stanza.


7. Figurative Language –

   a. imagery:
      i. measuring instruments such as clock (measures time) and weatherglasses (measures barometric pressure), the weatherglass, a primitive predictive instrument, neither instrument is precise and neither can influence or alter that which they measure. “shatter fragments of an instrument” are not “a proof against the wind”
      ii. “drawing the curtains as the sky goes black”
      iii. “boughs strain against the sky”
      iv. “set a match to candles sheathed in glass”
   b. personification: “winds are walking overhead,” “zone of grey unrest is moving across the land” creates the illusion of weather as a human presence
   c. metaphor: outside weather becomes a metaphor for emotional turbulence within a person

8. Diction I (Congruity) –

   a. verbs: (falling, knowing, walking, moving, leave, watching, strain, waiting, traveled, come on, alter, control, rise, close, draw, set, live) the verbs seem fairly passive, they are intentionally weak verbs which ties into the theme of the poem: that humans are defenseless and only can hunker down and wait for troubles to pass by.
   b. adjectives: (grey, pillowed, closed, silent, secret, polar, shattered, black, insistent, unsealed, sole, troubled) the adjectives create an isolated, lonely tone. Both verbs and adjectives function together to further drive home the theme of the poem.
9. Diction II (Ambiguity) –
a. the word “glass” can be interpreted as an instrument (a weather glass) or can be can refer to precipitation in the form of hail or sleet.
b. the choice of the phrase “polar realm” may be related to setting or to the emotional state of the speaker
c. Even though we have developed “instruments” to predict approaching weather (emotional trouble and hardship) these instruments are not always accurate, and cannot alter the outcome.

10. Diction III (Keywords and Central Ideas) –
a. The word “weather” is a keyword in the poem because it takes on two levels of meaning: the physical weather outdoors and the emotional weather in the speaker’s heart.
b. The word “prediction” is key because it ties into the theme of the poem: that people can do various things to prepare for tragedy, but these proofs will not stop the events from taking place or fully guard the person from them.
c. The word “waiting” also reinforces the theme of helplessness. An individual can board up the windows, but ultimately has to wait out the approaching storm.

SAMPLE ESSAY

The first stanza reveals much about an actual storm. Using the true events of a rising storm as details, the reader is first introduced to the literal "storm warnings": "The glass...falling," "winds walking overhead" and "gray unrest." Yet, the personification of the weather and use of words, such as "unrest", adds a new element to the plot. Somehow the storm is no longer just a change in weather, but comes to stand for an uncontrollable force. The speaker uses details of his own reactions to illustrate the anticipation and nervous feeling that overwhelms him before a storm or unstoppable force. This mood of anticipation is further emphasized with the idea of "air (moving) inward toward a silent core of waiting." However, sharing the figurative translation of the "storm", this idea also implies all the predictable, yet unstoppable acts that inflict man and man's reactions.

With this metaphorical view the speaker comes to the main point with his statement, "Weather abroad and weather in the heart alike come on regardless of prediction." This statement is placed in the center of the poem for precise reasons. The speaker builds up to this revelation, but also uses this point as the breaking time from literal description of a storm to a more personal translation of "storm." The reader now becomes aware of the speaker's feelings of helplessness when it comes to the so called "storms." In both cases, an extreme change of weather or a conflict within the "heart", can be predicted, but not "(averted)." Using the metaphor of "the wind will rise, we can only close the shutters," reveals more about the speaker than ever before.

From the given detail the reader can come to a realization that the speaker is in a state of despair and overwhelming reality. The symbolic act of "(closing) the shutters" reveals his need for escape and his inability to deal with uncontrollable situations or "storms." At last the speaker chooses to convey his overall gained knowledge of "(stormy)" situations. Choosing to add this detail at the end allows for the rest of the poem to build up to this resolution. The speaker concludes with the statement: "This is our sole defense against the season; These are the things
that we have learned to do." This statement ties the entire poem together, expressing both the literal progression of a storm, but also the acts to be taken when in a conflicted situation, such as love.

Therefore, the use of organization and detail help to reveal the dual meaning to the poem, "Storm Warning." This poem expresses the literal fears that come with a "storm," but also the hesitations and need for refuge against troubles of the "heart."