The following essay analyzes how Joan Didion creates a sense of foreboding that, in turn, helps her to develop her argument about the winds’ effects on human behavior.

Joan Didion’s Santa Ana Winds: A Mechanistic View of Nature

by Jane Knobler

The ominous description of Los Angeles preceding the arrival of the Santa Ana wind, juxtaposed with a scientific-sounding explanation develops Joan Didion’s view that human behavior is basically a result of mechanics. She recreates the tense, stifling atmosphere that precedes the wind and argues that its effect on the people of Los Angeles can be explained by science. The eerie atmosphere, like a 1930s detective film based on a Raymond Chandler novel, highlights the strangeness of a wind affecting behavior even before the wind has begun to blow.

The effect of Didion’s diction in the first part of the essay is to create foreboding; terror is just over the horizon. The wind cranks the nerves to a “flash point,” causing arguments to be “rekindle[d]”; one needs a “machete” for protection. The reader is reminded of the ease with which disaster visits the West Coast. Forest fires, mudslides, snakebite, murder can happen in a moment.
The word choice in the second part of the essay is more scientific; Didion provides names for these dangerous winds as well as statistics and facts about the “suicide rate,” “unmanageable” children, and a “mitigating circumstance for crime.” She supports her view that living in Los Angeles requires an understanding that human behavior is often out of our control. The dark atmosphere the Santa Ana wind creates has concrete, dire consequences that can be reported in terms of misbehavior and death. The vivid description of the impending terror that precedes the Santa Ana wind is highlighted when it is followed by the facts about the evil wind.

Didion’s choice and accumulation of detail also heighten the sense of foreboding. The coming of the wind has negative effects on the baby who “frets” and the maid who “sulks”; it causes the “eerie absence of surf.” The world is in an unnatural state. One cannot trust one’s expectations or perceptions. The long cumulative sentence that describes the “persistent malevolent winds” begins by naming other winds, moves to the wind’s beginning as a “cold mass,” and ends with the increasingly frightening “hot dry wind.” Those last three words reinforce what is “malevolent” in the beginning of the sentence. The wind’s “positive ions” seem at first a scientific explanation, but a second look shows them to be another perversion of nature. Wind should be cool; this wind blows hot. Something positive should bring happiness. These positive ions make us unhappy. Nature is a force to be reckoned with; all of our good intentions cannot stand up to the Santa Ana wind.

The evil Santa Ana winds have a negative effect on human behavior. When they are coming, the only course is to take to one’s bed. Otherwise, one may risk behaving
badly or becoming the victim of someone else’s bad behavior. It won’t be our fault. It will be the fault of the Santa Ana winds.