The Thought Fox

SUMMARY

The speaker sits alone in the middle of the night, surrounded by a forest that may or may not be in his imagination. He senses that something apart from himself is alive, as the clock ticks in the silence and his fingers hover over an empty page. He can't see any stars through the window, but feels that something is approaching him from the depths of the darkness, heading towards this isolated scene.

A fox gently touches its cold nose to twigs and leaves in the darkness. Its eyes scan its surroundings, again and again, from moment to moment.

The fox leaves tidy paw prints in the snow as it makes its way between the trees. Its shadow trails behind it like an injured animal. The fox's body, however, moves confidently and purposefully through clearings in the forest.

The fox's eye widens, its green color becoming more intense and vivid as it concentrates on what's ahead—until its scent suddenly becomes immediate and visceral, and the fox enters the darkness of the speaker's mind. The speaker still can't see any stars through the window. The clock is still ticking, and the poem has been written.

THEMES

CREATIVITY, INSPIRATION, AND IMAGINATION

"The Thought Fox" is a poem about writing poetry. The poem metaphorically depicts artistic inspiration as a fox—mysterious, twitchy, and unpredictable—that moves slyly through the darkness of the imagination. Through this metaphor, the poem shows that writing requires patience, concentration, instinct, and a bit of luck. The poem thus emphasizes both the role of the *unconscious mind* in creativity and the need for the poet to *intentionally* (or consciously) create the right conditions in order to coax a poem into existence.

For the speaker, writing is a kind of waiting game. Creativity and inspiration might work in mysterious ways, but they can't work their magic *at all*, the poem suggests, if the creator doesn't sit down and eliminate distractions! The speaker thus sits at a desk in the dark solitude of a wintry night, with only the ticking clock for company. There aren't even any stars in the speaker's window, which implies that he isn't about to be struck with a lightning flash of divine inspiration.

Instead, writing, as depicted here, requires a hunter's stillness and patience. The speaker can sense the presence of "something else [...] alive" nearby, implying that creative inspiration is a mysterious force with its own agency. Yet writers can't force an idea any more than a fox can force its prey—or a human hunter can force a fox—into the open; all they can do is make sure they're ready for it when it comes.

With the stage set, then, the speaker waits for the "thought fox" (again, representing creativity and inspiration) to arrive. And sure enough, step after tentative step, the thought fox makes its way across the dark, snowy forest (perhaps representing the darkness and mystery of the speaker's unconscious mind).

The speaker's vivid description of the fox, with its delicate movements and attentiveness to its surroundings, echoes the creative process. Like a fox on a mission to find prey or a mate, the poet uses instinct to follow the trail of a poem. The speaker implies that a poet doesn't necessarily know what a poem is going to say before it's written, and instead uses a kind of primal intuition akin to a wild animal's. Through concentration and a kind of trust in the unconscious mind, a poem, like a fox, can just go "about its own business"—until suddenly it pounces. The fox "enters the dark hole" of the speaker's mind, and the "page is printed"; the poem—this *very poem*—is complete, seeming to have written itself.

Note how the poem does a remarkable job of bringing what *seems* like a real fox to life for the reader, and in doing so *uses* the same imaginative power that the speaker is trying to *represent* through the fox. The fox is a creature conjured in the speaker's imagination to represent *how* that very imagination works its magic. In a way, then, the thought fox creates itself! The poem lives and breathes, bringing its creation to life—even as that creature is *itself* the source of creativity.

The poem, then, depicts creativity as a mixture of deliberate choices on the writer's part (the speaker's willingness to sit down at the desk and wait) and a deeply mysterious process that takes place beyond the writer's conscious control. And perhaps, in using their *own* imaginations to bring the poem to life, readers undergo a similar process, encountering a thought fox where, just moments ago, there was nothing.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I imagine this ...
... my fingers move.

The poem begins with the phrase "I imagine," establishing a first-person perspective and taking the reader straight into the speaker's mind. The scene is dark and quiet, and the speaker seems to be in a room with a clock and, perhaps, a desk (given that his fingers "move" across a "blank page"—implying that he's preparing to write).

It's late at night—midnight, to be precise. Time works in mysterious ways in the poem, starting right here: a single "moment" possesses, or creates, a forest (it's "midnight's forest"). There might be an *actual* forest outside the speaker's window, or this might be a forest of the imagination, a metaphor for the mysterious, untamed world of the speaker's unconscious mind. In any case, the alliteration and consonance—two distinctly *poetic* devices—between "midnight" and "moment" add lyricism to the line itself.

The speaker feels that "something else is alive / Besides" the clock and the blank page. "Besides" here could simply be mean *next to*—as in, there's another presence spatially *near* the clock and page—or *apart from*—as in, there's another living presence that's not the clock or the page. This second reader suggests that the clock and page are themselves *alive* (perhaps this is in the sense that they're alive with potential). Personifying the clock as lonely also implies that there's no other sound apart from its ticking, and makes the speaker seem all the more isolated.

Again, though, that the speaker isn't the only living thing around. The stage is set for "something else" to come into being—but the nature of that "something" is intentionally left unspoken at this early stage in the poem.

It's worth noting how the use of end-stop and enjambment play with the reader's experience of time in the poem so far. The end-stop after line 1 (that colon after "forest") creates a definite pause, and suggests that everything that follows comes from the speaker's mind, that it's all part of his imagining.

This end-stopped line then contrasts with the dynamic movement of the three lines that follow. Lines 2-3 ("Something else [...] loneliness") flow quickly down the page until firmly stopping, somewhat ironically, after the word "move" in line 4, coming rest on the image of the blank page. It's as though the speaker can feel creative inspiration stirring but can't yet harness it. This rhythm also anticipates the stop-start movements of the fox so beautifully described in the next stanza—and the tension between inaction and action of a poet waiting patiently for poetry to happen.

LINES 5-8

Through the window ...
... entering the loneliness:

Lines 5-8 continue to set the scene before the "thought fox" of the poem's title actually appears. The solitary speaker waits in "loneliness" for "something" to arrive, and line 5 heightens this sense of isolation—the speaker looks out the window but doesn't even have the stars for company!

The window through which the speaker looks might be real, or metaphorical, or both. It could symbolize the speaker's own mind, which, at the moment, is relatively "blank" (like the page before him). In this interpretation, the speaker seems to be peering *into* his own unconscious, waiting for inspiration to come.

At the same time, people don't just look *into* windows; they also look *out* of them. The speaker might not be searching his own mind for inspiration, then, but looking—and failing—to find it in the outside world.

- Importantly, the window shows *no* stars. Since stars are often symbolically linked with the heavens, the poem distances itself from the idea that creativity is some sort of divine gift sent down from up above.
- The poem *does* portray creativity as strange and mysterious, but it's a mystery drawn from something more earthy, and it depends upon the speaker's patience and willingness to sit down and work—and wait! It doesn't come down to him like some flash of heavenly lightning.

Whatever was coming "alive" in line 2 is now drawing "more near" (readers would be correct to guess by now that this something is the "thought fox" itself). At the same time, this "something" is "deeper within darkness." To make sense of this, think of the fox as both real and imaginary—as both a literal fox and something the speaker has imagined into existence in order to metaphorically represent the creative process.

- The same goes for "darkness" here: think of the darkness as both the literal night outside the speaker's room, and as the metaphorical darkness of the speaker's unconscious—the part of his mind that he can't control or readily access.
- If the thought fox gets closer but the surrounding darkness gets more intense, this suggests that as poetic inspiration draws nearer, the speaker's conscious mind gives way to more unconscious thought or instinct.

The smooth enjambment between lines 5-8 makes it seem like thought fox is stealthily stalking the speaker—or, perhaps, that the speaker is stealthily laying a trap for the thought fox. Hughes is on record as saying that his early experiences of hunting lurk in the background of this poem, in fact, and like a hunter, the poet/speaker plays a waiting game. Perhaps no creature (or poem) will come into view, or perhaps the thought fox is about to make its entrance.

It's also worth noting how the colon punctuation signals this process of going "deeper" into the mind. A colon often precedes

an explanation of something, which is a *deepening* of the reader's understanding. That's exactly what's going on here with line 8's end-stop: the thought fox hasn't *yet* appeared, but it's coming closer. And, in order for the thought fox to exist in the reader's mind—for the concept to make sense—the poem itself has to strike at the reader's imagination through the magic conjuring power of its words.

The speaker himself has to *animate* (in other words, *give life to*) the fox through poetic inspiration. This end-stop, which signals the speaker's deepening journey into the unconscious mind, thus works like a magician's reveal, in which, moments later, the results of poetic skill will be visible as a fox on the page.

LINES 9-10

Cold, delicately as ...
... touches twig, leaf;

At last, the thought fox arrives on the scene. Given that this stanza is introduced by the colon in line 8, it's clear that the fox is the "something" mentioned earlier in the poem.

The title has already told readers that this fox is not (or is not *only*) a real fox, but rather a kind of spirit animal of poetic inspiration. Part of poetry's magic, of course, is to make what's on the page *seem* real—to bring life to language and an entire world to the reader's mind. In order to do so, this and the next two stanzas all avoid explicitly mentioning anything to do with metaphor.

- In these stanzas, the poem *could* just be a brilliant nature poem called "The Fox," rather than a poem that uses the *figure* of a fox to explore the way that creative thought appears in the mind. The poem trusts the reader to understand what it is about real foxes that is relevant to the art of writing.

This stanza, then, paints a vivid picture of the fox's movements. The language is delicate, cautious, and deliberate, suggesting the tentative, careful movements of the fox itself. The fox is immersed in its dark, wintry environment, feeling its way through the forest with guile and instinct. It constantly reviews its surroundings through sensory data, its nose, eyes, and ears scanning everything anew from moment to moment. Lines 9 and 10 capture this twitchy attentiveness through delicate sound patterning:

> Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
> A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;

These lines are packed full of alliteration, consonance, and assonance, just like the fox's environment is full of sensory information. Notice, too, how most of the sounds have a twitchy, almost spiky quality—sounds like the /t/ in "touches twig" and the hard /c/ in "cold" and "delicately."

Line 9 also uses asyndeton to show that this is all happening through instinct—the fox touches a twig and, without pause in the poem for that "and," a leaf. To consider how this works metaphorically, it seems that this is a discussion about the poet's need to rely on their *own* instinct, to use their primal intuition to write (and then, most likely, to use the more conscious mind to revise the poem at a later date!).

LINES 11-14

Two eyes serve ...
... Between trees,

Lines 11 and 12 focus on the fox's eyes. Foxes have incredible eyesight, which is in fact on a par with cats' and helps them to see in the dark. Foxes mostly operate at night, so eyesight is important! Note how the speaker *also* operates in darkness—literally, because it's midnight, and metaphorically because he's surveying his unconscious mind.

The fox's eyes "serve its movement" just as the speaker's eyes serve his *poetic* movements (that is, his writing):

- Each moment requires a new intake of information and a speedy re-calibration with that information. A fox might suddenly notice a potential prey out of the corner of its eye, and adjust its pace accordingly.
- Similarly, a poet adjusts the poem in real time, making innumerable decisions about which word should go where, where the line should break, how to pattern the sounds, and so on.
- The repetition (specifically the epizeuxis) of "and now" in this section demonstrates this heightened state of instinctive attentiveness, each moment representing a new *present*.

The enjambment at the end of line 12 creates tension, with all of these "now[s]" requiring a verb to make sense of them. This verb arrives in the next stanza, where the thought fox "sets neat prints into the snow / Between trees." Again, there's a clear parallel between the fox's movements and the poet's. In fact, there's a pun at work here: "prints" relates to both the fox's footprints *and* the imprints of ink made on the blank page by the speaker's pen (or, perhaps, typewriter). Similarly, the blank whiteness of the snow represents the untouched potential of the page (which, by the end of the poem, is "printed").

The consonance at the start of the stanza is expertly orchestrated: "sets neat prints[.]" Three words in a row that share common sounds, laid down like a fox putting one paw in front of the other on the snow. Step by step, the poet writes the poem.

LINES 14-17

and warily a ...
... Across clearings,

After the caesura in line 14, the speaker continues building the vivid image of a fox in the snow. Remember, this is all part of an extended metaphor for "thought"—for creative inspiration. But the poem is careful to treat its metaphorical creature as though it were real, which demonstrates the poet's *own* imaginative power and engages the reader in *their own* creative interpretation of the poem.

If the poem thus far has described the thought fox tentatively coming into being—like the speaker's first words on the page, perhaps—these three lines or so represent a moment of doubt and hesitation. The fox, like the poet, relies on instinct. The fox is a predator, but it's also vulnerable to the unpredictable dangers of its environment. But here, the speaker describes how the fox's "lame / Shadow" trails the fox itself, almost as if it is reluctant to stay with the fox.

- This shadow might represent a kind of creative doubt, a moment of self-reflection in which poetry seems near-impossible.
- Perhaps the shadow is the speaker's *conscious* mind attempting to undo the good work begun by the unconscious. Though the unconscious is normally cast as a kind of shadow, here they are reversed: the fox's "bold" body is the speaker's instinctive creativity, while the fox's shadow is that little voice that tells the speaker that he doesn't have what it takes to bring the poem into being.

Alliteration plays an important role in this split between shadow and body. The shadow is reluctant—it is "lame" and "lags" behind like a wounded animal about to die. These /l/ sounds, which also chime with the consonant /l/ sound in "warily" and "hollow," slow the poem down. Contrast this with the more plosive—explosive—/b/ sound of the "body that is bold." The body—which runs on instinct—is raring to go, though not without being attentive to the surrounding environment. And ultimately, the shadow has no choice but to follow the body.

The poem—and its thought fox—overcome this brief hesitation. The drastic enjambment between stanzas ("[...] to come // Across [...]") shows the speaker moving past this obstacle, travelling "across" stanzas just like the metaphorical flight of the fox over "clearings" (and its clearings that generally represent danger to animals, as that's when they are most out in the open).

LINES 17-20

an eye, ...
... its own business

The speaker shifts the focus onto one of the fox's eyes. The fox is now so close that the speaker can see it in detail—even the way its eye adjusts to the light by "widening." Of course, this is all part of the poem's extended metaphor. This fox is a thought—a flash of poetic inspiration that results in a poem—and its proximity to the speaker (who is the poet in question) shows that his poem (perhaps *this* poem) is coming to life.

Not only this the "greenness" of the fox's eye "widening," it's also "deepening." The poem has played on this metaphorical idea of depth way back in line 7, and refers to the speaker's own explorations of the depths—the journey into the instinctive, primal, unconscious part of his mind. It's from here, through "brilliant[]" and "concentrated[]" dedication, that a poem comes alive on the page.

Line 20 suggests that the poet's responsibility is to let the poem "come[] about its own business"—to follow the lead of the unconscious without crushing it under the weight of the conscious, rational mind. In other words, it's not the poet's "business" to know what the poem is going to say before it has been written.

It's worth noting how this stanza is a continuation of one long sentence that started at line 11 (technically speaking, it starts at line 9, but line 9's semi-colon practically functions as a full stop). In one largely uninterrupted passage, the poem has been going deeper and deeper into its exploration of the creative process, and is about to reach its culmination. The repeated consonance of the /n/ sound in the stanza is dull but insistent, representing this attempt by the speaker to burrow down into his mind (e.g., "widening deepening greenness").

LINES 21-24

Till, with sudden ...
... page is printed.

The last stanza picks right up where the previous one left off, and finally brings the poem's longest sentence to an end in line 22. This sentence has stretched for more than 10 lines, marking a period of uninterrupted concentration—which is *exactly* what the poem implies is required for writing poetry! The end-stop at the end of line 22 after "head" shows that this is a process that is now complete.

Now, then, it all comes together. The fox, despite the poem's vivid and evocative naturalistic details in the middle three stanzas, is confirmed as the *thought* fox of the title. That is, the fox is a metaphor for thought, and more specifically for poetic inspiration. Otherwise, there'd be an actual fox entering the speaker's head—which would be worrying, to say the least!

Notice *how* it enters the speaker's head: with the "sudden sharp hot stink of fox." These monosyllabic words are robust, creating multiple stresses in a row ("sudden sharp hot stink of fox"). With these choppy but powerful words, the fox is practically alive on the page, making the place stink with its foxy smell. Metaphorically speaking, this represents the suddenness with which a poem seems to have appeared on the page. Of

course, this was the speaker's doing—but it's *as if* the poem suddenly pounced upon the page like a wild animal on its prey.

Though the poem emphasizes how this poetic inspiration appears to have come from elsewhere, it's only because the speaker has sat down in a state of readiness and willingness that "the page is printed." He wasn't struck by a flash of divine inspiration, but rather assessed something more earthly, a combination of the unconscious mind, hard work, and commitment:

- The window is *still* starless, reinforcing the idea that the speaker's creative act wasn't sent down from the heavens.
- The clock is *still* ticking, indicating the passage of time.
- The consonance here is almost onomatopoeic ("clock ticks"), and the vowel sound of "clock" subconsciously echoes the vowel of tick's twin—*tock*. The reader isn't meant to know how much time has passed; time has been warped through the speaker's intense attentiveness to the poetic work before him.

In the last line, the alliteration between "page" and "printed" gives the ending a sense of finality, two plosive /p/ sounds indicating that the speaker—with the help of the thought fox—has made his mark on the page. And that's what this was all about—creating a poem where before there was only blank space. Or, in the terms of the poem's metaphor, coaxing the thought fox into life in order to track its passage along the page-like whiteness of the snow (or the snow-like whiteness of the page!).

SYMBOLS

THE STARLESS NIGHT

At two points in the poem, the speaker mentions that he can't see any stars out of his window. These mentions are either side of the main body of the poem, before and after the speaker the thought fox (inspiration) arrives.

The starless sky works as a kind of anti-symbol, going against fairly old-fashioned ideas of creativity as a flash of inspiration sent from the heavens. That is, stars *normally* symbolize the divine realm—and poetry has a long and illustrious history with this realm (think, for example, of John Milton's famous address to the "heavenly muses" at the start of *Paradise Lost)*.

The speaker's inspiration, however, comes from something more down-to-earth—a combination of patience, hard work, and the mysterious thought fox (which seems to come from the speaker's own unconscious mind). The fact that the night is starless also heightens the atmosphere of solitude at the start of the poem—and that the window *is* still starless after "the page is printed" confirms that the speaker's creativity was *not* heaven-sent.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Through the window I see no star"
- **Line 23:** "The window is starless still"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

In general, alliteration helps give the poem its unique music (along with other devices like consonance and assonance). The poem is, in a way, about itself—the speaker meditates on the act of writing poetry (how it happens and what it feels like) *through* writing a poem. Devices like alliteration help mark out that this is specifically *poetic* writing.

The first example of alliteration in the poem comes in the very first line: "midnight's moment." Apart from signalling that this is language organized through sound as well as sense (in other words, poetry), this could be an allusion to Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of Hughes's key influences:

- The latter poet's most famous poem, "The Windhover," opens with a similar construction ("I caught this morning morning's minion").
- As this is a poem about writing poetry, and appears in Hughes's first collection, it's possible that this is a little nod towards one of his poetic heroes!

Later in the poem, alliteration mirrors the twitchy movements of the fox (which, again, represents thought and inspiration). The /d/ sounds in lines 7 ("deeper" and "darkness") and 9 ("delicately" and "dark") and then the two /t/ sounds of "touches twig" in line 10 construct an image of an animal feeling its way instinctively through its environment. The /d/ sounds, which are quite soft and dull, also have a hypnotic quality that signals the speaker's deepening journey into his own unconscious mind.

In the third stanza, alliteration creates a contrast between the fox's shadow and its body. The shadow (perhaps standing in for poetic doubt) is reluctant to move forward—it is "lame" and "lags." These soft, tentative /l/ sounds contrast with the confident tone of "body" and "bold" in line 16, subtly supporting the poem's argument that poets, like foxes, should trust their intuition and primal instincts.

Alliteration can also sound surprising and sudden, as in line 21's "sudden" and "stink." This is the moment that the thought fox enters the speaker's head; inspiration arrives and the speaker's creation lives on the page. The plosive /p/ sounds of "page" and

"printed" in the last line have the same effect, ending the poem on an emphatic note that boldly claims that the speaker's work is done—and that something is now alive (a poem) that until moments ago didn't exist.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "midnight moment's"
- **Line 4:** "my," "move"
- **Line 5:** "see," "star"
- **Line 7:** "deeper," "darkness"
- **Line 9:** "delicately," "dark"
- **Line 10:** "touches twig"
- **Line 14:** "lame"
- **Line 15:** "lags"
- **Line 16:** "body," "bold"
- **Line 19:** "concentratedly,"
- **Line 20:** "Coming"
- **Line 21:** "sudden," "stink"
- **Line 22:** "hole," "head"
- **Line 23:** "starless still"
- **Line 24:** "page," "printed"

ASSONANCE

Assonance gives the poem its distinctive *poetic* music. In this sense, it works much like the poem's use of alliteration (in fact, assonance, consonance, and alliteration often to work together in poetry like three collaborating artists).

Assonance has an almost hypnotic effect on the poem as well, which helps to evoke the speaker's intense concentration. The speaker is waiting patiently for inspiration to come—for the thought fox to arrive. Notice how the short /ih/ sounds in lines 7 and 8 work almost like a mantra, bringing the speaker into a meditative state of heightened—and *instinctive*—poetic awareness:

> Though deeper within darkness
> Is entering [...]

Going "deeper" into his mind enables the speaker to let the poem come to him, and gets rids of mental distractions. Line 18's "widening deepening greenness" achieves a similar effect, focusing on the thought fox's hypnotic eye as it draws nearer to the speaker's mind.

Elsewhere, assonance suggests confidence and instinct. In line 9, for example, the poem homes in on the long /o/ sound:

> Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
> A fox's nose [...]

As with the above example, it's as if the fox is tuning into something, using its sensory data to make sense of the world through which it moves. Later in the poem, more /o/ and /aw/ sounds create a picture of thought fox's intuition and primal determination:

> Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
> Of a body that is bold to come

These sounds assert themselves on the poem, indicating a growing confidence of movement as the thought fox approaches the speaker's mind. And when the thought fox arrives in the "dark hole of the [speaker's] head," assonance reappears. The fox appears "with sudden sharp hot stink of fox[.]" The boldness of this sound makes the fox seem all the more real, suddenly animated into life by the speaker's imagination. The fox is the speaker's inspiration, but the fox in the poem is also *created* by the speaker's inspiration.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "imagine this midnight"
- **Line 4:** "blank page"
- **Line 8:** "Is entering," "loneliness"
- **Line 9:** "Cold," "snow"
- **Line 10:** "fox's," "nose"
- **Line 13:** "prints into"
- **Line 14:** "Between trees"
- **Line 15:** "Shadow lags," "hollow"
- **Line 16:** "Of," "body," "bold"
- **Line 18:** "widening deepening greenness"
- **Line 21:** "hot," "of ," "fox"
- **Line 23:** "ticks"
- **Line 24:** "is printed"

ASYNDETON

The poem use asyndeton three times, first in line 10:

> A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;

The lack of a conjunction word—which in this case would be "and"—portrays the fox's instinctive relationship with its environment and its quick, rapid instincts. The lack of a conjunction here makes the line feel twitchy and unpredictable, evoking the way that foxes appear to move (to human eyes at least). The fox lives moment to moment, and the lack of "and" thus gives the line a sense of immediacy as if it's happening in real-time.

The asyndeton of lines 17-20 ("Across clearings [...] business") works in much the same way, suggesting the quick, stealthy movements of the fox as is goes about its business. Finally, asyndeton ends the poem in lines 23-24 (this is also an example of parataxis):

> The window is starless still; the clock ticks,

The page is printed.

These three sentences could be rearranged in any order and their meaning wouldn't change, which emphasizes the mysterious nature of poetic inspiration; it's as though the speaker has finished the poem without even realizing how he did it. Also think about much clunkier all these lines would sound had the poet used traditional conjunctions. Asyndeton, then, adds to the poem's fluid movement, echoing the way the speaker is pulled forward by a sort of mysterious instinct that he doesn't totally understand.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "twig, leaf"
- **Lines 17-20:** "clearings, an eye, / A widening deepening greenness, / Brilliantly, concentratedly, / Coming"
- **Lines 23-24:** "The window is starless still; the clock ticks, / The page is printed."

CAESURA

The poem uses caesura to control its rhythms and pacing. Sometimes, the poem unfolds in full uninterrupted flow. In the first stanza, for example, the thought fox is still a "something"—that is, it hasn't yet been fully conjured into life on the page by the speaker. These lines have no caesurae at all.

But notice what happens from the second stanza onwards. Suddenly, caesurae disrupt the poem's flow, creating a much jerkier sound that stops and starts like the twitchy movements of a fox:

> Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
> A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;
> Two eyes serve a movement, that now
> And again now, and now, and now

Caesurae, then, help mimic the motions of the thought fox, and in turn make the thought fox seem more real. Within the wider context of the poem's metaphor (in which this fox represents thought/inspiration), these caesurae evoke the act of writing itself, with its stops and starts, subtle movements, and quick changes in attention.

The poem's final caesura is also evocative, the pause after the word "still" creating stillness itself. Time seems to briefly slow before picking back up as "the click ticks." The use of caesura, here, suggests that the speaker has been lost in a kind of writing trance, and is now coming out of it.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Cold, delicately"
- **Line 10:** "twig, leaf"
- **Line 11:** "movement, that"
- **Line 12:** "now, and now, and"
- **Line 14:** "trees, and"
- **Line 17:** "clearings, an"
- **Line 19:** "Brilliantly, concentratedly"
- **Line 21:** "Till, with"
- **Line 23:** "still; the"

CONSONANCE

"The Thought Fox" is full of consonance. As with alliteration and assonance, consonance creates patterns of sound and gives the poem its distinctly *poetic* music. As this is a poem about writing poetry, and the inspiration required to do so, it makes sense that it showcases the kind of linguistic music that is so integral to the art form!

In the third stanza, for example, consonance marks the page like the paw prints of the fox mark the snow. /S/, /t/, and /n/ sounds dominate nearly every word in line 13, imprinting themselves on the line and suggesting the care, artistry, and delicacy of writing/creeping across the forest:

> sets neat prints into the snow

The sibilance in the poem's first stanza also helps to establish its setting. As the reader soon learns, it's winter—or, at least, within the metaphorical world of the thought fox, the ground is covered with snow. The /s/ in words like "moment's forest," "loneliness," "see," "star" creates a hissing sound like the wind blowing through the trees. The /s/ also sounds like a whisper, which contributes to the poem's sense of isolation and silence.

Soon enough, the thought fox appears on the scene. Though this fox is primarily meant to be taken as a metaphor for creative thought/inspiration, the speaker also treats it like a real fox for much of the poem. Consonance, in turn, helps bring the fox to poetic life on the page. The sharp sounds of "cold," "delicately," "dark," and "fox" itself evoke the animal's quick, tentative, precise movements.

The same can be said for the poem's final stanza, where clicking, hissing, and thudding sounds build to a crescendo:

> Till, with sudden sharp hot stink of fox
> It enters the dark hole of the head.

The poem then returns to the still, quiet scene it began with—with its hushed night that's "starless still." The "clock ticks," the words echoing "tick tock" sound of the clock itself in the darkness.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "midnight moment's forest"

- **Line 3:** “Besides,” “clock's loneliness”
- **Line 5:** “see,” “star”
- **Line 6:** “Something”
- **Line 7:** “deeper,” “darkness”
- **Line 8:** “entering,” “loneliness”
- **Line 9:** “Cold, delicately,” “dark,” “snow”
- **Line 10:** “fox's,” “nose touches,” “twig”
- **Line 11:** “serve,” “movement”
- **Line 13:** “Sets neat prints,” “ into,” “snow”
- **Line 14:** “Between trees,” “warily,” “lame”
- **Line 15:** “lags,” “hollow”
- **Line 16:** “body,” “bold,” “come”
- **Line 17:** “Across clearings”
- **Line 18:** “widening deepening greenness”
- **Line 19:** “Brilliantly, concentratedly”
- **Line 20:** “Coming”
- **Line 21:** “Till,” “sudden,” “hot stink,” “fox”
- **Line 22:** “It enters,” “dark,” “hole,” “head”
- **Line 23:** “starless still,” “clock ticks”
- **Line 24:** “page,” “printed”

END-STOPPED LINE

"The Thought Fox" uses end-stopping mainly to control the poem's pace. The poem opens with an image of stillness, the speaker sitting at his desk during the night, waiting for an idea to come to him. The end-stop after line 1, in the form of a colon, suggests that everything that follows is part of the speaker's "imagin[ing]." Then, notice how the full stop after line 4's "move" feels almost ironic, bringing the poem to a halt as the speaker's fingers hover over an empty page—waiting for inspiration to strike:

> And this blank page where my fingers move.

Another end-stop after "loneliness" prepares the reader for the fox's arrival, after which point the poem begins to flow more smoothly down the page. The end-stops that do pop up throughout the middle of the poem are much softer than those in the first stanza, mostly marked by the gentler pause of a comma. Line 11 to 22 ("Two eyes [...] head.") is in fact one long sentence, and the frequent enjambment here suggests the flow of creativity as well as the fox's stealthy movements.

This section represents the thought fox's tentative but purposeful approach. In other words, it's inspiration in motion; that motions stops when the fox finally enters the "dark hole of the [speaker's] head" and the poem is written.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “forest:”
- **Line 4:** “move.”
- **Line 5:** “star:”
- **Line 8:** “loneliness:”
- **Line 9:** “snow,”
- **Line 10:** “leaf;”
- **Line 17:** “eye,”
- **Line 22:** “head.”
- **Line 24:** “printed.”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment, like end-stop, affects the poem's tone and pace. In the first stanza, the speaker is waiting for inspiration to come—for the thought fox of the title to come to life in his mind. But it's a quiet, solitary scene, a mixture of boredom and excited anticipation. The fox is coming alive, but it's not alive *yet*; for now, it's just "something" in the "darkness."

The poem captures this in-between state by varying the pace, alternating between enjambment and end-stop. End-stopped lines like lines 1, 4, 5, and 8 suggest stillness, while the enjambment of lines 2-4 ("Something else is alive [...] fingers move.") and 6-8 ("Something more near [...] loneliness.") suggests dynamism and movement.

From line 11 onwards, the poem weaves one long but skillfully controlled sentence all the way until the full stop in line 22 ("It enters the dark hole of the head."). The thought fox, which is treated like a real fox for most of the poem, makes its way instinctively and with purpose. This long, flowing sentence mirrors the fox's determination—it makes its way across (or down) the blank page just like a fox on a mission to find a mate or its prey.

This enjambment even breaks across stanzas. Look at how active the verb "Sets" is at the start of line 13—that's because the sentence *needs* that verb to make sense of the dangling cliffhanger of line 12's enjambment:

> And again now, and now, and now
> Sets neat prints into the snow

It makes the verb stronger, like a grammatical foot being place in the snow of the blank page. The enjambment between stanzas 4 and 5 has a similar effect, marking the sudden arrival of the thought fox in the speaker's mind:

> Coming about its own business
> Till, with sudden sharp hot stink of fox

Stanzas 2 to 4 represent the thought fox's journey, and the sudden, surprising nature of the enjambment throughout mirrors the mystery and shock of creativity—the feeling of having made something that, until only recently, didn't exist.

Do note that we've marked lines 17-19 ("Across [...] concentratedly") as being enjambed, despite their final commas

indicating brief pauses; we'd argue that the commas are a grammatical necessity, and that within the context of this poem, the reader will experience these flowing lines as smoothly enjambed. It's valid to interpret differently, but the general feel of the lines remains the same regardless of the terminology readers want to use!

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "alive / Besides"
- **Lines 3-4:** "loneliness / And"
- **Lines 6-7:** "near / Though"
- **Lines 7-8:** "darkness / Is"
- **Lines 9-10:** "snow, / A"
- **Lines 11-12:** "now / And"
- **Lines 12-13:** "now / Sets"
- **Lines 13-14:** "snow / Between"
- **Lines 14-15:** "lame / Shadow"
- **Lines 15-16:** "hollow / Of"
- **Lines 16-17:** "come / Across"
- **Lines 17-18:** "eye, / A"
- **Lines 18-19:** "greenness, / Brilliantly"
- **Lines 19-20:** "concentratedly, / Coming"
- **Lines 20-21:** "business / Till"
- **Lines 21-22:** "fox / It"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"The Thought Fox" is almost entirely one long extended metaphor. The first stanza shows the speaker waiting for a creative idea to arrive, while lines 9 to 22 show that idea taking the metaphorical form of a fox and making its way into the speaker's mind.

The importance of the poem's title here can hardly be overstated! If readers took stanzas 2 to 4 in isolation, this could be a straight-up nature poem, one that brilliantly and admiringly describes an actual fox making its way through a wintry forest (and from which the speaker takes poetic inspiration). The poem *does* do this in a way, treating the fox as *real* rather than imagined by the speaker for a big chunk of the poem. It brings the fox to vivid life on the page before reminding readers something that the poem's title already revealed: that the fox represents a creative thought (or series of thoughts).

All the natural description of the fox, then, becomes a way of describing the process of writing poetry. Readers are left to map the description of the fox and its movements onto the act of creation, which means that they too have to engage their imagination—the process that the poem itself describes!

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Lines 6-8
- Lines 9-22

PERSONIFICATION

"The Thought Fox" uses personification in line 3:

> Besides the clock's loneliness

This is a classic case of projection, or pathetic fallacy. The speaker, feeling lonely himself, surrounded by "this midnight moment's forest," *projects* loneliness onto the ticking clock. The clock's loneliness, then, is really the *speaker's* loneliness. And this, the poem implies, is an important part of the creative process. Calling the clock lonely suggests there are no other sounds around to distract the speaker; the isolated, rhythmic sounds of the clock are perhaps more noticeable in the silence, and remind readers that the speaker is alone with his thoughts.

It's also worth nothing how this personification takes place *before* the thought fox—who, though very convincingly fox-like, is nevertheless the speaker's creation—appears on the page. Once the imaginative work of the poem is complete, the poem mentions the clock again—but now, it's no longer personified, just ticking away as expected. It's like the initial personification is the speaker flexing his poetic muscles in anticipation of what is to come—and that the clock no longer needs to perceived as lonely once the "page is printed." In fact, perhaps the speaker himself is no longer lonely, given that he now has the thought fox for company!

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "the clock's loneliness"

REPETITION

"The Thought Fox" has repetition baked into its form. The first and last stanzas take place either side of the speaker's creative act (that is, the composition of a poem). Accordingly, the first stanza mentions a clock, the page in front of the speaker, and a starless sky. Once the creative act is complete, and the thought fox has arrived, the poem returns to these elements:

- The window is still starless, indicating that the speaker's inspiration *didn't* come from some kind of divine, heavenly favor.
- The clock still ticks, but is no longer described as lonely (perhaps because the speaker now has his fresh poem for company).
- The page has completely changed from blank to "printed."

This zoomed-out repetition thus shows the fruits of the

speaker's labor between these two stanzas.

There are more discrete examples of repetition in the poem as well. In that first stanza—which creates an atmosphere of anticipation and solitude—the thought fox has not yet arrived. But it is, in some small way, coming into being. It's described in intentionally vague terms as a "something" that's "alive" but distant. The anaphora of "Something" lines 2 and 6 shows both this indeterminate form—the thought fox is not yet a thought fox, but a rumbling in the depths of the speaker's mind—and the strength with which this thought fox is coming into being. That is, it's not here yet, but it's already exerting its presence:

> Something else is alive
> [...]
> Something more near

In the next stanza, the poem uses repetition to capture the nature of the fox's movement. Like a real fox, the thought fox is twitchy, constantly scanning and re-scanning its environment for information. That is, of course, how a real fox survives and thrives—through being a good reader of its surroundings. The repetition in lines 11 and 12 is more specifically a mixture of diacope and epizeuxis:

> [...] that now
> And again now, and now, and now

This repetition suggests that the fox is utterly present and attentive to its environment. Implicitly, then, this is how a poet should be too—primal, instinctive, and attentive.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Something"
- **Line 3:** "the clock's"
- **Line 4:** "this blank page"
- **Line 5:** "Through the window I see no star:"
- **Line 6:** "Something"
- **Line 11:** "now"
- **Line 12:** "And," "now, and now, and now"
- **Line 23:** "The window is starless still; "
- **Lines 23-24:** "the clock ticks, / The page is printed."

VOCABULARY

Warily (Lines 14-15) - Cautious of possible dangers.

Lame (Lines 14-15) - Injured or ill in a way that makes it hard to walk.

Lags (Lines 14-15) - Falls behind, is unable to keep up.

Hollow (Lines 15-16) - This is a bit of a play on words. A hollow can be a cavity on a tree, but this could also relate to the way in which the fox's shadow exists in the space below the fox's body.

Concentratedly (Lines 19-20) - With great concentration.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Thought Fox" has 24 lines broken up into one eight-line stanza followed by four quatrains. The steady form lends a sense of structure to the otherwise free-flowing, unpredictable poem. The fact that the first stanza is longer than the others might also suggest how long the speaker waits for poetic inspiration to arrive—and how once it does, the actual act of writing begins to move more quickly.

"The Though Fox" is also a great example of meta-poetry—poetry *about* the writing of poetry itself. It could even be interpreted as a kind of *ars poetica*, a form of poem that explicitly addresses the question of how/why to write poetry.

METER

"The Thought Fox" is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't have a regular meter. This makes the poem feel all the more intimate, like readers are getting a glimpse of the speaker's internal thought process (which, in a way, they are—the poem is about what it's like to write a poem, after all!).

Not having a steady meter also keeps things unpredictable, adding a sense of anticipation and tension to the poem. The unpredictability of the meter might evoke the twitchy, responsive movements of a fox. The poem's rhythms are surprising, even erratic at points—the poem living on its nerve just like a fox using its primal instincts to move through the world.

Also note how the poem's last line is by far its shortest. The line's brevity gives it an air of finality, as if there isn't anything left to say; the speaker's work here is done.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Thought Fox" doesn't have a very clear rhyme scheme, but there are moments of rhyme throughout the poem that form a subtle pattern. For the most part, these are imperfect rhymes or eye rhymes, and they are, again, very subtle.

These rhymes work quietly in the background—line 3's "loneliness" picks up the on the /s/ of line 1's "forest," while "alive" and "move" also pair up through a shared consonant sound. The poem maintains this approach most of the way through (e.g., "fox/ticks" and "head/printed" in the last stanza). Readers might think of the poem as having a rhyme scheme that goes:

> ABAB

This gives the poem a quiet sense of purpose that matches the speaker's determination to do the work of poetry—to sit and

the desk in near-boredom and wait for an idea to come. The grouping into fours—or two pairs of pairs—also mirrors the fox's mode of travel: its own four legs! The fact these rhymes are so subtle, however, also echoes the poem's view that the composition of poetry is, in large part, an unconscious or subconscious process. Writing poetry is mostly about creating the conditions for an idea—a thought fox—to come, and then having the attentiveness and responsiveness to follow that idea where it leads.

SPEAKER

The speaker is a poet, sitting at his desk late one night, hoping to bring something to life on the "blank page" before him. From the start, the poem places emphasis on the speaker's internal state of mind. The first verb is "imagine," the present-tense hinting to the reader that they are witnessing a process happening in real-time (or one that is made to look like it happens in real-time).

The speaker essentially disappears after the first stanza, which makes sense: lines 9 to 22 ("Cold [...] head.") focus on the "thought fox," which represents poetic inspiration and creativity—things that the speaker feels are separate from his own conscious mind.

It's worth noting that Ted Hughes is on record as saying that the poem was inspired by a talking fox that visited him in a dream, warning him not to become overly academic in his approach to writing poetry. In other words, Hughes himself views the poem as about the importance of trusting instinct and intuition in the creative process. The speaker, then, is often equated with Hughes himself, or a version of Hughes at least. For that reason, we've used male pronouns to refer to the speaker throughout this guide. Readers should note that doing so isn't necessary to understanding the poem itself.

SETTING

On a literal level, the poem takes place a quiet room at midnight. There's a window, through which the speaker can't see any stars. The only sound comes from a ticking clock, and the speaker sits with his fingers poised over a "blank page"—ready to write.

Stanza 2-4 feel real—like they are describing an *actual* fox tentatively skulking across the snow, through clearings in a dark forest, getting closer and closer to the speaker. The line between the real world and the speaker's imagination blurs as the speaker describes the fox in remarkable detail and brings the animal to life on the page. For the most part, however, the poem takes place in the speaker's mind.

It's also worth noting that the poem offers little historical detail, as is often the case with Ted Hughes's poetry. Other than paper, a clock, and either a pen or a type-writer, the poem situates itself within a dreamy version of the natural world, and plays with an atmosphere of timelessness. There is no sense that the dominant technologies of the era—the wireless radio, for example, or the television—threaten to intrude on the poem's world. There is something eternal and primal about the figure of the thought fox as well, which the poem implicitly links with the act of writing poetry.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Thought Fox" is one of Ted Hughes most popular poems, and was first published in his 1957 debut collection, *The Hawk in the Rain*. Hughes grew up in Yorkshire in fairly rural surroundings, and developed an early interest in animals and nature. Animals appear throughout Hughes's poetry, most famously in the "Crow" series of poems. Hughes has said that "The Thought Fox" was actually inspired, in part, by a dream in which a kind of fox-man visited the poet and told him to reject overly intellectual or academic writing—favoring a more instinctive (or, fox-like) approach to creativity.

Hughes drew on many literary influences as well, and this poem in particular demonstrates the influence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and William Blake. Blake, writing in the 18th and early 19th centuries, often observed a kind of psychic link between animals and creativity, most notably in "The Tyger." That poem, like this one, takes place in the "forest of the night."

Hopkins, on the other hand, wrote poems that brought nature to vivid life as a way of celebrating the majesty of God's creation. Hughes has a similarly incredible knack for natural detail, and it's even possible that the first line here alludes to one of Hopkins's most celebrated poems, "The Windhover." Readers might also want to check out the animal poems of D.H. Lawrence for a more recent precursor to Hughes's animal-inspired poetry.

The poem also sits within the tradition of meta-poetry. That is, this is a poem explicitly *about* poetry itself. As a discussion of the poetic process, "The Thought Fox" can also be viewed as an *ars poetica*, a form that considers the *how* and *why* of writing poetry. Way back in around the year 19 B.C.E., the Roman poet Horace composed his "Ars Poetica," arguing that poets should, among other instructions, avoid overly flowery language.

The 20th-century poet Archibald MacLeish composed another famous "Ars Poetica," in which he states that a poem "should not mean / but be." Similarly, "The Thought Fox" suggest that poets should trust their instinct and intuition during the composition process, as opposed to becoming too academic or overly intellectual. As mentioned above, part of the poem's inspiration was a dream in which a fox-man told Hughes to do exactly that!

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For the most part, Hughes lived and worked in England, the nation for which he was appointed Poet Laureate from 1984 until his death in 1988. The poem was written in the 1950s, during a period of rapid post-war urbanization and industrialization. Britain had a booming manufacturing industry in products as diverse as ships, cars, metals, and textiles, but with this boom came increasing pollution. Hughes grew up in a more rural environment, and perhaps his tendency to feature the natural world in his poetry reflects this early influence.

Foxes have been hunted for sport for many centuries, and a number of London's most famous parks were initially created as land set aside for hunting. In his memoir, Hughes's brother, Gerald, talks about how he and Ted liked to go hunting and trapping rabbits and stoats as kids (actual fox-hunting has historically been a very upper-class, aristocratic activity).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Ted Hughes: Stronger Than Death" — Watch a BBC documentary about Hughes. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbAGbjXPCP8)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to Hughes read the poem himself and talk about the inspiration behind it. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s49p1K8bqK4&t=2s)
- Hughes's Biography — Learn more about Hughes's life and work from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-hughes)
- Ted Hughes and the Art of Poetry — Read a 1995 Paris Review interview with the (https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1669/the-art-of-poetry-no-71-ted-hughes)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER TED HUGHES POEMS

- Bayonet Charge
- Hawk Roosting

HOW TO CITE

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