A Memory

SUMMARY

The farmer, whom the speaker addresses in the second person, arches his thin, pale back while wearing a vest. He looks as strong as a horse as he bends over an upside-down sheep, shaving its wool while a cold easterly wind blows through the murky dark of the barn. He perspires and shivers, his face as red as fire. He mutters rhythmically, as though cursing in a foreign language, as he wrangles the sheep into position. He looks like he's trying to tie up a large, heavy, spilling bale of hay as it shifts about.

The farmer's cigarette bends at the burning tip, its ash still hanging proudly while he makes his movements—now violent, now tender—and remains in control of the sheep.

The speaker compares the farmer to a coal miner, one who works at the coalface (the place where coal is extracted) in difficult, risk-filled darkness. The farmer pays no attention to his own body as he shears the sheep inch by inch, completing his task through sheer strength (possibly as morning solidifies around him). He is bald and very wrinkled, and his worn head bends over his reassuring cigarette.

Then he sits up straight and lets out a moan. He releases the shorn sheep, which bounds away.

The farmer takes his still-lit cigarette butt from his mouth, and with large, gloved, greasy hands, carefully lights another cigarette with the glowing tip.

THEMES

THE DIFFICULTY AND BEAUTY OF TRADITIONAL LABOR

"A Memory" was inspired by Ted Hughes's father-in-law, Jack Orchard, a farmer in Devon in southwest England. The speaker of the poem observes Jack as he shears a sheep in a barn, admiring his primal strength, his mastery of the animal, and his grace as he goes about his hard work. As a nostalgic "Memory," the poem celebrates this type of traditional labor, finding a rugged beauty and dignity in it.

Sheep shearing, as portrayed by the speaker, requires determination, skill, care, guile, and brute strength. The shearer "bundle[s]" the sheep into position, requiring movements that are "suddenly savage, suddenly gentle." It's not just a case of overpowering the animal; finesse is required, too. The speaker seems awed by the shearer's mastery in both regards. Even for a highly skilled worker, shearing takes considerable effort: the shearer mutters "curses" as he works and lets out a "groan" when he's done. Even then, he may not *really* be done: he'll likely have to shear another animal right after he "L[ights] another" cigarette. His is a long, demanding task, and smoking seems to be his only "comfort."

The poem thus celebrates those who perform farm labor (and other manual labor), while acknowledging the toll their work takes on them. The speaker admires the "Powerful" sheep shearer—and, by implication, people with equally difficult jobs—without romanticizing what they do. The shearer's efforts over the years show in his physical appearance: he's "Bald" and "arch-wrinkled," with a "weathered" look. His back is "bony" and "bowed" (though he's also "Powerful as a horse"). At the same time, the shearer feels proud (or should, according to the speaker). His cigarette hangs with its "pride of ash" while he shears the sheep and provides the ember to light the next one. His ability to keep smoking through such difficult work shows just how skillful he is, but his compulsive chain-smoking also hints at the stress of his job.

By comparing the shearer to a "collier" (a coal miner), the poem associates him with other working-class laborers. He's part of a long tradition, which, the poem suggests, should be honored—cherished within the larger cultural "Memory."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

HUMANITY VS. NATURE

The poem dramatizes human beings' patient wrestling with animals and nature. "Mastering[]" nature, the speaker shows, requires incredible dexterity and effort—and the effort is never finished. For example, animals provide for humans through their meat, hides, etc., but they do not do so voluntarily. Getting even the tamest creatures to serve human needs requires skillful handling and an often exhausting struggle.

The poem illustrates how sheep—and nature more generally—don't willingly bend to the wants and needs of humans. The sheep being sheared is like an "oversize, overweight, spilling [hay] bale." That is, it's tricky to handle; it tries to wriggle free and "leap[s]" away as soon as the ordeal is over. Meanwhile, the barn is punishingly cold and "cave-dark," with an "East chill" blowing through it. Farm labor, the poem suggests, is an arduous way to make a living, in part because nature doesn't care about human preferences.

The resistance nature poses makes the shearer's accomplishment all the more impressive. But the accomplishment isn't final; for the shearer, the ordeal is still

ongoing! The sheep he finally manages to shear is just one among many. As soon as the shearing is finished, the sheep "leap[s] free." It doesn't want to be there, nor do the other sheep, so the shearer has his work cut out for him. Nature itself, here, seems like a "free," independent, headstrong force that humans can only partly and temporarily domesticate. It sustains us, but it always resists our attempts to control it.

This dynamic between humans and nature—part-conflict, part-collaboration—also shows in the shearer's physical appearance. His back is "bony" and "bowed," suggesting great physical strain. His face is "flame-crimson" with effort (and the cold!). He is wrinkled and weathered—a visual reminder of the intense demands of his work.

When all's said and done, the shearing provides wool to keep humans warm through the winter. But the poem demonstrates that animals and nature don't willingly cater to human needs, or submit easily to human control.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Your bony white ...
... sweating and freezing—

Ted Hughes wrote "A Memory" about his father-in-law, Jack Orchard, who was a farmer in southwest England. The poem is intended as a kind of diary entry in verse form, a way of recording—memorializing—what it was like to live on a farm with Orchard. Here, the speaker (a stand-in for Hughes) watches Orchard (whom this guide will call the farmer or shearer) as he shears a sheep—that is, cuts off some of the animal's woolen fleece, probably to sell it as material for clothing. The poem captures the beauty and intensity of this traditional labor.

The opening lines describe the shearer's appearance and setting. The speaker stresses the physical nature of his work and the toll it takes on his body. Visual imagery and simile combine in a vivid portrait:

> Your bony white bowed back, in a singlet,
> Powerful as a horse,

In other words, the farmer wears a kind of vest ("singlet"), and his back is bent and bony, indicating strenuous effort. His sheep don't always want to cooperate with his shearing! The alliteration in "bony white bowed back" imposes itself strongly on the line, much as the shearer imposes his strength on the sheep. Next, the simile in line 2 compares him to a horse: one of the most "Powerful" and majestic animals found on a farm. The comparison is simple yet flattering, and it's firmly grounded in the poem's setting. The speaker clearly admires this farmer; indeed, the poem celebrates him and his work.

In line 3, the speaker repeats the word "Bowed," again stressing the shearer's humble, strenuous effort. Then there's some satisfying alliteration: "sheep / Shearing..." This is almost onomatopoeic, as the /sh/ sounds like clippers working their way through the sheep's fleece.

Lines 4 and 5 focus mainly on scene-setting:

> Shearing under the East chill through-door draught
> In the cave-dark barn, sweating and freezing—

This "barn" is cold and drafty (or "draughty" to the Brits); the poem is set in the north of Dartmoor, Devon, an often chilly area. "The East" refers metonymically to the wind (which blows in from the east, off the Atlantic Ocean). The stressed monosyllables of "East chill through-door draught" sound powerful and insistent, mimicking the wind's stubborn attempts to enter the barn.

The barn is also "cave-dark" (it's probably *very* early in the morning, when farmers traditionally start working). This metaphor hints that there's something ancient and primeval about the shearer, as though his work places him in a millennia-long tradition. The work is so difficult that he's both hot and cold at the same time: "sweating" from strenuous labor, yet "freezing" in the chilly climate.

LINES 6-9

Flame-crimson face, drum-guttural ...
... adjustments of position

Lines 6-9 describe the farmer's efforts to hold the sheep in place and shear its wool. The farmer has a flushed, "Flame-crimson face" because his work is so strenuous (it gets the blood flowing!). Harsh /f/ alliteration and long /a/ assonance—"Flame-crimson face"—make the phrase itself a bit strenuous to say.

The farmer utters what sounds like "drum-guttural African curses" as he shears. "Drum-guttural" is a compound word invented by Hughes; it suggests the curses are rhythmic, like a drum, and spoken from the throat ("guttural"). Though they're not all exactly the same, the /u/ vowels in "drum-guttural African curses" give the phrase itself a throaty quality (try saying it out loud).

Readers might wonder why Hughes includes the word "African." Hughes felt that Jack Orchard's accent was "the broadest Devonshire with a very deep African sort of timbre." He pointed out that there are "pockets of North African genes here and there along the North and South Cornwall in Devon coasts." For modern readers, this line might be considered

problematic in its generalized image of Africa as a land of drums and curses.

The farmer holds the sheep in place as if "bundl[ing]" it close to him, a process the speaker compares to "tying some oversize, overweight, spilling bale [of hay] / Through its adjustments of position." In other words, the sheep tries its best to wriggle free, and the farmer has to wrestle and wrangle to keep it still. Notice how this simile, like the earlier "horse" comparison, keeps the poem grounded in the world of farming. The three adjectives—"oversize, overweight, spilling"—emphasize the sheep's bulkiness and restlessness. Asyndeton (the omission of "and") makes the phrase more concise and dynamic.

LINES 10-13

The attached cigarette, ...
... of the animal

The second stanza zooms in on the cigarette the farmer smokes throughout the shearing process. Notice how much shorter this stanza is than the last one: the poem's fragmented, unpredictable form makes it read like a series of impressions or sketches.

The cigarette, though dangling from the shearer's lips, remains remarkably intact. It bends with the weight of accumulated ash, yet that ash refuses to drop. It becomes a symbol of the shearer's—and perhaps even nature's—primal life force, while also demonstrating his skill and control:

> The attached cigarette, bent as its glow
> Preserving its pride of ash

Even while the shearer strains to complete his task, then, he remains cool enough to keep his cigarette on the go (like some kind of rural movie star). His chain-smoking also seems to represent the continuity of his labors: once this sheep is done, he'll move straight on to another, and he'll light another cigarette off the end of this one. In fact, his work links him to an ancient, unbroken human tradition (stretching all the way back to the "cave," as line 5 suggests). The alliteration of "Preserving" and "pride" underscores this sense of proud continuity.

The speaker then describes the shearer's "suddenly savage, suddenly gentle / Masterings of the animal." This moment helps explain why the speaker seems so awestruck. The shearer is totally in control of the sheep; he's a human being who has managed to tame one small aspect of nature. And his "Masterings" are multiple: in order to work properly, he has to be dynamic, graceful, forceful, and considerate. He has to be "savage" one moment and "gentle" the next. The diacope of "suddenly" suggests how fluidly these opposite traits coexist in one person; he demonstrates both at practically the same time.

LINES 14-19

You were like ...
... your cigarette comfort

The third stanza compares the farmer to another type of traditional laborer: a coal miner. It also shows how the farmer's strenuous lifestyle manifests itself in his appearance.

Lines 14-17 present an extended simile:

> You were like a collier, a face-worker
> In a dark hole of obstacle
> Heedless of your own surfaces
> Inching by main strength into the solid hour,

"Collier" is an old-fashioned term for a coal miner; "face-worker" refers to the *coalface*—that is, where miners work away at an exposed section of coal. Like a miner, the farmer is performing difficult, stressful work in a dark environment. The speaker also draws a parallel between the farmer's and the miner's focus on their respective tasks. The farmer shears the sheep "In a dark hole of obstacle / Heedless of [his] own surfaces." In other words, he works selflessly, against the odds, without thought for his own physical safety (the restless sheep might bruise or otherwise injure him).

Like a miner, he accomplishes his difficult task bit by bit, "Inching by main strength into the solid hour." The miner chips away at the coal; the shearer clips away at the sheep. Without "main strength"—that is, determination and physical power—the work couldn't be done. The hour may be metaphorically "solid" because it entails so much challenging labor (like the solid rock the miner chips into), or because the first glimmers of dawn are turning to solid daylight. The "collier" reference places the farmer in a longstanding tradition of skilled manual labor, and suggests that this work should be honored and rewarded.

Lines 18 and 19 refocus on the farmer's appearance, which shows the strain of his many years spent performing hard tasks. (Hughes based the farmer on his father-in-law, Jack, who was already of retirement age.) He is "Bald, arch-wrinkled"—meaning that his wrinkles form an arch shape on his forehead, or that he is *especially* wrinkled ("arch" can be an intensifier, as in "arch-villain"). His "dome" (head) looks rugged and "weathered." This last word might gesture toward the terrible weather that is a regular feature of Devonshire (the poem's implied setting).

The farmer's "dome" is "bowed / Over [his] cigarette comfort." This repetition of "bowed" again makes the farmer seem focused and humble, as if he's engaged in worship as well as work. And there's that cigarette again: his one reliable source of "comfort" in a punishing job.

LINES 20-24

Till you stretched ...
... another at it

After much struggle and strain, the sheep is officially sheared! The farmer "stretche[s] erect through a groan," finally unbending his back and stretching his aching muscles.

The sheep is happy not to be in the farmer's clutches anymore. The poem uses assonance in describing its quick escape: the farmer sits up, "Letting a peeled sheep leap free." These /ee/ sounds are so emphatic and repetitive that they're almost comical; they seem to mimic the animal's "leap[s]" and bounds. At only two lines long, this fourth stanza is the shortest in the poem—it's as light and quick as the sheep. Of course, the sheep isn't *really* "free," as it's still part of the farm, but at least the shearing is over.

The farmer's work goes on, however. It's implied that he'll have a lot of sheep to get through. He pauses only to light another cigarette before, presumably, bundling the next sheep into position. He "nip[s] the bud stub from [his] lips"—that is, grabs the still-lit cigarette butt from his mouth. Notice the clipped, assonant monosyllables in this line: "nipped [...] lips," "bud of stub." Their truncated sounds evoke the farmer's brisk movements and short, squat cigarette.

The speaker has already noted the farmer's impressive control of his cigarette (lines 10-13). Now the speaker admires how he lights one cigarette off the butt of another (off the "bud of stub"), with the same mix of strength and grace he uses while shearing:

> And with glove-huge, grease-glistening carefulness
> Lit another at it

His hands look oversized in their gloves, and they gloves are slippery with grease, yet he's still deft enough to light the next smoke! The alliteration and consonance in "grease-glistening" make the word tricky to say, just as the greasy gloves and cigarette are tricky to manipulate. The same goes for the /i/ assonance and /t/ consonance in "Lit another at it"; the phrase, like the manual task, requires precision.

Giving "Lit another at it" the weight of its own line—the last line of the poem—elevates the action to a grander, symbolic status. The farmer's habit of smoking one cigarette immediately after the other (before the previous one has even gone out!) illustrates his hunger for small "comfort[s]" in an arduous life. It also points to the ongoing, ceaseless nature of his work. One sheep might have leapt free, but there'll be another to shear right after, or else a whole queue of other tasks awaiting his attention. Farm work is never done—and never *has* been done, the poem seems to imply, since humans lived in "cave[s]." The poem's focus on this one task becomes a kind of snapshot, demonstrating the farmer's strength and skill. But for the farmer, the work is just getting started; there's no time even for smoke breaks.

SYMBOLS

CIGARETTES

In the notes to *Moortown Diary* (in which this poem appears), Hughes observes that Jack Orchard (the shearer portrayed here) always had a cigarette in his mouth. Here, that continuously burning cigarette becomes a symbol of the shearer's determination and the primal, elemental nature of his work. His chain-smoking, meanwhile, seems to represent the continuous tradition he inherits.

The speaker first describes the cigarette in the second stanza:

> The attached cigarette, bent at its glow
> Preserving its pride of ash
> Through all your suddenly savage, suddenly gentle
> Masterings of the animal

All through the challenging task of shearing a sheep, the cigarette never goes out. It demonstrates the farmer's control and physical grace: even while making sudden, "savage" movements, he's never flustered. In this way, it illustrates the dogged "pride" and care he takes in his work.

Before he finishes one cigarette, the shearer lights another. Instead of a lighter, he uses the end of the cigarette he's about to finish (lines 22-24):

> Then nipped the bud of stub from your lips
> And with glove-huge, grease-glistening carefulness
> Lit another at it

This continual smoking subtly gestures toward an unbroken farming tradition. The shearer carries the metaphorical torch of generations of farmers before him, stretching back hundreds of years.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "The attached cigarette, bent at its glow / Preserving its pride of ash"
- **Line 19:** "your cigarette comfort"
- **Lines 22-24:** "Then nipped the bud of stub from your lips / And with glove-huge, grease-glistening carefulness / Lit another at it"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration fills the poem with rough music that reflects the farmer's physical appearance and psychological character.

The first line, for example, describes the farmer's "bony white bowed back." Even though "bony" and "bowed" don't suggest physical strength, the powerful plosive /b/ alliteration does. The next line confirms that the farmer is "Powerful as a horse." The speaker also notes the farmer's "flame-crimson face"; these rough, fricative /f/ sounds seem to suit his rugged appearance.

That's not the only mention of fire in the poem. The farmer's cigarette—which never goes out—"preserv[es] its pride of ash" (line 11) the whole time he shears the sheep. This bold alliteration jumps out of the line, as if to highlight the farmer's pride. His movements are "suddenly savage, suddenly gentle" (line 12); the insistent, repeated /s/ sounds here convey his stubborn struggle with the sheep. Likewise, the repeated /l/ sounds in "Letting a peeled sheep leap free" might evoke the sheep's light bounding motion.

At the end of the poem, the speaker admires how the farmer lights one cigarette with the end of another. He does so with "glove-huge, grease-glistening carefulness." This alliteration, together with the /s/ consonance of "grease-glistening," makes the line a bit tricky to say, subtly evoking the slippery greasiness of the gloves.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "bony," "bowed back"
- **Line 6:** "Flame-crimson face"
- **Line 11:** "Preserving," "pride"
- **Line 12:** "suddenly savage, suddenly"
- **Line 21:** "Letting," "leap"
- **Line 23:** "glove-huge, grease-glistening"

ASSONANCE

Assonance helps bring the poem's images to life, putting the reader right there in the barn with the speaker and the farmer.

Look at the poem's descriptions of the farmer, for example. He has a "flame-crimson face" and mutters "drum-guttural African curses" (line 6). Assonance makes both phrases more striking. Those long /a/ vowels highlight the farmer's vivid red face, while the repeated short /u/s evoke his under-the-breath mutterings.

In lines 18-19, the speaker describes the farmer's bald head:

> [...] weathered dome bowed
> Over your cigarette comfort

These rounded /o/ vowels make his head seem all the more, well, round!

The most obvious example of assonance appears in line 21, when the sheep finally escapes the shearer's grip:

> Letting a peeled sheep leap free

The assonance here is intentionally over the top. Together with /p/ and /l/ consonance ("peeled sheep leap"), this series of /ee/ vowels sounds playful and carefree. As the sheep bounds away, each syllable sounds like its own little leap.

The short /u/ assonance in line 22's "bud of stub" captures the shape of the farmer's cigarette: short and stumpy. The short /i/ assonance (and /g/ alliteration) in the closing lines makes the language a bit tricky to say: it requires the same "carefulness" as lighting a cigarette while wearing "glove[s]"!

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "cave-dark barn"
- **Line 6:** "Flame-crimson face," "drum-guttural"
- **Line 8:** "oversize, overweight"
- **Line 18:** "dome"
- **Line 19:** "Over"
- **Line 20:** "stretched erect"
- **Line 21:** "Letting," "peeled sheep leap free"
- **Line 22:** "bud," "stub"
- **Line 23:** "grease-glistening"
- **Line 24:** "Lit," "it"

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors (and similes) elevate sheep-shearing from a necessary but mundane task to something of almost mythical status.

For example, the speaker describes the setting as a "cave-dark barn." This metaphor tells the reader that it's practically pitch black in there; perhaps more importantly, it points to an ancient, elemental period of human history (when people lived in caves). In this barn, the modern world seems far away.

The farmer consistently smokes a cigarette, lighting one off the end of another. The speaker admires his ability to keep smoking while working:

> The attached cigarette, bent at its glow
> Preserving its pride of ash (lines 10-11)

The metaphor "pride of ash" subtly personifies the cigarette. Its long—but still connected—section of ash showcases the farmer's dexterity: even when his movements are "savage[ly]" abrupt, he keeps his cigarette perfectly poised. The burning ash seems to "glow" with pride. This pride is, effectively, the farmer's: he works in a long, dignified tradition and is proud of his skill.

And his work, of course, is grueling and demanding. While comparing the farmer to a coal miner, the speaker describes him "Inching by main strength into the solid hour" (line 17). These last three words might refer to the time of day—for example, the hour when daylight seems to strengthen and solidify—or they might be comparing an hour of work to a solid,

rock-like substance the farmer chips away at. Regardless, a *solid* hour sounds more difficult than an average hour!

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "In the cave-dark barn"
- **Line 6:** "drum-guttural African curses"
- **Line 11:** "its pride of ash"
- **Line 17:** "Inching by main strength into the solid hour,"

SIMILE

"A Memory" features three similes, all of which describe the sheep shearer and his actions.

The first two lines depict him as "bony" but strong:

> Your bony white bowed back, in a singlet,
> Powerful as a horse,

This is a pretty straightforward simile, likening the shearer to a muscular, vigorous animal. But notice that the simile draws on the same rural setting and imagery as the rest of the poem. (Farmers often keep horses and put them to work on farms.) This is the kind of comparison the shearer himself might make, so it helps anchor the reader in the poem's world.

Shearing sheep isn't easy, of course. The sheep in this poem doesn't want to lose his wool! The simile in lines 7-9 captures its attempts to wriggle free:

> As you bundled the sheep
> Like tying some oversize, overweight, spilling bale
> Through its adjustments of position

The speaker compares the sheep to a bale of hay, which is hard to tie neatly and keep in place. In other words, the sheep resists the farmer's efforts and makes his job difficult.

In lines 14-17, the speaker likens the farmer to a coal miner:

> You were like a collier, a face-worker
> In a dark hole of obstacle
> Heedless of your own surfaces
> Inching by main strength into the solid hour,

This simile associates the farmer's work with another form of traditional, manual labor. The speaker admires people who do these vital and difficult jobs. Just as a coal miner works at the coalface, the farmer works on the front line of agriculture. He also works in darkness, and his daily life is full of challenges ("obstacle[s]"). He toils tirelessly and selflessly, putting himself in harm's way without hesitation ("heedless of [his] own surfaces"), and he completes his chores bit by bit, "inching" through the day like a miner through the earth.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Your bony white bowed back, in a singlet, / Powerful as a horse,"
- **Lines 7-9:** "As you bundled the sheep / Like tying some oversize, overweight, spilling bale / Through its adjustments of position"
- **Lines 14-17:** "You were like a collier, a face-worker / In a dark hole of obstacle / Heedless of your own surfaces / Inching by main strength into the solid hour,"

REPETITION

"A Memory" features some subtle repetition, which helps illustrate the nature of the farmer and his task.

First, there's the repetition of the word "bowed" in lines 1, 3, and 18. As an adjective, this word can refer to an arched shape that retains tension (think of a *bow* and arrow). As a verb, it means "leaned over" or "nodded one's head" (think of *bowing* humbly). Hughes uses the word in both senses. The farmer's "bowed back," which is "bowed over an upturned sheep," suggests physical effort and strain. His head is "bowed" down, too, indicating the concentration (and suggesting the humility) his task requires.

Line 12 uses more prominent repetition, this time in the form of diacope and parallelism:

> Through all your suddenly savage, suddenly gentle
> Masterings of the animal

The repetition perfectly captures the farmer's skill and dynamism. He changes tactics according to the movements of the sheep, but always remains in control. He's adept enough to be "savage" in one moment and "gentle" in the next. The close repetition of "suddenly" suggests how quickly all this happens. Meanwhile, the parallel structure emphasizes that these two seemingly contradictory qualities—savageness and gentleness—coexist in the same person, the same task. That's part of the farmer's genius: to be tender and harsh all at once.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "bowed"
- **Line 3:** "Bowed"
- **Line 12:** "suddenly," "suddenly"
- **Line 18:** "bowed"

VOCABULARY

Singlet (Line 1) - A sleeveless shirt; a vest.

Shearing (Lines 3-4) - Removing the woolen fleece from a sheep.

Draught (Line 4) - UK spelling of "draft," meaning a current of cold air that finds its way indoors.

The East (Line 4) - The wind blowing from the east (from the Atlantic Ocean towards England).

Flame-crimson (Line 6) - A deep, fiery red color.

Drum-guttural African curses (Line 6) - Rhythmic mutterings under the breath. "African" here might refer to the theory that the population of Devon has some north African ancestry.

Bale (Line 8) - A wrapped bundle, usually of hay.

Masterings (Line 13) - The various ways in which the farmer establishes his control over the sheep.

Collier, a face-worker (Line 14) - A "collier" is a coal miner. "Face-worker" refers to the *coalface*, the place where miners extract the coal from a mine.

Heedless of your own surfaces (Line 16) - Not worried about your own body.

Main strength (Line 17) - Sheer muscular force.

The solid hour (Line 17) - Might refer to a full hour of hard work, or the hour when dawn metaphorically solidifies into day.

Arch-wrinkled (Line 18) - Having arc-shaped wrinkles on one's forehead.

Weathered dome (Line 18) - The farmer's bald head, which shows signs of his years of physical effort.

The bud of stub (Line 22) - The (still-lit) butt of the farmer's cigarette.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Ted Hughes wrote "A Memory"—and the other poems in *Moortown Diary* (1973)—as a way of chronicling his experiences while living and working on a farm in Devonshire. These are intentionally rough "improvised verses," aimed more at capturing a particular moment than creating a finely wrought poem.

The poem's form reflects the spirit in which it was written. Each stanza has a different length and offers sketch-like impressions of the shearer (Hughes's father-in-law Jack Orchard) as he works. There's a nine-line stanza, a quatrain, a sestet, a couplet, and a closing tercet. This unpredictable, dynamic form might also reflect the restlessness of the sheep as it tries to wriggle free.

METER

"A Memory" uses free verse, meaning that it has no strict meter. The poem's unpredictable rhythms capture the rough, unpredictable nature of farm work, including the sheep's attempts to wriggle free from the shearer.

However, the poem occasionally plays with one specific effect: loading lines down with stressed syllables. Notice how many stresses occur in this phrase from line 4:

> the East chill through-door draught

These insistent stresses evoke the wind's dogged determination to get into the barn. It's as if the "draught" is trying to push through the door, or even the page!

Later, in line 21, the same technique has a slightly different effect:

> Letting a peeled sheep leap free [...]

These stressed (and assonant) monosyllables sound a little bouncier, a little more staccato. (The tongue-twisting consonants force the reader to enunciate each word clearly.) The rhythm reflects the sheep's newfound freedom as it bounds away from the shearer.

RHYME SCHEME

"A Memory" has no rhymes at all. Hughes wrote this poem—and others in the same collection—very quickly, in an attempt to capture particular fleeting moments. The poem is a kind of sketch, one that deliberately avoids too much "poetic process." Rhyming, meter, and so on would make the poem feel too carefully considered. Instead, it feels rough and organic, like the farm work it describes.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "A Memory" plays the role of observer, watching a farmer as he shears a sheep (and smokes a cigarette). Hughes explained that he wrote this poem, and other poems in *Moortown Diary*, while living on the farm he owned:

> It occurred to me from time to time that interesting things were happening, and that I ought to make a note of them, a note of the details in particular [...] a fleeting snapshot.

It's fair, then, to read the speaker as Hughes himself.

That said, the speaker's identity is not very important. The poem is all about the farmer the speaker observes—and greatly admires. By comparing the farmer to a coal miner (lines 14-19), the speaker places him in a long-running tradition of manual labor: difficult, yet important and strangely beautiful work.

SETTING

Like all the poems from Hughes's collection *Moortown Diary*, "A

Memory" is set in the west of England, around the time it was written (the early 1970s). Hughes and his wife, Carol Orchard, owned and lived on a farm called "Moortown" in North Devon. They were joined there by Hughes's father-in-law, Jack Orchard (a farmer and the shearer in the poem).

The poem takes place in a "cave-dark barn." It's probably so early that it's not yet fully light out, though it could be late in the evening. The weather is typical for the area: drafty and cold, with an Easterly wind finding its way inside despite the barn doors being closed.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Ted Hughes (1930-1998) is one of the best-known writers of the 20th century. His 1957 debut, *The Hawk in the Rain*, was a shock to the system of British poetry; Hughes's raw imagery challenged the dominance of more restrained and formal poets like Philip Larkin. To this day, Hughes remains one of the most widely read poets in the English language.

Hughes grew up in West Riding, Yorkshire, a relatively rural part of England, and he cultivated an early interest in the natural world that would influence his poetry. He also worked on farms from time to time. Hughes was both reverent and unsentimental about nature, seeing it not just as a source of wisdom and beauty (as 19th-century Romantics like William Wordsworth often did), but also as an environment full of instinctive violence and danger. Animals occupy a central role in Hughes's poetry (most famously in his series of "Crow" poems), where they often symbolically reflect the human psyche.

In "A Memory," however, the focus is more on the farmer than the animal. In the early 1970s, Hughes and his wife owned and lived on a farm in Dartmoor, in the west of England. Jack Orchard, Hughes's father-in-law, farmed it with them (he was a retired farmer). Hughes says of these times: "It occurred to me from time to time that interesting things were happening, and that I ought to make a note of them, a note of the details in particular [...] a fleeting snapshot, for myself, of a precious bit of my life." The resulting book was *Moortown Diary* (1973), which includes "A Memory." The poems in this collection were written quickly and soon after the events they capture; Hughes deliberately avoided relying on the "process of 'memory'" (despite the title) or the "poetic process." The book was published in part as a memorial to Jack Orchard, who, as Hughes noted, smoked a cigarette "throughout whatever he did."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Over the course of his long and prolific career (which ran from the 1950s until his death in 1998), Hughes saw enormous social change. He began publishing his poetry 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's poetry, with its interest in wild nature and animal instinct, might be read as a skeptical rejoinder to a post-war enthusiasm for civilizing, scientific progress.

Indeed, Hughes's experiences as a farm owner coincided with profound changes to the industry. Farming methods and practices in Devon in the early 1970s were not much different than those in ancient farming communities, in part due to the relative inaccessibility of the land. Soon enough, many of these ancient practices were altered or overhauled by "new chemicals, new gimmicks, new short-cuts, every possible new way of wringing that critical extra percent out of the acreage and the animals. We were dragged," recalled Hughes, "[through] one of the biggest extinctions so far in the evolution of English countryside and farming tradition." It wasn't an animal that went extinct, but the "last vestige of grandeur in the real work"—that is, the honoring of tradition. Europe-wide legislation drove the price of farm produce down, making it harder for farmers to survive.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Moortown Diary — Read more about the book in which this poem appeared. (http://thetedhughessociety.org/moortown)
- Ted Hughes's Life and Work — A biography of the poet and additional poems via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-hughes)
- British Library Archives — Additional resources on Hughes's work from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/ted-hughes)
- Hughes Remembered — Read the 1998 New York Times obituary of Hughes, which discusses his controversial life and career. (https://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/30/books/ted-hughes-68-a-symbolic-poet-and-sylvia-plath-s-husband-dies.html)
- Agriculture and Devon — Learn more about the area of England in which the poem is set (and its farming culture). (https://www.devon.gov.uk/environment/wildlife/habitats-and-species/farms)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER TED HUGHES POEMS

- A Picture of Otto
- Bayonet Charge
- Cat and Mouse

- Football at Slack
- Hawk Roosting
- Relic
- Roe-Deer
- Snowdrop
- Telegraph Wires
- The Harvest Moon
- The Horses
- The Jaguar
- The Other
- The Thought Fox
- Wind

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*A Memory*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 15 Dec 2022. Web. 2 Feb 2023.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*A Memory*." LitCharts LLC, December 15, 2022. Retrieved February 2, 2023. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/ted-hughes/a-memory.