The Jaguar

SUMMARY

The apes look bored as they inspect their fleas in the sunshine. The parrots, meanwhile, scream as though they've been set alight—either that, or they parade like prostitutes hoping passers-by will throw them a snack. Bored of being bored, tigers and lions lie as stationary as the sun itself.

A coiled-up snake looks like a fossil. All the cages seem deserted, or they carry the stench of sleeping animals from the straw-laden floor. The scene is so harmless, it might as well be painted on the walls of a preschool.

But whoever decides to rush past all of these boring sights will soon come upon a cage in front of which stands a big group of people who seem hypnotized or like dreaming children. The crowd watches a jaguar furiously rushing about, his bright eyes piercing through his dark cage, like the lit end of a short, powerful fuse.

The jaguar isn't bored. His eyes are happy to be blinded by such fiery rage, and his ears are deafened by the pulse of blood in his brain. He jumps from bar to bar, but he acts as if he's not in a cage at all.

Instead, he's like a mystic locked in a small room who nevertheless remains free through the power of the mind. The jaguar's long steps convey the freedom of being in the wild. The planet itself seems to spin under his strong steps, the new days rising to meet him.

THEMES

CAPTIVITY VS. FREEDOM

Ted Hughes's "The Jaguar" explores the relationship between captivity and freedom. Set at a zoo, the poem describes the animals as looking bored, tired, and utterly defeated by their imprisonment. The one exception is a ferocious jaguar, whose refusal to recognize his "cage" makes him a mesmerizing, dominant presence. Captivity and confinement, the poem ultimately suggests, are suffocating and draining, and the speaker thus celebrates those who refuse to let their wild natures be tamed.

The zoo the speaker walks through is a dull, dismal place that reflects an overly sanitized and controlled version of the natural world. Apes sit around bored, picking at their fleas, while boa constrictors lie so still that they might as well be "fossil[s]." Parrots shriek as though desperate for escape or "strut" around the cage in the hope of persuading a visitor to throw them a treat. Even lions and tigers, two of the most fearsome creatures to prowl the planet, are "fatigued with indolence"—that is, they're so tired/inactive that they're sick of being tired/inactive.

Captivity, the poem thus implies, saps creatures of their joy, their vitality, their very *essences*; these apes, parrots, tigers, lions, and snakes don't fly or pounce or slither, but instead "yawn," "shriek," "strut," and "Lie still." Confining the animals to cages has clearly deprived them of their power and presence. So tame and harmless have they become, the speaker says dismissively, that they might as well be found painted on the walls of a nursery (a British term that might suggest either a preschool or a children's playroom).

But there is one creature at the zoo who *retains* his true animal nature: the jaguar. Like a visionary who refuses to let "his cell" limit his dreaming, the jaguar acts as if he is in the wild because, in one sense, he *is* the wild. His powerful "stride" embodies his refusal to be cowed by his confinement. And this, in turn, grants him a powerful, "mesmerizing" aura that zoo visitors can't seem to look away from. The whole world seems to be under his command, in fact, the horizon "com[ing]" to meet him if he is physically unable to walk towards them (as he might in the wild). The poem thus characterizes the jaguar as something utterly primal and untamable, not just an animal but a force of nature.

Taken at face value, the jaguar's uncompromising power and majesty might suggest that humanity can never truly dominate the natural world. And the speaker might also be metaphorically celebrating those kinds of people who refuse to let their true natures, their sense of wildness and freedom, ever be tamed.

But it's also worth noting that the jaguar here is *male* and that the speaker implicitly scoffs at animals' failure to exhibit traits linked with stereotypical masculinity: the tigers are lying about instead of hunting, for example, and the birds "strut" like "cheap" sex workers—something the speaker clearly finds pathetic and distasteful. The speaker also seems to bristle at the thought of children, coolly dismissing the whole scene as fit for a "nursery." As such, the poem might subtly suggest that captivity (perhaps a metaphor for domestic life) threatens to sap men specifically of their virility and power.

In any case, the speaker clearly finds confinement draining and degrading—and encourages resistance.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

THE POWER OF THE IMAGINATION

"The Jaguar," like many of Ted Hughes's animal poems, doesn't have to be read literally. This animal, in addition to representing an untameable force of nature, might also symbolize the power of the human imagination. In this reading of the poem, the jaguar's boldness and ability to dominate his surroundings speaks to the potential of the human mind to overcome its own boundaries and restraints. The poem might suggest that the mind, like this fierce animal, can never be contained.

The jaguar's pride and inner strength are unmatched by the other animals at this zoo. The way the jaguar dominates his environment denies the cage its very purpose: to capture and contain, subdue and tame. The jaguar's *body* may be trapped, but his *inner* nature can't be defeated. He roams his cage, his eyes "drill[ing]" through the "prison darkness." He jumps around behind his bars, "mesmerizing" the on-lookers with his refusal to be beaten down by this prison.

The speaker thus compares the jaguar to a "visionary" in "his cell." A visionary is someone filled with wisdom, original ideas, thoughts about the future, and so forth. A visionary imagination doesn't require physical freedom because it's *imagination*, something that exists only within the mind. Just as the world seems to bow to the jaguar, the poem suggests that the human mind can conjure *inner* worlds unfettered by outside influence. The poem seems to marvel at the fact that this is possible, portraying the human mind as something primal, strong, and, above all, free.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

The apes yawn ...
... with the nut.

Given the poem's title and opening lines, readers can quickly gather that the speaker is at a zoo. At this zoo, the speaker comes across "apes" who "yawn and adore their fleas in the sun." In other words, these magnificent creatures—and humankind's closest animal relative—seem totally bored as they leisurely groom each other in the sunshine.

They're *so* bored, in fact, that they "adore," or as in worship/pay close attention to, their own fleas, which apparently offer their main form of entertainment in captivity. And right away, the poem's sounds evoke this dull atmosphere: notice how the long, drawn-out sounds of "yawn" and "adore," for example, and the clear end-stop that closes the line with a firm pause.

The speaker moves on to the parrots next, which, while more active, aren't any more impressive than those apathetic apes. The speaker uses two similes to hammer home the birds' unhappiness:

- They either "shriek" like they're on "fire," suggesting that their cries are grating and reflect the birds' sheer terror (perhaps at the fact of being caged);
- Or they "strut" like "cheap tarts" (meaning promiscuous women/sex workers) in order to get nuts from the crowd.

Either way, they're not doing what birds are made to do: fly. Instead, they've been reduced to "cheap" entertainment. The mention of a "stroller" makes the scene all the more dismal and degrading in the speaker's mind: these wild animals are mere amusements for people wandering idly past. Notice, too, how the poem's flashy, sneering consonance evokes the speaker's distaste for that "strutting" about, with the mixture of crisp /t/ and hissing /s/ sounds in "Parrots," "strut," "tarts to attract," "stroller," and "nut."

Also pay attention to the anaphora and parallelism of lines 1 and 2, whose opening phrases follow the same grammatical structure:

> The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun.
> The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut

This anaphora suggests the monotony of life at the zoo.

LINES 4-6

Fatigued with indolence, ...
... Is a fossil.

The speaker moves from apes and parrots to lions and tigers—two of the most fearsome creatures in the world and, one assumes, two of the zoo's major attractions. These animals are known for their power, strength, and killer instincts.

And yet, at this zoo, they're "Fatigued with indolence." That is, they are tired not from hunting, but from all the lying around they do! Their inability to simply be wild lions and tigers, the speaker implies, has drained them of their vitality.

The enjambment of line 4 then works like a subtle joke:

> Fatigued with indolence, tiger and lion
> Lie still as the sun. [...]

By breaking the line off in the middle of a clause, enjambment creates a sense of anticipation; readers expect some sort of movement and activity (like a roar, perhaps), which then doesn't happen. The tigers and lions just lay around, caught under the same spell of fatigue as the apes.

The full-stop caesura after "sun" also brings the line to a sudden

halt, mirroring the big cats' inertia. And through a simile, the speaker compares these animals to the "stillness of the sun" (an object that only appears to move in the sky because the Earth orbits around it).

The speaker then encounters a boa constrictor, another of nature's incredible creatures. But this snake, too, is utterly drained by its captivity. In fact, the speaker compares it metaphorically to a "fossil"—something that has been dead and petrified, turned to stone, for a very long time!

The poem then uses *another* full-stop caesura, again bringing the poem to halt right in the middle of a line and evoking the dreary, lazy atmosphere of the zoon—a place, it seems, that takes all the wildness out of the wild.

LINES 6-8

Cage after cage ...
... a nursery wall.

After the full-stop caesura in line 6 ("Is a fossil."), the speaker transitions from talking about specific animals to describing the zoo itself. And the picture the speaker paints isn't a very exciting one.

"Cage after cage seems empty," the speaker says, the diacope of "cage" emphasizing just how utterly devoid of life this place seems. Some of the cages carry the stench of animals sleeping on their beds of "straw," but there's nothing to *see*. The hissing, disapproving sibilance of "stinks" and "sleepers," meanwhile, suggests the speaker's disgust.

In fact, the speaker continues, the zoo is so dull and tame that it might as well be a picture on the wall of a "nursery" (a British word for a preschool or children's playroom). In other words, everything thing seems so very placid and tame that's appropriate for very small children. This recalls the speaker's mention of strollers back in the opening stanza, and it reiterates the idea that this place has drained something essential from its wildlife: wildness. Thus, despite housing magnificent predators, the zoo, so far, contains no sense of danger or thrills. It's a sanitized, tamed, boring version of nature.

Readers, by now, might be anticipating the arrival of the poem's title creature. All of this is a set-up, in a way, delaying the appearance of the jaguar so as to make the animal seem all the more majestic, powerful, and mysterious.

LINES 9-13

But who runs ...
... short fierce fuse.

The third stanza marks an important shift in the poem, as it begins with a small but all-important word: "But." This signals that the preamble is done; something is about to arrive that differs from the bored animals listed in stanzas 1 and 2. In other words, this is the jaguar's big reveal!

For those who make it past the apes, parrots, seemingly empty cages, and so on, the speaker says that an exciting sight awaits. Notice how, in lines 10 and 11, the speaker describes the crowd *before* naming the jaguar, further building anticipation and excitement:

> At a cage where the crowd stands, stares,
> mesmerized,
> As a child at a dream, [...]

The jaguar is like a hypnotist who has the entire crowd under his spell. The asyndeton here adds a sense of smoothness of the language that suggests the crowd's total concentration as they look on. The crowd is like "a child at a dream," the speaker says—a simile that conveys how the image of the jaguar evokes in the crowd a sense of pure awe and wonder.

The jaguar himself is "hurrying enraged" through the "prison darkness" of his cage, the speaker continues. That is, while the other animals have apparently gotten used to their dull environment, the jaguar remains *furious* and *ferocious*. While the other creatures act as if they have all the time in the world, the jaguar acts with impulse and urgency, as though he has somewhere he needs to be. In short, he retains his *wildness*.

The poem uses a metaphor to capture the jaguar's intimidating, mysterious presence. His eyes are "drills" boring a hole through the darkness of his cage—and, perhaps, through the souls of those people looking on. The rest of the jaguar's body seems to chase after his own eyes, which lead the way and glow like the lit end of "a short fierce fuse." This phrase might also refer to the jaguar's whole body; either way, it's as though he might explode into violence at any moment.

The clipped, monosyllabic words of "short fierce fuse" sound sharp and angry, while the mixture of the sibilance and alliteration subtly evokes the hiss of a fuse quickly burning down: "short fierce fuse."

Finally, note how this section of the poem—from line 9's "But" to line 13's "fuse"—is one long sentence filled with enjambment. Whereas the poem's first two stanzas were heavily end-stopped (and moved slowly as a result), the poem here moves swiftly down the page in a way that mirrors the jaguar's own sudden movements.

LINES 13-15

Not in boredom ...
... the ear —

The jaguar, unlike the other animals, isn't pacing around his cage because he's bored. Instead, he seems to the speaker to be driven by something totally primal and untamed. His eyes are burning bright with intensity, while the blood pounds so loudly through his brain that it deafens his own ears. These metaphors mean that he sees nothing by his own fearsome instincts, can't

hear anything other than the blood pulsing through his veins. In other words, he is driven entirely by something ferocious, wild, and instinctual.

The sounds of these lines make the jaguar's ferocity all the more striking for the reader. Note the booming alliteration of /b/ sounds that ring out in this description, plus the insistent assonance of long /i/ and /ay/ sounds:

> The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,
> By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear —

The sounds of the words themselves are like an exciting, and perhaps frightening, pulse in the *reader's* ear.

Notice, too how asyndeton between these two lines also evokes the way the jaguar moves with instinct and immediacy, unlike the other animals at the zoo. The jaguar retains his wildness, stubbornly refusing to be beaten by his confinement.

LINES 16-17

He spins from ...
... visionary his cell:

The speaker continues to describe the jaguar's powerful movements, now saying that he "spins from the bars." This acrobatic spinning clearly contrasts with the sleepy verbs that described the apes, tigers, and lions.

The bars here refer to the bars of the animal's cage, which he gracefully turns away from. But though it seems to offer some acknowledgment of his confinement—he presumably "spins from the bars" because he physically can go no further—the speaker insists that "there's no cage to him." There may physically be "bars" in his way, but, the speaker says, his wild nature remains untamed and uncontrolled. And notice how the enjambment between full stanzas here conveys freedom and movement:

> He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him
> More than to the visionary his cell:

The speaker makes an analogy here, comparing the jaguar's freedom to that of a "visionary in his cell":

- Readers can think of a visionary as someone who sees beyond the limits of their world; someone who is filled with wisdom, original ideas about the future, and, above all, imagination.
- "Cell," meanwhile, refers to the small room occupied either by a prisoner or a member of a religious community like a monk or a nun.
- An imprisoned visionary can find freedom within their own mind (just as monks and nuns' connection to God isn't hampered by their tiny quarters). Physical boundaries can't confine the imagination. Likewise, the bars of the jaguar's cage can't confine its wild nature.

This comparison adds a new layer to the poem, suggesting that the jaguar here is actually more than just a jaguar. Instead, readers might get the sense that this fierce animal is meant to symbolize the power of the mind and/or human imagination to resist imprisonment and captivity.

LINES 18-20

His stride is ...
... the horizons come.

The poem concludes with three metaphors that convey the majesty and freedom of the jaguar. All three capture the way that the jaguar, despite being in a cage, remains the master of his domain.

First, the speaker says, "His stride is wildernesses of freedom." Each step or leap the jaguar takes, in other words, is freedom itself. His very movements embody what it means to be wild and free.

Lines 19 and 20 expand on this idea. The jaguar doesn't just make the *cage* his dominion; the whole world "rolls under the long thrust of his heel." Instead of the jaguar moving across the earth, readers can imagine the earth rolling like a ball beneath the jaguar's powerful steps. This image suggests that the animal possesses a kind of power over the world even as it tries to keep him captive.

The next line reiterates that idea, again saying that the world comes to the jaguar rather than the other way around:

> Over the cage floor the horizons come.

Horizons—those images of the sun rising and setting in the distance—are created by the planet's rotation. Again, then, the speaker invites readers to envision the world itself rotating beneath the jaguar's feet. He doesn't need to walk towards the horizon; *it* will roll towards *him*.

Note how these lines are basically saying the same thing, but the order of their ideas is reversed. The first line moves from the world as a whole to the ground beneath the jaguar's feet, while the second line moves from the ground beneath the jaguar's feet to the world as a whole:

> The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel,
> Over the cage floor the horizons come.

This device, known as chiasmus, has a kind of lurching, gravitational effect, almost like the tides going in and out. Structurally, the lines *surround* the jaguar with the world. This makes the jaguar seem all the more powerful, as though the words themselves are being drawn towards or revolve around

him (just as the crowds of people are drawn to his cage).

Taking the jaguar as a symbol, this final image speaks once again to the idea that no physical boundaries can contain the human mind. That's because, through the imagination, people can bring the world to them.

SYMBOLS

THE JAGUAR

The poem's jaguar is a symbol of primal, instinctive energies and also of the imagination.

The jaguar might be trapped in a cage, but he doesn't seem to know it: he has a "visionary" impulse, a kind of imaginative understanding of the world, that allows him to remain free. He thinks outside the box (literally) and thus symbolizes that part of the human psyche that is able to do the same.

What's more, his urgent, physical pacing suggests a kind of instinctive power that the speaker admires and even longs for. Being like this symbolic jaguar, the poem suggests, might mean feeling unconfined by societal strictures and conformity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-20

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears frequently throughout the poem, bringing its images and ideas to life on the page. Take line 7, for example, in which the speaker notices how "cage after cage":

> Stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw.

Hushed sibilance suggests the whispery breath of sleeping creatures, while the sharp /t/ sounds make it seem almost like the speaker is spitting these words out in disgust.

Some of the poem's most striking alliteration coincides with the arrival of the jaguar. The animal's presence transfixes the watching crowd, which "stands" and "stares" in mesmerized awe; alliteration, appropriately, intensifies the poem's language to reflect the jaguar's power. His fiery eyes are like "drills" that bore through the "darkness" of his cage; those glowing eyes are like the lit end of a "short fierce fuse," the /f/ sounds perhaps mirroring the fizzle of a flame on a fuse line.

The alliteration gets even more intense in line 15, with the loud /b/ sounds of "by the bang of blood in the brain" ring out like the repeated thwack of a hammer. At the moment, the poem's language mimics the pulse of blood in both the jaguar's ear, making it resound in the readers' ears as well.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "strut"
- **Line 3:** "tarts," "stroller"
- **Line 5:** "still," "sun," "constrictor's coil"
- **Line 6:** "Cage," "cage," "seems"
- **Line 7:** "Stinks," "sleepers," "straw"
- **Line 9:** "runs," "rest," "arrives"
- **Line 10:** "cage," "crowd," "stands," "stares"
- **Line 12:** "darkness," "drills"
- **Line 13:** "fierce fuse," "boredom"
- **Line 14:** "be blind"
- **Line 15:** "By," "bang," "blood," "brain"
- **Line 20:** "cage," "come"

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The animals in "The Jaguar" are subtly anthropomorphized throughout the poem, granted human-like emotions and actions. In line 1, for example, the speaker says that the apes "adore their fleas." Later, the speaker talks about how the tigers and lions are "fatigued with indolence"—in other words, bored of being bored.

While it's possible that the animals might literally *be* bored and depressed, the speaker presents all these emotions in a strikingly anthropomorphic light. Reading the animals this way, the speaker also seems to see his *own* feelings in them: he seems bored and depressed by the animals' boredom and despair. The anthropomorphism in the poem, though subtle, asks the reader to consider the relationship between humans and animals—why the former keep the latter cages and pay to stare at them, for instance.

The star of the show—the jaguar—is also anthropomorphized. The speaker views the jaguar as "enraged," refusing to give in to the dull terms of his imprisonment. He embodies primal instinct, energy, danger, and beauty, all traits which the poem implicitly admires. These qualities make him similar to a "visionary [in] his cell" who lives in his imagination and won't let his spirit be broken.

Anthropomorphism thus invites readers to reflect on the relationship between humans and animals, and it also gives an indirect picture of what the speaker values.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 11-20

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration and consonance, assonance intensifies the poem's images, bringing them to life on the page.

In the first two stanzas, for instance, assonance conjures boredom and despair, as in line 1:

> The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun.

These long /aw/ sounds (which would be assonant in Hughes's English accent, if not necessarily to an American reader's ear) are slow and heavy, evoking the behavior of the apes.

Later in the poem, assonance paints the jaguar as a powerful, primal, and frightening creature. This is particularly noticeable in line 14:

> The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,

These striking long /i/ sounds are the equivalent of the poem turning up its own volume: the insistent repetition demands readers' attention, evoking the speaker's fascination with the jaguar.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "yawn," "adore"
- **Line 4:** "tiger," "lion"
- **Line 6:** "seems"
- **Line 7:** " sleepers," "breathing"
- **Line 9:** "arrives"
- **Line 10:** "mesmerized"
- **Line 14:** "eye satisfied," "blind," "fire"
- **Line 19:** "under," "thrust"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton helps evoke the jaguar's fascinating power. Take a look at line 10, for example:

> At a cage where the crowd stands, stares,
> mesmerized,

All three words highlighted here describe the hush of a crowd enthralled by the jaguar's primal majesty. The asyndeton makes this moment feel *more* still, as if the poem, too, is suddenly caught in the jaguar's aura. Each word stands alone, like members of the crowd arriving and freezing in place one by one.

The speaker then describes the jaguar's behavior:

> [...] Not in boredom —
> The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,
> By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear —
> He spins from the bars[...]

The two middle lines here are a kind of aside in which the speaker imagines the jaguar's inner world as he stalks his cage with primal urgency. He's totally in the moment, and the asyndeton here suggests the immediacy of his perceptions.

The last two lines similarly portray the jaguar's power:

> The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel,
> Over the cage floor the horizons come.

The lack of an "and" here makes these words seem all the more dramatic, drawing attention to the idea that the jaguar is the center of the world and master of his environment—even though he is in a cage.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-10:** "stands, stares, / mesmerized,"
- **Lines 14-15:** "The eye satisfied to be blind in fire, / By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear —"
- **Lines 19-20:** "The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel, / Over the cage floor the horizons come."

CAESURA

Caesura slows the poem down. This has two different purposes: to create an atmosphere of boredom in the poem's opening stanzas, and then to build a sense of awe once the speaker discovers the jaguar.

In the early part of the poem, caesura works hand in hand with end-stopping. Commas in line 2 ("The parrots[...]") and line 4 ("Fatigued with indolence[...]") intentionally prevent the poem from building momentum. Then, the poem doubles down on this effect with the full-stop caesurae:

> Fatigued with indolence, || tiger and lion
> Lie still as the sun. || The boa-constrictor's coil
> Is a fossil. || Cage after cage seems empty, or

These solid periods are the poem's equivalent of lying down or curling up, as if it's saying it's too bored and depressed to move. In this way, caesura mirrors the mood of the zoo animals.

The caesurae that appear once the speaker finds the jaguar work a little differently, creating hypnotic rhythms that evoke the crowd's awe. This is a *different* kind of inactivity, being "mesmerized" as opposed to being bored:

> At a cage where the crowd stands, || stares, ||
> mesmerized,
> As a child at a dream, || at a jaguar hurrying enraged
> Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes
> On a short fierce fuse. || Not in boredom — (lines
> 10-13)

The commas have a dreamlike feel, while the full-stop caesura in line 13 draws attention to the word "fuse." "Fuse" suggests a

metaphorical explosion of violence just waiting to happen, and landing on it so heavily makes the jaguar seem even more majestically dangerous.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "fire, or"
- **Line 4:** "indolence, tiger"
- **Line 5:** "sun. The"
- **Line 6:** "fossil. Cage," "empty, or"
- **Line 10:** "stands, stares, mesmerized,"
- **Line 11:** "dream, at"
- **Line 13:** "fuse. Not"
- **Line 16:** "bars, but"

CONSONANCE

Consonance, like assonance and alliteration, helps to paint pictures in the reader's mind, with particular sounds embodying what's being described.

Take the spiky /t/ sounds in lines 2 and 3:

> The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut
> Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut.

These sharp sounds call attention to themselves, reflecting the parrots' attempts to "strut" and show off in the hope of getting some nuts.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "strut"
- **Line 3:** "tarts to attract," "stroller," "nut"
- **Line 4:** "indolence," "and lion"
- **Line 5:** "still," "sun," "boa-constrictor's coil"
- **Line 6:** "Cage after cage," "empty"
- **Line 7:** "Stinks of sleepers," "straw"
- **Line 9:** "runs," "rest," "arrives"
- **Line 10:** "cage," "crowd," "stands, stares,"
- **Line 11:** "jaguar," "enraged"
- **Line 12:** "darkness," "drills"
- **Line 13:** "fierce fuse"
- **Line 14:** "be blind"
- **Line 15:** "By," "bang," "blood," "brain"
- **Line 16:** "bars"
- **Line 18:** "stride," "wildernesses"
- **Line 19:** "world rolls," "long," "heel"
- **Line 20:** "cage," "floor," "come"

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stopping works with caesura to pace the poem, helping to shape its mood and tone.

Though the first section of the poem (which takes place before the speaker finds the jaguar) is shorter than the second, it *feels* longer due to all the firm end-stops, which slow down the poem's pace to match its descriptions of languid, depressed animals.

Check this technique out in action—or inaction—in the first line:

> The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun.

The poem has hardly begun, but it's already taking a break on the word "sun"! This pause captures the apes' frustration at being caged.

In the following stanza, two lines are end-stopped in a row:

> Is a fossil. Cage after cage seems empty, or
> Stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw.
> It might be painted on a nursery wall.

There's not much happening here: the whole zoo seems caught under a sleeping spell. But the real purpose of the end-stopping is not just to evoke fatigue, but to create a kind of dull backdrop against which the jaguar can stand out dramatically. End-stops here are like the lights going down in the cinema before the film actually starts.

When the jaguar actually appears, the end-stops get a lot more lively. In fact, some hardly feel like stops at all:

> On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom —
> The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,
> By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear —

All the end-stops here are breathless dashes or brief commas—a far cry from the trudge of periods in the first stanzas. Here, end-stopped lines evoke the jaguar's furious pacing.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sun."
- **Line 3:** "nut."
- **Line 7:** "straw."
- **Line 8:** "wall."
- **Line 10:** "mesmerized,"
- **Line 13:** "boredom —"
- **Line 14:** "fire,"
- **Line 15:** "ear —"
- **Line 17:** "cell:"
- **Line 18:** "freedom:"
- **Line 19:** "heel,"
- **Line 20:** "come."

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment typically creates momentum and energy, but the poem uses the technique a little differently in the first two

stanzas. While these two do have a lot of enjambment, it's constantly undercut by end-stops and full-stop caesurae:

> The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut
> Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut.
> Fatigued with indolence, tiger and lion
> Lie still as the sun. The boa-constrictor's coil
> Is a fossil. Cage after cage seems empty, or
> Stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw.

Here, each time momentum starts building, it gets interrupted by a period. Movement is what people *expect* to see from zoo animals, but the enjambments here suggest these caged creatures are too depressed and lethargic to move far.

Except, that is, for the jaguar. When this big cat arrives, the poem dials up the enjambment to match:

> But who runs like the rest past these arrives
> At a cage where the crowd stands, stares,
> mesmerized,
> As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged
> Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes
> On a short fierce fuse.

This enjambment suggests rapid, violent movement, fitting the image of the jaguar "spin[ning] from the bars."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "strut / Like"
- **Lines 4-5:** "lion / Lie"
- **Lines 5-6:** "coil / Is"
- **Lines 6-7:** "or / Stinks"
- **Lines 9-10:** "arrives / At"
- **Lines 11-12:** "enraged / Through"
- **Lines 12-13:** "eyes / On"
- **Lines 16-17:** "him / More"

METAPHOR

The poem uses metaphor to give its description of the jaguar layers of mysterious meaning.

Like the "mesmerized" crowd, the speaker is in awe of the jaguar's frightening, majestic, and beautiful presence. Metaphor helps capture this feeling:

> [...] a jaguar hurrying enraged
> Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes
> On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom —
> The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,
> By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear —
> He spins from the bars,

The jaguar's eyes are like powerful tools *drilling* through the oppressive darkness of the cage—a metaphor that might remind readers that drilling is a pretty classic method for escaping "prison"! The "fuse" suggests the jaguar might explode into violence at any moment.

The speaker goes on to describe the jaguar's eyes as "blind in fire," effectively saying that the jaguar is so passionately "enraged" that he doesn't acknowledge his immediate environment; rather, he is on a different, more "visionary" plane of existence. This jaguar seems both to live in the moment and in a kind of elsewhere in which he rules his domain, not caged at all.

Finally, the last two lines portray the jaguar as a kind of gravitational force at the center of the world; his mere presence creates "wildernesses" around him. The whole world *bows* to him, rolling under his heel (line 19); likewise, horizons "come" to meet him, rather than the other way around. These images emphasize the jaguar's fierce, primal, masterful power, and his enraged spirit of independence: he seems to be the ruler of a personified natural world.

Contrast these images with the metaphor that appears in the second stanza: "The boa-constrictor's coil / Is a fossil" (lines 5 and 6). This is part of the poem's scene-setting, in which the zoo is portrayed as a boring and depressing place to be. The snake here looks like something that's been dead for millennia. The metaphor subtly suggests that captivity denies wild animals their wildness: this snake might as well be stone.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** " The boa-constrictor's coil / Is a fossil."
- **Lines 11-13:** "at a jaguar hurrying enraged / Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes / On a short fierce fuse."
- **Lines 14-15:** "The eye satisfied to be blind in fire, / By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear —"
- **Line 18:** "His stride is wildernesses of freedom:"
- **Lines 19-20:** "The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel, / Over the cage floor the horizons come."

REPETITION

Repetition helps to make the lives of the animals in the "The Jaguar" feel limited, dull, and—well, repetitive!

First up, there's the parallelism of the first two lines:

> The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun.
> The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut
> Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut.

These moments of anaphora help to establish the scene. Like a visitor at a zoo, the poem moves from exhibit to exhibit, from one animal to the next. It's a repetitive process reflected in

repetitious language. It also hints at the dull, samey days which the animals have to live over and over again; the apes, this phrasing suggests, always "yawn," and the parrots always "shriek."

In line 6, meanwhile, the speaker explains how "cage after cage seems empty." This is diacope, and it has a similar effect to the anaphora described above. The speaker's gaze still seems to travel from one cage to the next—but what speaker sees is just a series of animals so dispirited and miserable that they might as well not be there at all.

Repetition thus evoke the rote, limited world of the zoo.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The apes yawn"
- **Line 2:** "The parrots shriek"
- **Line 6:** "Cage after cage"

SIMILE

"The Jaguar" uses similes to help readers to imagine the animals' unhappiness—and the jaguar's power.

Lines 2-3, for instance, use two similes in quick succession:

> The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut
> Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut.

The similes here present the parrots as desperately unhappy. They "shriek" as if they are about to die in a fire, suggesting a kind of existential crisis. But they also "strut" around like "cheap tarts"—a derogatory British turn of phrase that might mean either sex workers or promiscuous women. There is also something desperate about this, of course; the parrots are reduced to parading themselves for a small reward.

Meanwhile, tigers and lions, two of the most fearsome creatures on the planet, "lie still as the sun." This simile suggests an endless, hot, dull summer afternoon, when the sun hardly seems to stir—and thus evokes the big cats' boredom and discomfort.

Later in the poem, the speaker encounters a crowd "mesmerized" by the sight of the jaguar. They stare like "a child at a dream." This simile suggests that the jaguar has a "visionary" quality: not only is he presented as an imaginative force himself, he makes the people who look at him feel as if they were confronting a mysterious image from the depths of their own sleeping minds.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut / Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut."
- **Lines 4-5:** "Fatigued with indolence, tiger and lion / Lie still as the sun."
- **Lines 10-11:** "the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized, / As a child at a dream,"

CHIASMUS

The poem reaches its climax with the awe-inspiring sight of the jaguar who, unlike the other zoo creatures, doesn't give in to his imprisonment. Instead, he appears to be master of his domain. On the one hand, this is an illusion—the jaguar is still trapped in a cage. But he acts as if he is free, which, in a way, makes him free. To the speaker, the jaguar has a different relationship with his environment than the other animals at the zoo:

> The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel,
> Over the cage floor the horizons come.

Such is the jaguar's strength that the world seems to be governed by his will, as though he is the center around which everything else orbits. Chiasmus helps to evoke this strange phenomenon, putting the jaguar right in the middle of the "world" and the "horizons." First, line 19 moves from the "world" to the spot where the jaguar paces; then, line 20 moves from that same ground out to the distant "horizons."

This chiasmus makes the jaguar feel like a concentrated force of wild power, imagination, and self-possession. Wherever he goes, he always seems to be at the exact center of the world.

Where Chiasmus appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel, / Over the cage floor the horizons come."

VOCABULARY

Strut (Lines 2-3) - To walk in a show-offy or attention-grabbing way.

Cheap tarts (Lines 2-3) - A derogatory British term that can mean either "sex workers" or "promiscuous women."

Stroller (Line 3) - A person strolling past.

Indolence (Lines 4-5) - Laziness, inactivity.

Boa-constrictor (Lines 5-6) - A large snake that kills its prey by squeezing it to death.

Nursery (Lines 8-8) - A British word for preschool; this might also refer to a traditional children's playroom/bedroom.

Mesmerized (Line 10) - Transfixed, hypnotized.

Fuse (Line 13) - A length of string or wire that, lit on fire, sparks an explosive.

Visionary (Lines 17-17) - Someone with remarkable foresight and imagination.

Stride (Lines 18-18) - A long step.

Wildernesses (Lines 18-18) - Areas of land uninhabited by humans.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Jaguar" is built from five quatrains, or four-line stanzas. This regular shape mirrors the physical constraint on the lives of the animals at the zoo: the stanzas are as boxy as cages. The speaker moves from stanza to stanza like one of those "strollers" passing from one cage to the next.

The poem sometimes creates tension by enjambing *between* stanzas, suggesting the animals' deep-rooted desire to break free (e.g., "but there's no cage to him // More than to the visionary his cell" in the last two stanzas).

It's also worth noting that the poem effectively divides into two distinct sections. The first two stanzas depict the speaker walking idly around the zoo *before* finding the jaguar. The next three show the jaguar as awe-inspiring, majestic, and frightening. This division creates a clear contrast between the depressing "indolence" of most animals at the zoo and the hypnotic power of the jaguar.

METER

The poem doesn't have a strict meter, though the lines are all of a similar length. However, sometimes it slips into iambic rhythms. For instance, line 8 is in perfect iambic pentameter, meaning that it uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds:

It might | be paint- | ed on | a nurse- | ry wall.

The rigid regularity of the meter here captures the zoo's atmosphere of boredom and depression.

Other than that line, though, the poem's rhythms are pretty unpredictable. The looseness of the meter creates tension by being at odds with the tightness of the regular quatrain form, mirroring the tension between the animals' natural wildness and their imprisonment.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem has a regular rhyme scheme almost all the way through. Each stanza except the third and the last runs like this:

ABBA

That means that the first and last end rhymes of each stanza *enclose* the couplet in the middle, a subtle form of poetic imprisonment that reflects the zoo animals' predicament. Note, though, that some of the rhymes are loose or slant—for instance, "boredom" and "to him" in lines 13 and 16, or "coil" and "wall" in lines 5 and 8. The wildness of the rhymes cuts across the strictures of the rhyme scheme, suggesting all the primal power trapped in that zoo.

But the poem disrupts its rhyming pattern twice, first in the third stanza ("But who rungs [...] drills of his eyes"]:

AABA

And then in the final stanza, which runs like this:

ABAB

Both stanzas focus on the jaguar's movements in his cell. This break from the rhyme scheme thus reflects the jaguar's power, independence, and wildness: he might be trapped in a zoo, but in some sense, no cage can really hold him!

SPEAKER

The speaker is a visitor to the zoo—and one with strong feelings about the lives and natures of the animals there.

For the most part, the speaker views the zoo as a dull experience. Most of the animals seem both bored and boring, too beaten down by captivity even to move.

But the speaker's mood changes when they join a crowd standing "mesmerized" at the sight of the jaguar. Like the others, the speaker finds the jaguar fascinating because this wild beast seems to refuse the conditions of its imprisonment. The jaguar speaks to a primal, instinctive, *natural* energy that can't be contained and, indeed, should be celebrated.

This admiration for primal power is a common thread throughout Hughes's poetry! It's thus fair to read a little bit of the poet himself in the figure of the speaker.

SETTING

"The Jaguar" is set at a zoo and, as expected, it's full of animals. But the poem suggests that a zoo is no place for a wild creature. The apes are bored, the parrots seem stressed, and the tigers and lions are tired even of being tired. All in all, the zoo seems to take the *wild* out of the wilderness. The first two stanzas create an overall atmosphere of inertia and apathy.

But this is a kind of trick, setting the stage for the jaguar to appear. The last two stanzas are effectively set in the speaker's imagination as the poem envisions life from the jaguar's fiery perspective.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Jaguar" was first published in *The Hawk In the Rain*, Ted Hughes's debut collection of poetry (1957). The book was a critical and commercial success, and it formed a sharp contrast with the work of Hughes's contemporaries.

English writers like Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, and Donald Davie valued convention, restraint, and simplicity in their writing. Hughes's collection, on the other hand, offered something more instinctive, primal, and raw—something more jaguar-like, perhaps! The poet himself said that the collection would "challenge everything being written in England." Hughes's wife, the American poet Sylvia Plath, considered Hughes's poetry "the most rich and powerful since that of Yeats and Dylan Thomas." Poems like "The Jaguar" were thus the start of a long career.

Animals occupied a central role throughout Hughes's poetry, where they symbolically reflect the human psyche. The jaguar, for instance, is a kind of primal force made flesh. Hughes's poetry implicitly values such energies—and, indeed, suggests that modern life often neglects them. In the same collection, "The Thought Fox" and "The Hawk in the Rain" similarly mix literal appreciation for the animal world with something deeper and more symbolic. In his poems, visceral, violent nature shines with mystery.

Hughes also returned to jaguars specifically multiple times in his work, as in a later poem titled "Second Look at a Jaguar" as well as an unpublished poem titled "Jaguar Skin."

The poem also perhaps draws parallels with Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "The Panther." But whereas Rilke's big cat is despairing and "weary," the jaguar seems full of life and anger.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ted Hughes (1930-1998) was one of the foremost figures of 20th-century English poetry, both critically acclaimed and commercially successful. He was married to Sylvia Plath from 1956 until her death by suicide in 1963.

Hughes worked for a time at the London Zoo after graduating from Cambridge in 1954. There, he observed jaguars in captivity. The animals clearly fascinated Hughes, who also created two sculptures in their shape. He later gifted these objects to his brother and sister. Hughes grew up in *rural* England, however, and much of his poetry was inspired by the wildlife of the English countryside. A *caged* animal is thus perhaps a slightly unusual subject in his poems.

Human civilization has been keeping animals in enclosures for thousands of years. For a while, collections of animals were a symbol of royal power and reach (e.g., King Louis XIV's menagerie at Versailles). Nowadays, zoos often perform acts of conservation as well as being open to the public—though the ethics of imprisoning animals remains controversial.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Hughes himself reading the poem out loud. (https://youtu.be/n-mB8TsUGMo)
- Ted Hughes's Craft — Read an interview in which the poet talks about his relationship with poetry. (https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1669/the-art-of-poetry-no-71-ted-hughes)
- Hughes's Life and Work — Watch a BBC documentary about Hughes. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbAGbjXPCP8)
- Ted Hughes's Life and Work — Visit the Poetry Foundation to read a brief biography of Hughes and find more of his poetry. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-hughes)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER TED HUGHES POEMS

- A Picture of Otto
- Bayonet Charge
- Hawk Roosting
- The Thought Fox
- Wind

HOW TO CITE

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