The Rain Horse

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TED HUGHES

Ted Hughes was the youngest of three children born to working-class parents in Yorkshire. From an early age, he was interested in animals. This fascination persist throughout his life, and animals become a hallmark of his later writing. He won a scholarship to Cambridge where he studied English, anthropology, and archeology. In 1956, he met American poet Sylvia Plath; the two were married within four months and had two children together. Hughes and Plath's troubled marriage, Plath's death by suicide, and Hughes's subsequent position as executor of her literary estate are controversial parts of his legacy. During a career that spanned more than four decades, Hughes was a prolific poet, editor, translator, essayist, and children's book author; he published more than 15 collections of poetry; 18 children's books; and many short stories, plays, and essays. He was appointed poet laureate of Great Britain in 1984, a position he held until his death of a heart attack in 1998. In his final years, he returned to the countryside, cultivating a farm called Moortown in Devon and becoming involved in local nature conservation efforts.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The setting of "The Rain Horse" is ambiguous, but the story is clearly influenced by Ted Hughes's literary education, which was composed of modernist poets and novelists. Like most writers of the second half of the 20th century, Hughes's stories are characterized by alienation, existentialism, and the rejection of the idea that there is a meaningful, civilized order in the world. All of these ideas play out in "The Rain Horse," as the protagonist struggles to make sense of his own alienation and reckon with the barbarism of the natural world. Modernist literature is largely rooted in the cultural trauma of WWI, a conflict that forced people to reckon with humanity's capacity for violence. WWI had an impact on Hughes because his father served in the war, and his stories made a deep impression on the young Hughes.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Hughes was deeply influenced by mythology, Jungian psychology, and the modernist literature he read in his formative years. The vital energy of nature as it appears in Hughes's work recalls the poetry of Gerard Manly Hopkins (published in 1918), whom Hughes cited as an influence on his work. Hopkins's poem "The Windhover," for example, exalts in the perfection of nature and its ability to touch the emotional core of human beings. Hughes was also deeply enamored with the work of D.H. Lawrence, which often explores the tension between people's animal nature and the control that civilization's rules impose on that nature. The black horse in "The Rain Horse," in its wildness and its refusal to allow the protagonist to avoid confronting his feelings, recalls a pack of horses that menace Ursula, the protagonist of Lawrence's 1915 novel *The Rainbow*. Carl Jung's psychological theories also filtered into Hughes's writing: Jung's *Psychological Types* opposes thinking and feeling, which are rational and conscious experiences, to sensing and intuition, which are unconscious and irrational. A healthy psyche is balanced between these poles, while an imbalance generates psychological illness. This opposition between thinking and intuition also plays out in "The Rain Horse." Finally, the story's rural English setting aligns with two other short stories Hughes wrote in the late 1950s, "Sunday" and "The Harvesting." All three draw on scenes from Hughes's childhood, feature animals (a rat in "Sunday" and a rabbit in "The Harvesting"), and deal with nature's power and the harsh, life-and-death reality of life in the country.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Rain Horse
- **When Written:** 1958
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1960
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** The English countryside
- **Climax:** Having armed himself with stones to use as missiles, the young man is able to fend off the horse and escape.
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Animal Kingdom. Ted Hughes loved animals from childhood. After he finished university, he worked a series of odd jobs, including two days spent washing dishes at Regent's Park Zoo in London. The big cats' cages were across from the kitchen, and Hughes drew inspiration from this experience for his poem "The Jaguar."

Joyce Superfan. James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1922) follows the movements of Leopold Bloom around Dublin on June 16, a date Joyce's fans have dubbed Bloomsday. Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath were married on June 16, 1956, having specifically chosen "Bloomsday" for their wedding.

PLOT SUMMARY

On a dreary and rainy day, an unnamed young man walks through the hills and farmland of the country where he grew up, but which he left 12 years ago. He has trudged miles from the village, trying to emotionally connect with his youthful stomping grounds and muddying his new shoes and nice **suit** in the process. But even when looking at a view that he fondly recalls, he finds himself unmoved, a bored and distant stranger in this bleak landscape.

While the man considers the best way to return to the village, something catches the corner of his eye, and he turns to see a strange, "nightmarish" black **horse** silhouetted against the sky. Though the animal unsettles the man, and he wants to leave the area immediately, he doesn't want to take the easy route back to the nearby village because it will take him past a familiar farm. He doesn't want the farmer there to recognize him—or to *not* recognize him. So, he decides to take a longer route through the muddy fields, even though he's worried about dirtying his clothes even more. But with the rain intensifying, he runs for shelter among some nearby oak trees.

The trees provide scant but soothing shelter in which the man desires to stay forever. But his pleasant, trance-like state in the woods is ruined when he becomes aware that the horse is watching him. This again unsettles him, but he decides that he will ignore the animal—until it charges into the woods at him. He rolls out of the way, narrowly escaping its "long yellow teeth." As the horse disappears into the undergrowth, the man decides to leave the woods in the opposite direction.

However, at the edge of the woods, just as the man has managed to convince himself that the horse must have approached him out of "curiosity or playfulness" rather than malice, he sees it standing in his way. He slithers out of its sightline and tries yet again to talk himself out of his irrational, fearful reaction—while also deciding to take yet another route that he hopes will avoid the horse and leave it standing in the rain and waiting for him. But when he emerges from the cover of the vegetation, the horse charges yet again. He runs away, frightened but now also infuriated.

The man is no longer worried about dirtying his suit, and he ignores the increasingly heavy rain. Faced with the realization that the horse's actions cannot be explained away, he picks up two stones from the ground. When the horse once more discovers his retreat and charges at him, he turns and hurls the stones, causing the horse to run off. Feeling enraged, empowered, and murderous, the man arms himself with more stones. The next time he sees the horse, he takes the offensive position, yelling, "brandishing his arms," and hurling stones in its direction to the brink of exhaustion. When he pauses to stretch his shoulder, the horse makes a final charge. With his aim under "some superior guidance," he cracks the horse with two final stones, finally deterring the animal.

Suddenly aware that he is freezing, exhausted, and miserable, the man retreats to a nearby farm where he spent time as a child. As he enters the farmyard, he notices its familiar smell and the swallows' nests under the rafters of the shed. Taking shelter under the shed, he begins to strip off his ruined clothing and wring out the water. But then he suddenly stops, staring at the ground and feeling like an important part of his brain has been removed.

CHARACTERS

The Man – The unnamed young man who is the protagonist of "The Rain Horse" is only character in the story's desolate landscape. Not much is revealed about this man—his exact age is never stated, and the story doesn't give many specific details about his life. Although the man grew up in the countryside where the story takes place, he left 12 years ago and has only now returned. While it is not clear what he has done during his time away, what is clear is that he's distanced himself from his past and from his former connection with the natural world—though his reason for returning to this place is because he wants to relive his nostalgic vision of it. He marks his separation from his "home-country" though his clothing, which is inappropriate for the weather and the geography: his nice shoes and grey **suit** offer him little protection from the rain and end up utterly ruined by the mud. After being disappointed by a picturesque view he remembers from childhood, which now makes him feel alienated and old, he spends the majority of the story trying to return to the nearby village as a mysterious **black horse** repeatedly charges at him and the rain grows heavier. Though the man at first tries to rationalize the horse's aggression and outsmart the animal, his fear causes him to think and behave in increasingly instinctual and irrational ways. He's only able to subdue the horse when he accepts nature's power and mystery and embodies the same savagery that nature has shown him, hurling rocks at the horse to defend himself. The story ends with the man having successfully escaped from the horse and taken shelter from the rain at a nearby farm. But the man feels broken and empty in the wake of what he's just experienced, as though a piece of him is missing—perhaps suggesting that letting go of his nostalgic perception of nature as safe and comforting has traumatized him.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in

black and white.

CIVILIZATION AND NATURE

"The Rain Horse" dramatizes the conflict between civilization—represented by the protagonist, a young man who abandoned the countryside 12 years ago—and nature. Having returned to the rural area where he grew up, the man wears a new **suit** as he traverses the rough terrain—a mark of his belief that he's impervious to the elements. But as he wanders through the farmland, he's powerless in the face of nature's onslaughts: driving rain, a treacherous landscape, and the aggressive **horse** that gives the story its name. This horse's repeated attacks and the miserable weather impede the man's progress back to the village (civilization) and contribute to his fear, discomfort, and misery. At first, he attempts to avoid and outsmart nature, but he's only able to subdue the horse when he becomes animalistic himself, embodying nature's savage energy. And after escaping the horse, the man symbolically sheds the last things that mark him as civilized when he strips off his clothes. The "Rain Horse" thus demonstrates that even as civilization tries to resist or control the natural world, nature remains a powerful force capable of controlling and humbling people. Moreover, the story suggests that to survive in nature, people must play by its rules rather than trying to outsmart it.

The young man's belief that he's "civilized" and able to outsmart nature is implied by his clothing, rational thinking, and desire to return to the village. His walk began on "pleasantly remembered tarmac lanes," but it eventually became a muddy, "cross-ploughland trek" that dirties the nice suit and shoes he's wearing. The contrast between the man's surroundings and his clothing represents the divide between civilization and the natural world—and perhaps the man's belief in his own superiority over nature. In fact, his walk in the countryside is only a temporary immersion in the landscape he remembers, and when he discovers that he is incapable of connecting to nature like he used to, he wants to "get away […] as quicky as possible." He no longer belongs in this place, seemingly because he has traded his rural roots in favor of a city life. Then, once the man notices the "strange" black horse, he tries to talk himself out of his frightening impression that it's after him, telling himself that "[h]orses wander about the countryside often enough," that his fear is "absurd," that the horse likely "made a feint at him in passing" out of curiosity or playfulness, and that "anybody in their senses would just walk off." These thoughts further indicate his separation from nature and his belief in the superiority afforded to him by civilization: rather than accepting the obvious evidence of the horse's malice and protecting himself, he wastes time and provokes further attacks by clinging to his belief that he can rationalize its behavior.

But as the man tries to return to the village, the heavy rain overwhelms him physically and mentally, demonstrating that nature has more control over him than he has over it. Three miles from the village, the clothing that serves as a mark of civilization succumbs to nature: the man's shoes are ruined, mud is "inching up" the legs of his suit, and his jacket offers no real protection from the increasing rain—his whole suit feels like it's made of "sheet lead." When the rain becomes "blinding" before he has managed to leave the fields, he is forced to take shelter in a stand of "little crippled trees." Sitting on the ground, the rain soothes him into a "trance-like," childish state in which he feels shrouded and protected by the branches—perhaps reflecting a memory of how nature used to make him feel when he belonged to this landscape. Yet all this time, the rain continues to "beat steadily on his exposed shoulders," meaning he is still at the mercy of the elements. Nature is relentless, diminishing the man's sense of superiority over the natural world and influencing his emotions, thoughts, and behavior.

Alongside this, the horse's attempts to attack the man are the ultimate example of nature's power, and it's only when he gives into his own primal nature—rather than trying to ignore or outsmart the horse—that he's able to subdue it. His initial response to the horse's surveillance and attacks is to rely on reason and cunning. But ignoring or tricking the horse only seems to provoke it, as when it charges towards him just after he decides "not to give [it] one more thought." He changes his path back to the village no fewer than four times to outsmart it, but each time he is shocked to discover that it has anticipated his route. Finally, the man is so distraught and helpless that he abandons cunning for violence. He accepts the horse's intelligence and power by acknowledging that it is "definitely after him," arms himself with several good-sized stones, and plans a route that will provide "perfect places to defend himself" rather than one that he hopes will avoid the animal. In this way, he begins to incorporate elements of the natural world into his strategy rather than trying to escape it altogether. When he becomes angry enough to "have killed the horse" and to fantasize about breaking its owner's neck for "letting the dangerous thing loose," he begins to strike it furiously with fieldstones. It's only then that the horse becomes docile and retreats. The man's embrace of his primal nature—his ultimate willingness to meet nature's violence with his own—ends the bizarre encounter. Thus, through the man's perilous trek through the countryside and this dramatic final battle, the story suggests that the line between civilization and nature doesn't offer as much power and protection as people might wish it to, and that the only way to survive in nature is to accept its power and play by its rules.

FEAR AND ALIENATION

Even before the arrival of the "nightmarish" black **horse**, the protagonist of "The Rain Horse" is alienated and afraid. Having returned to the countryside where he grew up after 12 years away, the man

fears how empty, incompetent, and weak this place now makes him feel. It's because of this that he immediately and desperately wants to flee—but he refuses to take the easiest path because it passes by a nearby farm and he's afraid that the farmer will either remember him or mistake him as a trespasser. The man's fear of being an outsider in his own homeland is also reflected in his terrifying, violent encounter with the strange horse. The animal's repeated charges make it all the more obvious that the man no longer belongs in his "home-country." As the story progresses, the man's rising fear influences his perception of his surroundings, causing him to lose his grip on reality and control over his mind and body. This is true even when he consciously tries to rationalize what he is experiencing. Through the man's harrowing journey through the hills and woods where he grew up, the story shows that fear—especially when compounded by alienation—can be an all-consuming emotion that shapes people's view of the world around them and influences their behavior, making them think and act in ways they would otherwise consider irrational.

When the man fails to recapture the nostalgic feelings of his youth while walking over the hill, he feels alienated and unsettled—and these emotions quickly turn into anxiety and fear. Although he claims he wasn't expecting a "very transfiguring experience" in returning to the area, he clearly looked forward to something. He feels alienated by his inability to conjure up "the right feelings," and this failure forces him to confront his sense that "the land no longer recognize[s] him." The place makes him feel "so outcast, so old and stiff and stupid" that he immediately wants to flee. Clearly, he is anxious about accepting that he no longer belongs in this place. In this emotionally heightened state, the man first catches sight of the unsettling horse. Immediately, his "senses [startle] alert." Even before he fully registers the horse's unnatural and "ghostly" appearance, his reaction is instinctively fearful. In this way, the man's alienation exacerbates his anxiety and makes him more likely to react fearfully, given that he already feels isolated and vulnerable.

The longer the man remains mired in the muddy fields, the more disoriented and irrational he becomes, and his sense of alienation and rising fear color nearly everything he hears or sees. The harder the rain falls, the more it obscures the landscape, narrows the man's perspective, and hides landmarks. Sitting in the woods, he watches the "blue shoal of the town" rising and falling as if floating on stormy waves, reflecting how he feels unmoored, like a ship in a storm at sea. Once, when the horse charges at him, he feels as if "[i]ts whinnying snort and the spattering whack of its hooves" are "actually inside his head." His fearful overreaction demonstrates how the horse's antagonism (which represents the man's unbelonging in this place) is as much in the man's mind as in the horse's actions.

Then, the man's fear of the horse drives him to think and behave in increasingly irrational ways, to the point that he seems to be losing control of his own mind and body. The horse begins to follow the man and repeatedly tries to attack him, though he can't discern its motivations. This further illustrates the man's alienation: it seems as if the horse is trying to drive him out of a territory that no longer recognizes him as a citizen. Every attempt to shelter, cross the field, or return over the hill, causes the horse to threaten the man. Yet the idea that it would be intentionally antagonizing him is so strange that he initially rejects it. As soon as the horse disappears farther into the woods, he thinks it "incredible that the horse could have mean to attack him." His explanations are increasingly tenuous as the encounter unfolds: he wonders whether the animal has "an abscess on its brain," or whether it is "clairvoyant." His "rational" explanations have become more outlandish than the simple explanation that the horse doesn't want him here. And his instinct to sneak away and avoid attacks belies his attempts at rationality; his behavior continues to be directed by his fear, even as he tries to convince himself that there's nothing to be afraid of.

After the man eventually grows angry, fights back, and escapes the horse, he retreats to the safety of a nearby farm where he spent time as a child. As he takes in the familiar smells and sights, he already feels the episode with the horse slipping away, feeling less and less real. Yet the "fright and shame" of the experience remain, having only been covered briefly by his rage at the horse. He continues to behave irrationally, stripping his ruined **suit** off in the midst of the cold, driving rain. He feels "as if some important part had been cut out of his brain," and although the meaning of this is ambiguous, it's clear that the terrifying experience with the horse has left him empty and broken rather than triumphant. In the end, the man has survived the experience with the horse, but at the cost of his dignity and his rationality.

NOSTALGIA

The man at the center of "The Rain Horse" has returned to the countryside where he grew up after 12 years away, and he's walked miles from the village to revisit a vista he remembers affectionately from his youth. The walk, however, has been too long, too wet, and too muddy; and when he arrives at the long-sought view, he finds it disappointing. He feels antagonized rather than comforted by nature, alienated and even mocked by a landscape that doesn't match his nostalgic memory. And as the story progresses, the rain and the repeated attacks of a strange black **horse** reinforce his disconcerted feeling that he no longer belongs here. Even as he retreats into childlike behavior and begins to reconnect with nature, it's clear that his desire to return to the nostalgic, romanticized version of his memories isn't possible—he's perhaps remembering a world that never truly existed. Through the bizarre and alarming violence of the man's ordeal

with the horse and his deteriorating mental state, the story suggests that nostalgia is a destructive and self-defeating fantasy.

The man recognizes the details of the land, but without the emotional response he expects, he feels estranged. The walk along "pleasantly remembered" lanes has, without conscious planning, brought him to the crest of this nostalgically remembered hill, which has represented the place in his memory since he left. This makes it clear that the purpose of his walk has been to recreate an old, idealized memory. When he was a child, the hill was alive and tantalizing with the promise of rabbits to hunt; now it is "sunken […] utterly deserted, shallow, bare […] black, and sodden." As a boy, he felt at home among these hedges and fields. Now, however, he cannot conjure up any feeling other than "the dullness of feeling nothing." And when a "nightmarish" black horse runs past him in the rain, he feels unsettled and unwelcome, making it even clearer that he has become a stranger in his homeland.

As the man continues to indulge his nostalgia, trying to "nudge the right feelings alive," he stubbornly resists engaging with the landscape in ways that would require him to accept a less romanticized version of reality. He initially avoids nearby farms because he fears being remembered as much as he fears being run off as a trespasser. Recognition would force him to engage with the reality of the place as it is *now* rather than his memories; not being recognized would confirm his feeling that he no longer belongs here. As the rainstorm increases, he takes shelter in a scrubby oak wood, sinking into a trance that allows him to recapture some of his childlike feelings. Among the branches, he imagines himself to be "hidden and safe" and "warm" even though "the rain beat[s] steadily on his exposed shoulders." He plays amusing little games and entertains himself by looking for the images of "dwarfs and continents and animals" on the tree bark. Just as earlier he tried to force himself into rekindling his youthful feelings, the man must put effort into interacting with the landscape in a way that he finds emotionally satisfying. But this nostalgic longing cannot insulate him from the violence of the storm and the roughness of his shelter, as when he suddenly realizes how cold he still is, because his insufficient shelter isn't truly protecting him.

Indeed, the man cannot maintain his suspension between the past and the present, and his terrifying encounter with the horse forces him to reject his immature and nostalgic worldview. His efforts to retreat into the past leave him vulnerable to the aggressive horse; the animal sneaks up and begins to watch him while he's immersed in his childish reverie. In this way, the story implies that the man's nostalgia is self-destructive, since it blinds him to the truth of his surroundings in the present moment. Although he recognizes landmarks from his childhood (such as the river on the edge of the woods that leading back to the road), the horse's repeated attacks force him to accept that he no longer belongs here. The horse is the ultimate symbol of how the safe, comforting natural world the man remembers no longer exists—and perhaps *never* existed. Now, nature is revealed as something mysterious, uncomfortable, and threatening, and the horse's efforts to drive the man away represent this dramatically. The need to escape the horse pushes the man toward a utilitarian view of the landscape, as when he decides to head for the river because its deep hollows and shoals of pebbles offer "perfect places to defend himself." He eventually defeats the horse by using the place to his advantage and throwing rocks at the animal. Only by literally digging into the mud—immersing himself in the unpleasant messiness of his surroundings rather than trying to retreat into the comfort and safety that he remembers—does he manage to subdue the horse.

Thus, when the unnamed man confronts his memories at the end of the story, they are no longer sentimental. Reaching a nearby farm with relief, rather than dread, he recognizes equipment and the decidedly non-romantic smells of "paraffin, creosote, fertilizer, dust." He is overcome by the sensation of having lost an important part of his brain—which perhaps means that he has lost his desire to experience this place through the lens of nostalgia. But he has also lost the fear and embarrassment that held him back from accepting the reality of this scenery and his place in it. Spent from his encounter, he can face the mundane details of his memory, which are less poetic than his nostalgic version, but also less destructive than his efforts to recapture or recreate that vision.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BLACK HORSE

The black horse symbolizes nature's power. When it first appears, the young man has just realized that after 12 years away from the rural area where he grew up, the natural environment that brought him comfort and joy in childhood now makes him feel weak, foolish, and out of place. As he's gazing out at a view he remembered, the horse suddenly appears and gallops past him over the crest of the hill. Like the bleak landscape, the animal seems both familiar to the man (he immediately recognizes it as a horse) and strangely hostile, running along "on its toes like a cat" and looking like a "nightmarish leopard." And when the horse later charges at the man, he tries to find rational explanations for the animal's aggression toward him. But none of the theories he comes up with—that the horse is upset because of the rain or has an abscess on its brain—seem to accurately explain its motivations. In this way, the horse represents the idea that people are fundamentally unable to comprehend nature's mystery and

immense power—a reality that makes the man feel increasingly alienated and afraid.

As the story progresses and the horse repeatedly follows and charges at the man, the animal comes to represent the idea that nature is more powerful than people, and that people can only hope to survive in nature if they play by its rules rather than trying to ignore or outsmart it. The horse embodies nature's unbridled, violent power in that it's aggressive, unpredictable, and unfazed by the rainstorm or the man. And the man quickly realizes that he can't avoid playing by the horse's rules: whenever he thinks he has outsmarted the animal, it suddenly appears in an unexpected spot or charges at him from an unanticipated angle. In fact, the man is only able to subdue the horse when he treats it with the same savagery that the horse has directed at him, pelting the animal with stones until it finally leaves him alone. The horse thus represents the mysteriousness and raw power of the natural world, qualities that force people to rely on their instincts and physical strength (rather than intellect or logic) to survive.

THE SUIT

The young man's suit symbolizes the idea that nature controls people more than people control nature. The man's new gray suit is a marker of civilization, in that it's associated with city life and is an impractical choice for the man's walk through "mud-trap" fields in rainy weather. His choice to wear the suit in a rural environment perhaps represents his belief that he's impervious and superior to nature. Yet he quickly realizes that this isn't the case, as his suit and new shoes become soiled—in fact, his anxiety about getting his clothes dirty is one of the reasons he decides to head back to the nearby village. In this way, the man's dirty suit represents the fact that as much as people try to use civilization's material comforts to insulate themselves from the elements, they are still vulnerable to the natural world.

Yet even when the titular **horse** in the story appears and repeatedly charges at the man as he tries to get back to the village, the man is still worried about his suit—he thinks that "he must at all costs keep his suit out of the leaf-mould." When the horse is safely out of sight, he pauses to brush the dirt and leaves off his suit "as well as he could." But the man's primal instincts quickly overpower this imperative: when the horse charges at him again, he falls to the ground "without a thought for [the] suit" that is now "ripped at the seam" and "splashed with the yellow mud of the top field." Only after he has subdued the horse does he again notice his "sogged clothes." He is no longer worried about preserving an outfit that has become nothing more than a burden as he tries to escape the "sucking earth." In this way, the man's changing attitude toward the suit reflects his realization that the trappings of civilization can't keep him safe and comfortable, and that he's powerless to control nature's whims. The man even strips off his suit at the end of the story, once he's finally escaped the horse and taken shelter from the rain, which can be read as his symbolic surrender to nature's power.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Stories of Ourselves* published in 2018.

The Rain Horse Quotes

He had come too far. What had set out as a walk along pleasantly-remembered tarmac lanes had turned dreamily by gate and path and hedge-gap into a cross-ploughland trek, his shoes ruined, the dark mud of the lower fields inching up the trouser legs of his grey suit where they rubbed against each other. And now, there was a raw, flapping wetness in the air that would be downpour again at any minute. He shivered, holding himself tense against the cold.

Related Characters: The Man

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 262

Explanation and Analysis

The protagonist of "The Rain Horse" reaches the destination of his walk, a lonely and isolated hill, but he is unsatisfied with this accomplishment. The word choice in the second sentence mirrors the man's bewildered sense that he has come "too far," as his "walk" has become a "trek," implying the greater effort required to traverse the fields. It's unclear whether "too far" is absolute (meaning that the man has come farther than he should have under any circumstances) or relative, meaning that he's come too far given the impending rain and his inappropriate clothing (he's wearing a nice suit).

Regardless, the man feels distinctly uneasy with the distance between himself and the village. The village and the man's suit are symbolic of civilization, which does not hold much power in this lonely place. The village is miles away, and the grey suit may have provided enough protection for paved roads, but it is deeply inappropriate for the rainy weather and the muddy environment. The man's clothing aligns him with the civilized world of the village rather than the rough-hewn nature of the hills, yet already

the mud is beginning to tarnish and damage the suit and shoes.

The man's inappropriate clothing and apparent lack of planning render him vulnerable and out of place in this landscape; he doesn't have a clear or easy path back to safety. The story drops readers onto the lonely hill with the man with no supporting context at first, mirroring the sense of disorientation and surprise at finding himself alone in the wilderness. That the only "map" back to the village is contained by his brief recollection of the walk enhances the feeling of isolation and alienation that the man suffers throughout the story, and the impending rain foreshadows more discomfort to come.

> Twelve years had changed him. This land no longer recognized him, and he looked back at it coldly, as at a finally visited home-country, known only through the stories of a grandfather; he felt nothing but the dullness of feeling nothing. Then, suddenly, impatience, with a whole exasperated swarm of little anxieties about his shoes, and the spitting rain and his new suit and that sky and the two-mile trudge through the mud to the road.

Related Characters: The Man

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 262

Explanation and Analysis

The man takes in a view that he fondly remembers from childhood but now finds himself unmoved by. It's as if he had never been here—he feels like the place would have been as familiar if he had only heard it described by his grandfather in stories, even though he hunted rabbits on this very hill as a boy. The invocation of a grandfather's stories contrasts with the actual length of time he's been away—it's only been 12 years, yet it feels to him like an entire lifetime or more.

Yet the man's ability to recall landmarks with great accuracy suggests that it's his emotions and expectations, not his necessarily his memories, that are unaligned with reality. He is unable to "nudge the right feelings alive" in part because his memory of the hill is tinged with nostalgia, a longing for something that cannot be recovered or recreated. He's trying to recapture a world that perhaps never truly existed, in the sense that his vision of it is romanticized and therefore unrealistic.

But the man is unwilling to interrogate or accept his feelings of alienation and sadness over the changes the intervening years have made to the land and to him. He quickly exchanges the dull emptiness for impatience, anxiety, and exasperation. This emotional volatility will be become even more evident later in the story as he struggles to get back to the village, but it also subtly suggests that the man's civilized world is small and petty: he has more feelings about his suit and his shoes, it seems, than about his connection with the land.

The man's overwhelming sensation that the land doesn't recognize him falls shy of personification, or ascribing the attributes of a human to the inanimate countryside, but it does foreshadow his coming conflicts with nature as he struggles through a rainstorm and is attacked by a mysterious black horse. The rain, the landscape, and the horse will conspire to humiliate the man and drive him from the fields to the safety of a nearby farm. The land itself rejects the man as foreign, and he is expelled from the wilderness in his "home-country" because of this.

> For several seconds he stared at the skyline, stunned by the unpleasantly strange impression the horse had made on him. Then the plastering beat of icy rain on his bare skull brought him to himself. The distance had vanished in a wall of grey.

Related Characters: The Man

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

Just as the man prepares to return to the village, he catches sight of the strange, "nightmarish" black horse out of the corner of his eye. In a landscape that has been nearly obliterated by the grey rain, the horse stands out starkly against the sky and the surrounding hills, drawing attention to itself through its odd gait and its seeming nonchalance in the face of the rainstorm.

The unpleasant visual sensation of the horse and the uncomfortable physical sensation of the rain both demand the man's attention, and the two forces of nature seem to be working together to increase his feelings of vulnerability

and fear. Alliteration (the repetition of the "s" sound in the words "several," "seconds," "stared," "skyline," "stunned," "strange," "impression," "horse," "plastering," "icy," and "skull") both links the twin symbols of horse and rain through language and suggests the hissing sound of the heavy rainfall.

In this moment, the rain again emphasizes the man's isolation and vulnerability. To return to a momentarily invisible village would require weathering the rain's assaults across a distance that is starting to feel impenetrable. Moreover, the trappings of civilization—his suit and shoes—are insufficient to protect him from the icy raindrops, reflecting the idea that nature is more powerful than people's attempts to outsmart it or escape from it.

❝ He felt hidden and safe. The sound of the rain as it rushed and lulled in the woods seemed to seal him in. Soon the chilly sheet lead of his suit became a tight, warm mould, and gradually he sank into a state of comfort that was all but trance, though the rain beat steadily on his exposed shoulders and trickled down the oak trunk on to his neck.

Related Characters: The Man

Related Themes:

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

The man, realizing that he cannot make it back to the village in the rain, takes shelter among some small, scrappy oak trees. In this moment, he feels pleasant sensations of safety, warmth, and comfort. It is as if the woods have taken him in from the cold and granted him the comfortable, childlike, and nostalgic feelings he has been looking for all along.

The man's nostalgic longing for his past comes closest to being realized here. But nostalgia is longing for a world that cannot be recreated, and the man's ability to feel protected and connected with nature means that he must experience it in an unrealistic way. He feels safe, in part, because in his suspended state he doesn't have to acknowledge the reality that he is now a foreigner in this country. He wants to believe that his suit is warm, when in reality it is still soaking wet. The rain, which continues to fall unacknowledged on his neck and shoulders, reminds readers that safety and comfort are illusions. Even while the man thinks he is safe, he is still subject to nature's power and influence over his thoughts and behavior.

This is another place where the author, Ted Hughes—who was a renowned poet—uses alliteration to draw attention to the sound of the rain. In this case, the sounds reinforce the man's sense of comfort. The sound of the rain wraps protectively around him, and the pervasive "s" sounds in the passage ("safe," "sound," "rushed," "woods," "sank," "state," "trance," and even the "steadily," "exposed," and "shoulders" of the final acknowledgement that he isn't completely protected) reflect how completely he's given in into that illusion of safety.

❝ This was absurd. He took control of himself and turned back deliberately, determined not to give the horse one more thought. If it wanted to share the woods with him, let it. If it wanted to stare at him, let it. He was nestling firmly into these resolutions when the ground shook and he heard the crash of a heavy body coming down the wood.

Related Characters: The Man

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 264

Explanation and Analysis

The man realizes with a start that the horse has been watching him while he has been sunk in his peaceful trance under the trees. His initial discomfort only increases when he realizes that the horse hasn't moved at all in the past few minutes. The horse, at this point, is still vaguely menacing rather than directly threatening. It mainly seems to inspire fear in its deviations from what the man considers normal equine behavior. But the horse, unbothered by the rain, is familiar with and comfortable in this country while the man is not. So, his belief that the animal will conform to his expectations is unfounded.

This is one of many times that the man relies on his own knowledge rather than the evidence in front of his eyes, and each time this tendency ends badly for him. His reliance on reason is a product of civilization, and he clings to it in the mistaken belief that it will allow him to impose his will on nature. He tries to convince himself that the horse isn't actually menacing, and then he aligns his behavior with this belief. The man is so alienated from himself and the natural world around him that he refuses to acknowledge his animal instincts—at least consciously. The effort with which he must "nestl[e] firmly" into these beliefs indicates that he

may sense—if not accept—the limits of his civilized reason in this wild place. The horse's charge both interrupts his attempt to reorder reality to conform with his beliefs and rudely asserts nature's dominance over civilization.

> Gasping for breath now and cursing mechanically, without a thought for his suit he sat down on the ground to rest his shaking legs, letting the rain plaster the hair down over his forehead and watching the dense flashing lines disappear abruptly into the soil all around him as if he were watching through thick plate glass. He took deep breaths in the effort to steady his heart and regain control of himself. His right trouser turn-up was ripped at the seam and his suit jacket was splashed with the yellow mud of the top field.

Related Characters: The Man

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 265

Explanation and Analysis

The man survives two of the horse's attacks, managing to run away just in time. He sits down to rest his legs, which are shaking either from the exertion or, just as likely, from the rush of adrenaline he felt when the horse charged at him.

Notably, the man no longer makes any attempt to protect his new grey suit. During the first attack, he had the presence of mind to worry about his clothes when he tripped and fell, but now he sits down in the mud without a second thought. Although the man tries to steady his breath and regain control over himself, nature's power is overwhelming his ties to civilization at this point. His suit is nearly—if not completely—ruined, as it's torn, muddied, and wet. Earlier, the dark mud of the lower fields dirtied the hems of his pants; now, his jacket is splashed with the "the yellow mud of the top field," and the rain is plastering his hair to his forehead. There does not seem to be an inch of the man left untouched by the miserable rain and humiliating mud. The state of the man's clothes therefore sends the message that nature controls him more than he controls it.

Moreover, the ever-increasing rain continues to isolate the alienated man by cutting him off from his surroundings; visually, it has become as "thick" and impermeable as "plate glass." His salvation depends on either escaping the fields through the wall of rain or on besting the horse, both of which will require him to face nature head-on and play by its rules rather than trying to ignore or outsmart it.

> The encounter had set the blood beating in his head and given him a savage energy. He could have killed the horse at that moment. That this brute should pick on him and play with him in this malevolent fashion was more than he could bear. Whoever owned it, he thought, deserved to have his neck broken for letting the dangerous thing loose.

Related Characters: The Man

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 266

Explanation and Analysis

Once the man has realized that the horse is "definitely after him," his attitude and strategy shift from hiding and tricking the horse to defending himself—through violence, if necessary. His first volley of stones encouraged the horse to back off, and he is rearming himself while his blood boils and he thinks murderous thoughts.

Previously in the story, the man's anger has surfaced in small, petty ways, fretting over the ruination of his suit and expressing frustration with how far away the village seems in the rain. But civilization's rules failed repeatedly to protect him from the horse. He's playing by nature's rules now, and in contrast to his ineffectual exasperation, his primal anger taps into previously unrealized power, pushing him so far away from his identity as a civilized, rational person that he gleefully considers murdering the horse's owner.

The horse has always been an agent of nature and the landscape, and the man's anger arises in part from his feeling that the horse personally singled him out for attack, in the same way he felt personally attacked earlier when the land didn't recognize him. Yet through his anger, the man shows that, on some level, he still believes in his own superiority over the horse, a mere "brute" (literally, a wild animal). This suggests a general attitude of arrogance toward nature, even though the horse has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to anticipate and thwart the man's plans.

> The ankle-deep clay dragged at him. Every stride was a separate, deliberate effort, forcing him up and out of the sucking earth, burdened as he was by his sogged clothes and load of stones and limbs that seemed themselves to be turning into mud.

Related Characters: The Man

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

As the man throws rocks at the horse, the final stone causes the animal to retreat—at least long enough for the man to finally escape the field, which he does slowly and laboriously due to the mud, his rain-soaked clothing, and the stones he's still carrying.

Burdened by both civilization (his soggy suit) and nature (the armful of defensive stones), the man is balanced on the cusp of two worlds as he drags himself away from his frightening encounter. In contrast to the horse, whose retreat through the same muddy territory was unburdened, conducted in "great, swinging leaps," the man's progress requires an immense amount of "deliberate effort." Although the land has rejected him as a stranger and has violently driven him away, he is still subject to the power of nature, at least until he crosses the threshold into more civilized territory. Abandoning the stones might have eased his burden but would have left him defenseless against the horse; abandoning his clothing would expose him to the elements. Nevertheless, the man is determined to pull himself up and out of the mud, to leave the horse and his now unfriendly home country behind.

> Under the long shed where the tractors, plough, binders and the rest were drawn up, waiting for their seasons, he sat on a sack thrown over a petrol drum, trembling, his lungs heaving. The mingled smell of paraffin, creosote, fertilizer, dust—all was exactly as he had left it twelve years ago.

Related Characters: The Man

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

Having finally crossed the fence into the relative safety of the farmyard, the man looks around at the tools and implements of farm life while unpolished memories of his childhood years come back to him.

The farm represents the life the man left behind—a life lived with respect for nature's rhythms. The tools that are out of season wait patiently for the spring when they will be used to till the land and plant crops. This contrasts with the man's clothing, which was insufficient for the weather—implying that he is no longer in tune with nature's constant (and often unpredictable) changes. The further implication that he has arrived after the farm equipment has been put away for the season calls attention to the passing of the year, which can be read to metaphorically represent the stages of life. While the story's "young" man isn't yet in the "autumn" of his life (middle age), he has been made to feel "old and stupid" by the landscape. The passing seasons thus emphasize his feeling of distance between himself and his childhood after his nightmarish encounter with the horse.

Moreover, while the equipment is familiar, it is the smell that most immediately connects the man with his past. The sentence structure delays the revelation that this is not just any farm, but one with which the man is intimately familiar—he either grew up or spent a great deal of time here in his youth. Perhaps the delay also reflects his unwillingness to return to a life characterized by harsh nature, muddy land, and brutal nature: it's a hard-working smell he remembers, made up of the chemicals and fluids that keep the equipment functioning and are used to render the land fertile.

Nothing at all, it would seem, has changed since the man was last here 12 years ago, in contrast to the momentous change he felt when cresting the hill at the beginning of the story. This raises the question of how—or whether—the man himself has changed. The story refuses a simple resolution of the man's place in the world. First, he hasn't returned to the village; the farm serves as a transitional zone between civilization and nature in its reliance both on human ingenuity and labor and on nature's seasons and resources. The man can't fully retreat into his rural childhood because he still wears his suit (a mark of civilization) and, while he has escaped the horse, the land has not given him any sign that it will recognize him again as someone who belongs here. Yet he is so soiled and covered with mud that he can't simply walk back to civilization (the village) either. This experience, like the original view, doesn't

seem to have been transformative, creating the sense that the man can neither recapture his nostalgic vision of this place nor fully embrace and integrate himself into the present reality of it.

> Piece by piece he began to take off his clothes, wringing the grey water out of them, but soon he stopped that and just sat staring at the ground, as if some important part had been cut out of his brain.

Related Characters: The Man

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

In the final sentence of the story, the man stands under a shed in the farmyard and strips naked. Although earlier he had an urge to strip down in the rain, he waits until he is in the safety of the farmyard and under the shelter of a dry, manmade structure. His walk and his adventure are apparently over. However, the story's ending is ambiguous, and there are many ways to interpret both the act of stripping off his clothing and his sensation that he's lost an important part of his brain.

The man's suit, which represented both his connection with civilization and his alienation in the wild countryside, has been completely ruined. He tapped into his barbaric, primal nature in defeating the horse by pelting it with stones, and now he follows through on his urge to strip naked, removing the last things that mark him as civilized. Yet he stops before he's finished the task, and he also tries to wring the water out of the suit, suggesting that he's unwilling to submit himself to nature fully. The suit, and his own sense of being civilized, might be salvageable.

The man's sensation of losing an important part of his brain mirrors earlier losses: the loss of his connection to nature and his "home-country," the loss of his clean new shoes and suit, the loss of his dignity. His impulse throughout the story has been to deny, ignore, or run away from these uncomfortable feelings of alienation. Removing his clothing may be another way in which he attempts to avoid dealing with his uncomfortable feelings: if he removes the signifiers of both civilization (the suit) and nature (the mud) from himself, maybe he can delay having to pick one or the other for a little while longer. However, he clearly cannot stay in this suspended state forever, since his struggles on his journey here have repeatedly forced him to choose. The farm is an in-between place, marked both by civilization (technology, tools) and nature (the animals and the fields that the farmer cultivates). Through the man's sudden paralysis and sense of emptiness, the story again emphasizes his alienation—he doesn't seem to belong anywhere.

Finally, in taking in the farm's sensory details, the man has awakened memories of his childhood in a way that the view at the beginning of the story failed to do. The man came to this region to recreate his childhood experiences, but through an intensely nostalgic lens that blinded him to reality. He cannot conjure up a nostalgic sensation here any more than he could on the hill, and the story implies that his feeling of loss here is his realization that his nostalgia is for a world that never truly existed. The world he occupied as a boy was one of labor, messiness, and living on the edge of nature's often violent power. Given how tightly he clung to his desire to reconnect to an imaginary world in which nature is gentle and comforting, the loss of this fantasy could indeed feel like a world-ending, brain-destroying event.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE RAIN HORSE

Rain begins to fall as an unnamed young man crests a hill, having wandered along "pleasantly-remembered" country lanes and trekked through muddy farmland. Shivering and sensing an impending storm, the man looks down at the valley below—this view is the one he's been searching for after 12 years away. But he finds the view "utterly deserted" and "shallow." Although he is not sure what he had hoped to feel, he had expected "some meaningful sensation."

The unnamed protagonist's relationship to this landscape is contradictory. He is familiar with the area because he grew up here, and he recognizes many of the landmarks. Yet he has come from the village, which is separated from the wildness of the hills by several miles, and he doesn't feel any "meaningful sensation" even though he fondly remembers this view from years ago. In this way, the landscape makes him feel alienated rather than comforted or welcomed, which is reflected in the fact that the view looks desolate and devoid of life to him. Furthermore, he is under-dressed and under-prepared for the natural elements (the rain and mud). The village represents civilization, and he has wandered so far away from it that he won't be able to get back without getting soaked by the rain. Nature imposes itself on the man, and his lack of proper preparation makes it clear that the man underestimates the natural world.

The man tries to stir up old feelings by taking in the details of his surroundings: a curved hedge, a stone gate pillar, an iron gate hook, and the long rabbit warren he's standing on. Twenty years ago, he'd looked at this view from a distance in a nearby village and had noticed the rabbits. But after 12 years, he neither recognizes this land nor feels recognized by it, and he feels bored and empty. His connection to this "home-country" might as well be through his grandfather's stories.

This place no longer feels like the man's "home-country"; he feels unsentimental and emotionally distant from the land, which suggests that the man isn't as connected to nature as he once was. Although the view initially disappointed the man, he perseveres in trying to awaken the nostalgic feelings he longs for, even if this means he'll get caught in the approaching storm.

The man grows suddenly anxious as he considers walking two miles back to the road, as this will dirty the new **suit** he's wearing even more. Although it would be faster to walk past a nearby farm in the valley and get back on the road from there, he does not want the farmer to recognize him or run him off as a trespasser. He grows increasingly angry at this muddy land for making him feel alienated, old, and foolish.

The man's underlying anxiety and discomfort have come to a head with the realization that he is a stranger in this place. Although he can't truly escape his alienation, he wants to avoid situations that would make him confront it, like running into an old acquaintance. In avoiding this uncomfortable truth, he projects his anxieties and frustrations onto the state of his suit. The suit, which symbolizes civilization throughout the story, has already started to succumb to the elements—it is insufficient to protect the man from the harsh weather and mud. Already, nature seems to have the upper hand, although the man isn't ready to accept that.

The man desperately wants to get out of the rain, but he's suddenly startled by something in the corner of his eye. A "thin black **horse**" runs across the farmland and up to a wooded hill across from where the man is standing. The animal seems uncanny and "nightmarish," making an "unpleasantly strange impression" on him. As the horse disappears over the hill, it begins to rain harder, and the man decides to run up the muddy hill and toward the village.

While the man plans a route back to the village that will allow him to avoid his sense of alienation, he renders himself vulnerable to the power of nature, represented here by the rain that soaks him as it moves across the countryside. The man continues to project his feelings, this time onto the strange horse: rather than having to acknowledge his own sense of alienation, he can focus on how alien and out of place the horse seems. However, his fearful reaction foreshadows the true balance of power: although he tries to dismiss the unpleasant feeling the horse arouses in him, by changing his route back to avoid it, he nevertheless allows the animal to dictate his actions.

When the rain becomes "blinding," the man stumbles into some woods to seek shelter. Here, he feels "hidden and safe." The rain subsides into a soothing sound that seems to shroud him, and he feels comfortable and warm as he leans against a tree trunk. He studies the raindrops, the shapes on the bark of a twig, and the silhouette of the town beyond the trees. The man wants to stay in this pleasant state where he is "suspended from life and time." However, the rain is still "beat[ing] steadily on his exposed shoulders and trickl[ing] down […] onto his neck."

For a few moments, the man experiences a kind of peacefulness that has thus far eluded him. He gives up, at least temporarily, on returning to civilization (the village) and accepts the scanty protection the natural world offers him. To do this, however, he must huddle on the ground under a tree, which means he is further muddying his suit. In the woods, the man manages to reach some version of his childhood connection with nature, which is why he feels as though he's "suspended from life and time." But the story suggests that this suspension cannot be maintained: the rain continues to fall onto him, and he is not as warm and safe as he wants to believe.

However, the memory of the strange **horse** interrupts the man's reverie. He tries to rationalize what he saw, reasoning that horses often wander the countryside—but the image of the horse still haunts him. As he peers through the trees to distract himself, he sees the black horse standing nearby against the grey light, watching him. Contrary to the behavior of most horses in the rain—to go into a stupor—this horse is alert and intent.

The pleasant interlude in the woods hasn't changed the man's status: he is still an unwelcome stranger in his childhood country. His attempts to rationalize the horse's behavior are attempts to impose reason—a function of civilization—on nature. But his efforts are futile because the horse's behavior doesn't conform to the man's expectations. The man would like to believe that this shows the unnaturalness of the horse, but it really seems to imply that his knowledge of nature is insufficient. Nature has far more control over him than he has over it.

The man's body goes cold. He considers his options, but neither leaving the woods nor driving the **horse** away seem feasible. The man is becoming increasingly unsettled by the horse watching him, but he attempts to shake off his fear and put the horse out of his mind. But then, the animal suddenly crashes through the woods toward him. As the man leaps up, the horse's "long yellow teeth" and bloodshot eyes fill his view. He runs up the slope in a panic but slips falls, worrying again about dirtying his **suit** before he hits the ground.

In its second appearance, the horse comes to symbolize the inescapable brutality of nature. Its motives are mysterious and therefore terrifying—since he cannot understand why it behaves in this way, the man cannot predict its actions or control it. So, he now tries to put it out of his mind—just like his earlier impulse was to ignore and run away from his feelings of alienation. He clings to what he thinks *he knows about how horses behave, even though this knowledge doesn't help in this case. By appearing repeatedly, the horse shows that it will not allow the man to escape confronting his own primal nature under his civilized appearance. Although he still clings to civilization, both by trying to rationalize the horse's behavior and by worrying about the state of his suit, his survival instinct only separates him further from civilization, as represented by his muddied suit. He hasn't yet rediscovered his primal nature, but he is on that path.*

The man gets up and continues to run. Once he's put some distance between himself and the **horse**, he spins around and sees that the animal has disappeared again. Brushing dirt and leaves off his **suit**, the man looks around for a makeshift weapon. He wonders if the horse has something wrong with its brain, or if the rain is affecting the animal's behavior. Whatever the case, the man decides to leave the woods as quickly as he can and head for the nearest farm.

The man's fearful responses increasingly dictate his behavior, causing him to become less logical or reasonable. He is so overwhelmed by panic that he doesn't even realize when the horse stops following him. Running and falling have further soiled the suit, once again emphasizing how out of place the man is in nature, and how the elements are slowly but surely eroding his control over his own behavior. The horse is preparing him to confront his feelings of alienation by directing his path and slowly moving him closer and closer to the farm he's been avoiding. He becomes so anxious to escape that he seems to have forgotten his desire to avoid potential interaction with the locals.

Thinking the **horse** has gone farther into the woods, the man decides to leave in the opposite direction, over the hill. As he walks, he tries to convince himself that the horse hadn't intended to attack him and was just being playful. However, as he reaches the hill's crest, he sees the statuesque and "ghostly" horse standing in the middle of the field, watching the woods. He immediately "slither[s] down the bank" to hide. He cannot stop reacting as if the horse is intentionally antagonizing him, even has he tries to calm himself down by thinking that anyone rational would just walk away and ignore the horse. He resolves to go back the way he came, below the hill crest.

At this point, the man is still trying to outsmart the horse and clinging to the idea that his civilized rationality is more powerful than nature. But on some level, he also knows that he is vulnerable to the horse, so he tries to get an advantage by sneaking away. Once again, this man has failed to understand of acknowledge the reality of the situation: no matter how many times he tells himself that the horse can't possibly be after him, the evidence points in that direction. His refusal to accept this is a sign of his unwillingness to accept other uncomfortable truths—that he is afraid of the horse, that he doesn't belong in this landscape anymore, and that civilized people are still subject to the power of nature. His willingness to cling to his deluded sense of dominance prolongs the encounter with the horse and interferes with his return to the village.

Rain soaks through the man's **suit** as he walks, and he feels as though the **horse** is watching him through the hedge above. At the side of the woods, he climbs back up the hill and peeks his head through the hedge, and he's reassured to see that the field is empty. But just as he is hoping that the horse has forgotten him and wandered off, he feels the thunder of its hooves as it charges. The horse comes so close that he imagines the "spattering whack of its hooves" is "inside his head," although he escapes unharmed back into the woods.

All the while, the man becomes becoming more and more miserable as the rain soaks through the insufficient protection offered by his suit and shoes. The suit represents his connection to civilization, which is not proving capable of protecting him from nature's attacks—each time he notices the suit, it has become more disheveled. The rain soaks through his clothes, blurring the boundary between him and the world around him. This mirrors the way that his fear makes it hard for him to distinguish between what's happening in his mind and what's happening in reality. When his strategy to avoid the horse fails, he experiences the next attack so viscerally that he feels like horse has actually entered his head. And, given the way the horse's attacks continually remind him that his fears are real, the horse has, in a way, gotten into his head.

The man no longer cares about the rain or his **suit**, and he sits in the mud as he takes deep breaths to calm himself. His pants are torn, and his jacket is plastered with mud. This last attack has, at least, offered him clarity: now he knows that the **horse** is "definitely after him." So, he arms himself with two large stones that he can use to defend himself. The man knows that there's a river bordering the farmland beyond the woods, and that he can follow this river back to the road. The riverbank is studded with "deep hollows" covered in pebbles, in which he can take shelter if the horse charges at him again.

By sitting down in the mud without concern for the state of his suit or his dignity, the man has begun to relinquish his grip on civilization and to accept that he cannot outsmart nature. He is subject to its rules, and the only way to best the horse is to resort to a primal, violent response. Likewise, he has relinquished any remaining nostalgic memories of the setting and transitioned to a utilitarian assessment of familiar landmarks, like the river.

At the edge of the woods, the trees are so close together that they form a nearly "impassable barrier" through which the man attempts to push himself. He stops only when he sees the **horse** in the field below him. Fortunately it hasn't yet noticed him, and he now thinks he can escape by his original route, over the hill to the farm. He notices that the sky has darkened, and as he begins to run through the thickening rain, the horse yet again charges at him. He spins around and throws one of his stones at the horse, which shies away. The second stone hits its flank, driving it farther off.

Two barriers stand in the way of the man's escape: the interwoven limbs of the trees and the horse standing like a sentinel in the field. Although he has prepared to defend himself with violence if necessary, the man makes one final attempt to slink away without confronting the horse, his sense of alienation, or his fear. Yet, as if by magic, the horse seems to have anticipated this move, and it meets him once again on the hill where the encounter began. Although—or perhaps because*—his other strategies have failed, when the man finally resorts to throwing his stones, he doesn't seem to hold much faith in their ability to protect him, and he is surprised when the horse shies away. His attempts to approach the situation rationally have failed so miserably that he initially struggles to accept the ease with which his violence seems to stop the horse's violence.*

While the **horse** retreats, the man collects more stones. He feels a murderous rage toward the horse thinks that its owner also deserves to die for letting the wild beast run loose. He selects another two stones and comes back into the field "in open battle," but this time he finds that the horse is "watching him calmly" from a short distance. He works himself into a state of despair while throwing the stones and shouting at the horse to leave him alone; it watches this performance impassively.

The man's earlier behavior rendered him impotent in the face of nature's—and the horse's—fury. But now, meeting violence with violence, he feels empowered. He is playing by nature's rules, having abandoned civilization's rules, to the point that he would—in the moment—be happy to murder the horse's owner. Anger wells up to displace his fear, and he no longer hides from the horse and takes an offensive strategy instead. It seems that the horse, in contrast to the man, has nothing to prove. The man's temporary empowerment arises from desperation, rather than from an acceptance of his place in the world.

However, when the man pauses to stretch his sore shoulder, the **horse** charges. He snatches up two more stones from the ground and hits it with both in rapid succession. The horse retreats in the face of this assault, then slowly walks back up the field toward the man, shaking its head and dropping its gaze. The man feels a strange pang of pity for the animal, but he tells it to "keep [its] distance" so it will "not get hurt." The horse stops walking, "almost obediently," and watches him climb to the top of the hill.

If the man has won the encounter, he has done so by accepting nature's rules. But he has merely traded the control of one external force (civilization) for another: nature. His suit aligned him with civilization, and now violently hurling the rocks aligns him with nature. But he doesn't feel victorious, because he hasn't yet resolved the tension of his nostalgic yearnings, his alienation from the landscape, and his desire to both belong in the country and to return to civilization. His pity for the animal indicates his unwillingness to actually harm it, despite his earlier anger, and perhaps indicates an awareness of his own pitiful state after the encounter.

The man is soaked through from the rain and feels as though the farm is miles away. Too exhausted to fear the **horse** any longer, he grabs more stones and struggles through the fields amid thick mud and heavy rain. At the last field before the farm, he looks back and sees that the horse is still watching him but has not moved from where he left it. When the man reaches the farm gate, he drops his stones and has the sudden urge to lay down and surrender himself to the rain and the mud. But he hoists himself over the gate, and as he looks back, he finds that the rain has become so thick that he can no longer discern the horse on the hill. The landscape looks dead and barren, the sky and land blurring together.

Anger and violence, although powerful primal forces in this story, are also costly. The man's exhaustion makes his final exit from the field painfully slow, and his tiredness arises equally from his initial attempts to escape nature and his later surrender to it. The farm represents a buffer zone between the natural world he's trying to escape and the civilization he's trying to return to in the village, in that it's more rural than the village but safer and tamer than the wilderness. The man's desire to strip his clothes off and bathe in the rain seems to indicate his final urge to try to recapture his childhood relationship with nature. But given the harrowing experience in nature he's just had, the world he remembers is likely only a nostalgic recreation and never truly existed. The way that the thick rain completely obscures the landscape only reinforces his sense of isolation and suggests that what he is trying to recapture is imaginary, or inaccessible, because he's clearly not the country boy he once was. Even if his idealized world did exist, he would no longer belong there.

The man takes shelter under a shed, surrounded by farm machinery, and catches his breath. The farm smells exactly like it did 12 years ago, and there are still swallows' nests in the rafters. The man remembers dead foxes hanging from one of the shed's beams. His encounters with the **horse** already seem surreal and distant, a vague mixture of "fright and shame." He notices that his chest hurts and wonders if the ordeal strained his heart. The man strips off his soggy, soiled **suit** and begins to wring the water out of it. But then he suddenly stops and stares at the ground, as though he's missing an important part of his brain.

On the farm, the man confronts a version of his nostalgic memories that isn't romanticized. The farm smells and looks like a place where hard, dirty work happens, and the memory of the dead foxes reinforces the lesson that violence is inextricably woven into a life lived close to nature. The strange encounter with the horse has taken an emotional and physical toll on the man, and it hasn't resolved his feelings of alienation. He has left the fields, but he also strips off his once-civilized clothing and stands exposed to the elements. The sensation that he is missing an important part of his brain is ambiguous and could apply to any one of the many facets of his adventure. It could reflect the fact that has given into primal violence, relinquishing his hold—even if temporarily—on civilization's rational order. It might also represent the alarming and chilling realization that he no longer belongs in his "home-country," which has deprived him of a sense of connection and belonging. Finally, it could suggest that nature's violence has forced him to trade his fuzzy, romanticized memories for an acknowledgement of its harsh reality. In any case, the story ends with the man feeling empty and broken rather than triumphant or content, suggesting that nature is a brutal and sobering force rather than a comforting one, and that clinging to nostalgic memories can be self-destructive.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Duprey-Henry, Annalese. "*The Rain Horse.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 30 Nov 2021. Web. 30 Nov 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Duprey-Henry, Annalese. "*The Rain Horse.*" LitCharts LLC, November 30, 2021. Retrieved November 30, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rain-horse.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Rain Horse* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Hughes, Ted. The Rain Horse. Cambridge University Press. 2018.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Hughes, Ted. The Rain Horse. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2018.