Snowdrop

SUMMARY

At this very moment, the entire world is constricting into a tight grip around a mouse's heart, the beating of which has grown slow and muted as it hunkers down for the winter. Weasels and crows, seemingly molded out of metal, move through the gloomy landscape outside as though deranged, walking alongside all the other dying things. The snowdrop flower also strives to accomplish her goals, savage as the constellation she was born under, her white petals so heavy they seem to be made of metal.

THEMES

THE BRUTALITY OF NATURE AND THE STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE

"Snowdrop" portrays a bitter winter landscape in which various animals (including a mouse, weasel, and crow) struggle to survive. The whole world seems braced against "darkness" and the threat of death, down to the snowdrop of the poem's title (a small flower that blooms in winter). Unlike the animals, this flower thrives in these conditions by imitating the harshness of its environment, her petals hanging "heavy as metal" in the surrounding cold. In one reading, the poem simply acknowledges that all living things are doing their best to withstand the cruel brutality of nature. It's also possible that the poem is making a commentary on how brutality engenders *more* brutality, and how it takes fierce, steely determination to thrive in a merciless world.

The winter of the poem is harsh and unforgiving. It seems, to the speaker, as though "the globe"—the entire world itself—has "shrunk tight," wrapped like a fist "[r]ound the mouse's dulled wintering heart." This image likens the world to a predator; like a bird of prey, it's squeezing the life out of a mouse, whose heart slows in the cold.

Meanwhile, a weasel and crow "[m]ove through an outer darkness," trudging the landscape as though "moulded in brass." The animals appear heavy, stiff, and slow with cold, and there's no light to assist them in their journeys. These conditions, understandably, render them a little mad. They're "[n]ot in their right minds" as they wander around "[w]ith the other deaths"—a phrase nodding to the lifeless winter world that surrounds them and also ominously suggests that these creatures are on the brink of death *themselves*.

The tiny snowdrop, a flower that blooms in mid-winter, also "pursues her ends"—that is, attempts to survive the cold, unforgiving conditions. Unlike the mouse, weasel, and crow, however, the snowdrop, personified as a female figure, seems to be a match for the ruthless environment she grows in. The flower is as "[b]rutal as the stars of this month," perhaps indicating that she's been specifically *made* for winter, born as she is under this particular set of "stars." (Hughes was very interested in astrology, which holds that the stars you're born under determine your character and fate.)

It seems that the snowdrop survives by adopting the harshness of the world around her. The speaker says that "[h]er pale head is heavy as metal," a striking way to describe the flower's white, downturned petals. As with the reference to a weasel and crow made from "brass," this image speaks to the way that winter hardens living things. Yet in the flower's case, this hardening seems to be an advantage. Despite her delicate appearance, the simile implies that she's strong and resilient. Indeed, even her name makes her seem like simply a *part* of the winter landscape.

The fact that this flower is white and blooming from the earth in winter might be read as symbolic of the resilience of life itself. Alternatively, this hardy flower might reflect how a cruel, icy world favors hardened creatures. In yet another reading, the poem is just exploring the universal struggle to survive. Indeed, even as the snowdrop seems to contrast with the animals from earlier in the poem, the speaker never actually praises one creature's method of survival over another. In fact, the poem doesn't romanticize *any* aspect of nature; as far as the speaker is concerned, it all seems pretty equally grim.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Now is the ...
... dulled wintering heart.

"Snowdrop" begins by setting a chilly scene. Note how this description of a winter landscape quickly goes from being quite vast and abstract to small and specific:

> Now is the globe shrunk tight
> Round the mouse's dulled wintering heart.

The speaker describes the entire "globe"—or world—as if it's contracting, like a hand being squeezed into a fist, around a little mouse's heart. The enjambment here subtly evokes that

constriction, the first line seeming to exert its grip around the following.

This mouse is hunkered down for the winter, its heartbeat slow and muted to preserve energy and warmth. The world has perhaps "shrunk" in the sense that nothing matters to this little creature beyond its immediate survival.

Listen to the assonance here as well:

> Now is the globe shrunk tight
> Round the mouse's dulled wintering heart.

That broad /ow/ sound adds intensity to the poem's language and also mimics the shrinking of the world itself; just as the speaker's description goes from very broad in line 1 to very specific in line 2, so too do these /ow/ sounds go from wide to narrow (just try saying "now" out loud and feel what happens to the shape of your mouth!). In this way, assonance evokes the very contracting that the speaker is describing.

These lines also form a rhyming couplet, though readers might not actually catch the rhyme at first: "tight" is only a vague slant rhyme with "heart." The poem will rely on subtly rhymed couplets like this throughout, as though the rhyme sounds themselves have been "dulled" alongside the hearts of the poem's "wintering" animals.

LINES 3-5

Weasel and crow, ...
... their right minds,

The speaker introduces two new creatures moving through this winter world: a weasel and a crow. Note, however, that the speaker doesn't actually include any articles ("a" or "the") before mentioning these animals: "Weasel and crow [...] Move," the speaker says, rather than "The weasel and crow" or "A weasel and crow." It isn't clear if the speaker is talking about a single, specific weasel and crow or if they're referring to entire categories of animals. "Weasel and crow" almost sound like names of mythical characters engaged in a battle against the landscape.

Using a simile, the speaker says that these animals move "as if moulded in brass." In other words, they're so stiff and heavy from the cold that they seem to be made out of metal. The simile also suggests that the harsh landscape has transformed them into something unfeeling or inanimate, more like statues rather than living beings.

They trudge through the "outer darkness"—the world outside the mouse's lair referenced in line 2. The phrase "outer darkness" also might reflect the animals' mental states: the speaker says they're "[n]ot in their right minds." They're confused or unwell, it seems, overwhelmed by the harshness of their environment.

Notice the subtle /m/ alliteration trickling down lines 2-5 of the poem: "mouse's," "moulded," "Move," "minds." This is a muffled sound, and its reappearance through these lines evokes the muted quiet winter. Readers can picture a world where most life is buried beneath a heavy layer of snow.

LINE 6

With the other ... pursues her ends,

In line 6, the speaker says that these seemingly deranged animals wander the winter landscape "[w]ith the other deaths." The word "other" implies that the weasel and crow are on the brink of death *themselves*. It also reflects the fact that winter is a season of death and stagnation in general; there's no new life or growth breaking up this landscape, just dark, icy emptiness.

There is something strange, too, about the idea of them moving around "[w]ith the other deaths." The phrase makes these "deaths" feel actively *present*, like ghosts existing right alongside the living. Death, in winter, isn't something that simply waits patiently in the background! Perhaps the animals aren't "in their right minds" because all this death and "darkness" has driven them mad; perhaps they can focus on nothing but the cold as their minds are taken over by an instinct to survive.

There's a full stop caesura after the word "deaths," inserting a moment of eerie silence into the poem:

> With the other deaths. She, too, pursues her ends,

The speaker then switches gears, turning away from the weasel and crow to talk about a female figure ("She") who, "too, pursues her ends."

It isn't immediately clear who this "She" is referring to, only that, whoever she is, she's similar to the weasel and crow in her ambition: to survive the winter. The phrase "pursues her ends" sounds rather calculating and mercenary, however, and readers might already sense a contrast between this figure and the animals mentioned thus far in the poem. Whereas the mouse has a "dulled" heart and the weasel/crow are losing their minds, this new creature seems clear-headed and focused in her pursuit.

Note, too, how the introduction of this character corresponds with the longest line in the poem. This signals to the reader that this new figure is important, though it isn't yet clear why.

LINES 7-8

Brutal as the ...
... heavy as metal.

Whoever this female figure is, it's clear that she's tough. She's as "[b]rutal as the stars of this month," in fact—that is, as brutal as the winter season itself—and has a "pale head" that's as "heavy as metal." The huffing /h/ alliteration and /eh/ assonance give this final line intensity and emphasis, perhaps echoing the "heav[iness]" the speaker describes. Note, too, that this simile

recalls the mention of animals "moulded in brass" earlier in the poem, against suggesting that this new creature has been made firm, icy, and even unfeeling by the winter.

Yet, unlike the weasel and crow, this metallicness now suggests steely strength. That's because this new figure doesn't have to move: the final line is a description of a snowdrop, a flower that blooms in the winter.

- The snowdrop has white petals (hence the "pale head") that hang toward the ground—something that, to the speaker, makes her bloom look "heavy."
- The speaker is personifying the flower here and juxtaposing her against the dying animals from earlier in the poem. Despite her delicate appearance, the snowdrop is hearty and resilient. The poem suggests that the flower is able to survive because she's not so different from the environment she grows in: she is as savage and ruthless as the winter world around her and the unfeeling stars above.

Note that it's also possible to interpret this "she" as an actual person (or to take the flower a literal presence in the poem that symbolizes some woman in the speaker's life):

- In this interpretation, the poem's title might be more of a metaphorical description of this woman's nature, suggesting that she survives in a cruel world by making herself more *like* that world.

Either way, the poem implies that this figure isn't just tough; she actually *destined* to survive, having been born under "the stars of this month." This is likely a reference to astrology and the idea that the arrangement of celestial bodies upon one's birth determines one's character and fate. The symbolic "stars" simultaneously suggest a cold, unfeeling universe (the stars are unaffected by what happens on earth) and the possibility that some people are simply fated to rise above the difficulties of life.

The poem steers clear of any explicit messages or lessons, however. While it implies that this flower/woman may have what it takes to survive, it doesn't necessarily argue that her methods of survival are *better* than those of the other animals. In fact, the poem doesn't actually say whether she survives, only that she, like all the rest, is trying to do so—that she's "pursu[ing] her ends."

SYMBOLS

THE STARS

In this poem, the "stars" might symbolize the unfeeling nature of the universe, which gazes down on the creatures trying to survive below. Unlike the animals that are barely clinging to life, the "[b]rutal" stars burn bright regardless of the time of year, unchanging and unaffected by the seasons. The speaker doesn't portray their constancy as a comfort but rather as a reminder that nothing that happens on earth has any impact on the vast "outer darkness" that contains the "stars" above.

At the same time, "the stars of this month" refers not just to stars in general, but to a specific constellation associated with a certain time of the year. In other words, the poem is referencing astrology—the belief that the arrangement of celestial objects in the sky upon a person's birth affects who they are and will become. In this way, the "stars" in this poem also symbolize fate, perhaps implying that the snowdrop is "[b]rutal" because she is destined to survive.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Brutal as the stars of this month,"

POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

Assonance adds rhythm and intensity to the poem's language while also calling attention to certain images. Listen to the repeated /ow/ sounds in the first two lines, for example:

> Now is the globe shrunk tight
> Round the mouse's dulled wintering heart.

Note the shape the mouth makes while saying these words ("Now," "Round," "mouse's"): broad and open at first, followed by a closing in around the /w/ sound. This motion subtly mimics the shrinking of the "globe," which tightens like a fist around the "mouse's" slowing "heart."

The assonance here also just adds some interesting music to the poem, drawing the reader into this setting. The same is true of the long /o/ sounds of "crow"/"moulded" and the /oo/ sounds of "[m]ove through" and "too, pursues."

There's then another striking string of assonance in the final line of the poem, where the speaker repeats the short /eh/ sound:

> Her pale head heavy as metal.

There's alliteration here as well, on the huffing /h/ sound. Altogether, the intense sonic repetition of this line adds weight to the poem's final moments. The insistence of these sounds perhaps evokes the resilience and perseverance of the snowdrop flower itself.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Now"
- **Line 2:** "Round," "mouse's"
- **Line 3:** "crow," "moulded"
- **Line 4:** "Move through"
- **Line 6:** "deaths," "too, pursues," "ends"
- **Line 8:** "head heavy," "metal"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration, like assonance, adds some interesting music and rhythm to the poem and also emphasizes certain moments. Notice, for example, the trickle of /m/ sounds throughout lines 2-5: "mouse's," "moulded," "[m]ove," "minds." The effect is subtle because these sounds are fairly spread out across the poem, but they still softy evoke the "dulled" quiet of winter, of a world muffled under a blanket of snow and cold.

The poem's last line contains a tighter cluster of alliteration, which gives it rhythm and intensity:

> Her pale head heavy as metal.

Together with the assonance of the /eh/ sound ("head heavy," "metal"), that alliteration calls readers' attention to this closing simile. The insistent huffing, husky sounds might even evoke the strength and resilience of the snowdrop flower.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "mouse's"
- **Line 3:** "moulded"
- **Line 4:** "Move"
- **Line 5:** "minds"
- **Line 8:** "Her," "head heavy"

SIMILE

The poem contains several similes that help bring the poem's stark winter setting to life. In line 3, for example, the speaker describes a "Weasel and crow" wandering through the dark "as if moulded in brass" (i.e., as though made of metal). This simile suggests the stiff, plodding movements of these creatures through the cold, dark, and snow.

In line 7, the speaker says that the snowdrop flower is as "[b]rutal as the stars of this month." In other words, the flower is as tough and savage as this specific time of year (i.e., winter). The reference to stars adds another layer to the simile: the stars are brutal, perhaps, because they go on burning brightly up above regardless of whatever suffering may be happening down below. As such, this simile implies that the flower's method of survival is to be as harsh, unfeeling, and austere as the world she's born into. The "stars of this month" is also likely a reference to astrology, so the simile also suggests that the snowdrop is brutal by her very nature; her steely resolve is simply a matter of fate or destiny.

The final line also contains a simile:

> Her pale head heavy as metal.

The "pale head" here refers to the snowdrop flower's white petals, which hang towards the ground. To the speaker, this makes the petals appear heavy. In comparing them to "metal" (a word that, not coincidentally, is just one letter away from "petal"!), the speaker is imbuing the snowdrop flower with immense strength and resilience. She may look delicate, but she is nearly indestructible.

The word "metal" also echoes the first simile from the poem, in which the weasel and crow appeared to be "moulded in brass." But unlike those animals, the flower seems to be getting on just fine. Her "heav[iness]" isn't the result of her blood slowing, after all, but rather just part of her very nature.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Weasel and crow, as if moulded in brass,"
- **Line 7:** "Brutal as the stars of this month,"
- **Line 8:** "Her pale head heavy as metal."

PERSONIFICATION

The poem personifies the snowdrop of the title as a female figure who, like everything else in this winter world, "pursues her ends." The flower isn't just mindlessly growing, but rather is actively trying to thrive under harsh conditions. It's going after what its wants (i.e., survival). Personification lends the flower a sense of will and agency, highlighting its steely resolve. It also suggests that the speaker respects the flower; they talk about it as though it were another human being trying to get by.

Indeed, it might even take the reader a couple of seconds to realize the speaker is referring to the snowdrop from the poem's title. In this way, the *flower's* desire to survive gets conflated with the *human* desire to survive. All living things, the poem perhaps implies, are engaged in a difficult struggle to make it in a harsh world.

In fact, one could easily interpret these final lines to be about an *actual* person: a woman with immense, "[b]rutal" strength and an iron will.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-8:** "She, too, pursues her ends, / Brutal as the stars of this month, / Her pale head heavy as metal."

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses mostly end-stopped lines, creating a slow, plodding rhythm that evokes the slow, plodding pace of life in

this harsh winter world. There are two clear moments of enjambment, however, which briefly speed the poem up and subtly mimic what the speaker is describing.

Take a look at the first two lines, for instance:

> Now is the globe shrunk tight
> Round the mouse's dulled wintering heart.

Thanks to enjambment, readers can perhaps feel the world's sudden, decisive shrinking. Line 1 seems to wrap itself "[r]ound" line 2, evoking the tight grip of winter on the mouse. The end-stopped second line then slows the reader down, evoking the slowing of the mouse's heart.

There's one other enjambment in the poem, which appears between lines 4 and 5:

> Move through an outer darkness
> Not in their right minds,

Line 4 steps out into the blankness of the page, subtly evoking the vast "outer darkness" of the world in winter and the way these animals seem to be stumbling confusedly through it.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "tight / Round"
- **Lines 4-5:** "darkness / Not"

CAESURA

The poem uses caesura sparingly. Line 3, for example, is broken into two nearly equal parts by a comma in the middle of the line:

> Weasel and crow, as if moulded in brass,

The speaker interrupts their straightforward description of the animals moving "through an outer darkness" with a simile depicting the physical difficulty of living outside in the winter. That caesura actually slows the *reader* down as well, evoking what's happening in the poem.

There's another important caesura in line 6:

> With the other deaths. She, too, pursues her ends,

The full stop after "deaths" calls readers' attention to this word and adds a pocket of eerie, deathly silence to the poem. This pause also emphasizes the juxtaposition between these trudging, almost deranged animals and the flinty resolve of the snowdrop flower.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "crow, as"
- **Line 6:** "deaths. She"

VOCABULARY

Snowdrop () - A small, white flower that blooms in winter.

Wintering (Line 2) - Passing the winter in a particular place or manner. The word also implies a sort of hunkering and/or slowing down to escape the winter cold.

Moulded (Line 3) - Formed or fashioned.

Right minds (Line 5) - To be in one's *right mind* is to act in a way that is sane, normal, or rational. The speaker is saying that these creatures seem a bit mad or out of sorts.

Pursues her ends (Line 6) - This just means the flower is striving for a particular outcome (i.e., survival).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Snowdrop" consists of eight lines of free verse, lumped into a single stanza. Although there are no stanza breaks here, readers can also think of the poem as being made up of four couplets (or two-line stanzas) due to the poet's use of end rhymes (all of which are subtle—more on that in a minute!).

The tight, compact nature of the poem echoes the shrinking of "the globe" that the speaker describes in line 1, which seems to constrict like a fist around animals in winter. The poem, like the lives it describes, is brief and brutal.

METER

As a free verse poem, "Snowdrop" does not use meter. This is true for most contemporary poetry and for most of Hughes's poems as well. While the steady rhythms created by meter might suggest a predictable, well-ordered universe, the unmetered verse here is an appropriate match for a poem about the unforgiving reality of survival. That is, the poem's *lack* of meter allows its brutality to shine through; there's no soothing music here to romanticize the natural world.

RHYME SCHEME

Although it might be hard to hear at first, "Snowdrop" does actually have a rhyme scheme. It consists of four rhyming couplets: AABB and so on.

That said, all of these end rhymes are *very* slant. For example, "tight" is rhymed with "heart," and "minds" with "ends." Reading it aloud, the effect is much more subtle than if full rhymes had been used instead. It's almost as though the rhymes here have been buried in a layer of snow, muffled by winter alongside the

little mouse's "dulled wintering heart."

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is anonymous and genderless. They're an impartial, seemingly omniscient observer describing this brutal winter scene. Readers aren't really thinking about the speaker at all; the focus here is on nature.

SETTING

The poem takes place in a stark winter landscape. It's cold and dark; the world itself seems to be "shrunk tight," constricted like a fist around the "heart" of hibernating creatures. A weasel and crow trudge "through an outer darkness" and aren't "in their right minds," suggesting the disorienting nature of this winter world. Surrounding them are "other deaths," an ominous statement reflecting the fact that winter is a time of stillness. There's also a little snowdrop flower, a perhaps unexpected sign of growth and life in this bleak world. The flower is "[b]rutal" as the indifferent stars above, however, its white, downturned petals hanging like heavy bits of metal.

The speaker doesn't say where in the world this scene is occurring nor if the poem is meant to describe a single night or many. This cold, harsh environment could occur in many different places, at many different times, and may even be interpreted metaphorically (i.e., the "winter" could represent a difficult time in a person's life). What's clear is that the natural world of this poem is a harsh, unforgiving place.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Ted Hughes (1930-1998) is considered one of the foremost writers of the 20th century. His arrival on the scene with his 1957 debut, *The Hawk in the Rain*, was a shock to the system of British poetry; Hughes's raw imagery challenged the dominance of more restrained and formal poets like Philip Larkin. To this day, Hughes remains one of the most widely read poets in the English language. "Snowdrop" first appeared in *Lupercal*, Ted Hughes's second collection of poetry, in 1960.

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

Hughes was deeply influenced by the work of his wife, fellow poet Sylvia Plath. Over the course of their (often tormented) marriage, the pair produced a rich, unsettling body of work. Both were inspired by the English countryside in which they set up home. The domestic strife between Hughes and Plath became a key subject in both poets' work as well, including in Plath's *Ariel* (published posthumously after her 1963 suicide) and Hughes's *Birthday Letters* (1998). Some might even interpret the "[b]rutal" and "pale head[ed]" figure at the end of this poem as a reference to Plath, who, like Hughes, had a keen interest in astrology.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Over the course of his long and prolific career (which ran from the 1950s until his death in 1998), Hughes saw wild social change. He began publishing his poetry during a period of rapid post-war urbanization and industrialization. Britain had a booming manufacturing industry in products as diverse as ships, cars, metals, and textiles, but with this boom came increasing pollution. Hughes's poetry, with its interest in wild nature and animal instinct, might be read as a skeptical rejoinder to a post-war enthusiasm for civilizing, scientific progress.

Grim as the outlook of poems like "Snowdrop" might be, Hughes's choice to become a poet largely stemmed from his *love* of nature. Even in its harshest moments, nature attracted him as a source of inspiration and awe. Hughes grew up hunting animals, but he soon found that the thrill of chasing an animal was deflated by the result. Rather than trap or kill wild creatures, he preferred to portray the essence of their wildness and to explore the deep bond he felt with nature. In this way, he found poetry better suited to his aims.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to a recording of the poem read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTF0SrQ51kM)
- The Snowdrop Flower — Learn more about the flower that inspired this poem. (https://www.gardendesign.com/bulbs/snowdrops.html)
- British Library Archives for Ted Hughes — Peruse the British Library's archives on Hughes, which contain biographical information and additional resources (including writing about the influence of war and mythology on Hughes's work). (https://www.bl.uk/people/ted-hughes)
- An Introduction to the Poet's Life — Head over to

the Poetry Foundation's website to read a brief biography of Hughes. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-hughes)

- A Documentary About Hughes's Life and Work — This BBC documentary investigates how Hughes's life shaped his poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbAGbjXPCP8)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER TED HUGHES POEMS

- A Picture of Otto
- Bayonet Charge
- Cat and Mouse
- Hawk Roosting
- Telegraph Wires
- The Jaguar
- The Thought Fox
- Wind

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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