The Horses

SUMMARY

The speaker walked up a tree-covered hill in the darkness just before sunrise. The atmosphere was ominous and filled with an icy stillness.

There wasn't a single leaf or bird around, and it was as though the speaker's surroundings had been frozen solid. When the speaker emerged from the trees, their breath made twisted clouds of fog in the cold air and the low, gray light.

The valleys below were filled with darkness until they reached the edge of the boggy landscape and the horizon: a dark line marked by the final remnants of the night, which split the sky before the speaker in half.

And that's when the speaker saw horses. There were ten of them, looking enormous in the thick gray light and standing as still as giant rock statues. They remained completely motionless and silent as they breathed, their long manes of hair flowing down their necks and their back hooves resting at an angle.

Not a single horse responded when the speaker walked by. They were silent, gray pieces of a silent, gray planet.

The speaker listened for any sound in the silence on the outlook overlooking the expanse of boggy land below. The call of a bird suddenly interrupted the absolute quiet.

The speaker was able to make out more specific images in their surroundings as the darkness slowly faded. Then the sun appeared like a sudden, silent explosion of color. The sun momentarily split itself in half as it rose across the horizon, burning away the clouds to reveal the blue of the sky and the cosmos.

The speaker changed direction, walking unsteadily, as though in the frenzied heat of a dream, down the hill back to the dark trees, and then the speaker approached the horses.

They were still completely motionless, but now there was steam emanating from them, and the dew on their bodies reflected the sun's light. Their stiff, rock-like hair and back legs seemed to be thawing out.

Meanwhile, the frost on the surrounding landscape glistened in the sunlight. Even so, the horses remained totally silent.

Not a single horse made a sound through its nose or stomped its foot. Instead, their hanging heads remained as calm and motionless as the line between the earth and sky, which was far above the lowlands, in the red beams of sunlight that fell over every part of the landscape.

When the speaker is surrounded by the chaos of busy streets, going about their life over the years, they hope to remember this moment: being in an utterly isolated place, between small rivers and colored clouds, listening to the sounds of birds and the silence of the endless, unchanging horizon.

THEMES

THE STABILITY AND BEAUTY OF NATURE

The speaker "The Horses" describes an early morning walk through a hilly, rural landscape. The poem begins "in the hour-before-dawn dark," when everything is cold, silent, and still, including a group of sleeping horses that the speaker passes by. Their stability and "patien[ce]" inspire the speaker, who hopes to remember this peaceful country morning when back in the noisy "din" of the city. Through its memorable descriptions of the stillness of the horses and their surroundings, the poem finds deep inspiration in the serenity, splendor, and permanence of nature.

The speaker describes pastoral scenery that's dark, silent, and austere—in short, not obviously inspiring—in almost reverent terms. The speaker notices the "[e]vil air," which is freezing cold, and the absence of even a single "leaf" or "bird." The world is "cast in frost," and the speaker's smoky breath twists in the air. Noticing the horses, the speaker compares them to giant statues: though they're breathing, they make "no move" or "sound," and they appear to be sleeping. So still and silent are they, and the entire landscape, that the speaker compares the horses to "[g]rey silent fragments / Of a grey silent world."

Following a colorful, dramatic sunrise, the speaker turns back and finds the horses still motionless. The speaker is moved by their patience, which seems to reflect the timelessness of nature itself. Even as the sun rises, the horses are asleep in the same place: "[t]here, still they stood." The pun on "still"—meaning both that the horses *remain* and that they are *unmoving*—emphasizes the animals' poise. The horses are "patient as the horizons," a simile that evokes the endlessness of the line between the earth and sky and links the horses with nature's own everlasting stability.

The speaker is inspired by the horses' unchanging beauty, contrasting it with the "din of crowded streets" the speaker will find elsewhere (presumably in a city). Thinking of the uncertain, noisy, chaotic future in store, the speaker cherishes this moment of peace, stability, and beauty.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-38

RURAL SILENCE VS. URBAN NOISE

"The Horses" juxtaposes the serenity of the countryside with the "din" (commotion) of the "city." The near-total silence of the pastoral landscape awes the speaker into a state of heightened emotion and sensitivity. In this elevated state of mind, the speaker cherishes the silence of nature and hopes to remember it back in the noisy city. The poem thus portrays quiet natural landscapes as more lasting, beautiful, and spiritually fulfilling than urban turmoil.

The poem establishes the near-total silence of the countryside, where "not a leaf, not a bird" makes a sound, and "a frost-making stillness" predominates. The speaker also emphasizes the silence of the horses themselves, observing that they "made no sound" and "[n]ot one snorted or stamped." In fact, the whole landscape remains hushed—the world is "grey" and "silent," and the speaker "listen[s] in emptiness" to the immense quiet all around.

Suddenly, a birdcall breaks the silence. The speaker describes the curlew's unexpected cry as a "tear," emphasizing the power that even a single sound has in this quiet. The cry seems to herald the rising of the sun, which transforms the view by brightening the overwhelming gray and bringing out the "detail" of the landscape. Afterward, however, the world is again silent: the curlew's "tear" is the only sound in the poem, and it's brief, described in just one line. For the speaker, the single, startling noise seems to make the silence afterward more profound.

The speaker contrasts the silence of the country with the commotion of the city, suggesting that the memory of the country will refresh and comfort them in the midst of urban noise. Observing the silent horses makes the speaker think ruefully of the "din of crowded streets." Eventually, the speaker will have to return to city life, where the "din" and innumerable "faces" of passersby will represent a stark, sad contrast with the hushed beauty of nature. The speaker clearly prefers the quiet beauty of this place to the noise and crowds of the city. The expansive quiet of nature allows the speaker to appreciate individual sights, sounds, and living things. The city, the speaker implies, is the opposite: annoyingly noisy and overcrowded, and totally lacking in natural beauty.

Broadly, then, the speaker suggests that the quiet countryside is more inspiring, rewarding, and spiritually healthy than the city. The speaker even makes a kind of prayerful wish—"May I still meet my memory in so lonely a place"—that expresses a reverence for these natural surroundings. The speaker emphasizes that the "horizons" of the countryside will "endure," perhaps implying that cities are temporary and insignificant by comparison.

This attitude calls back to the 19th-century Romantic tradition, embodied by poets such as William Wordsworth and John Keats. Much as the speaker of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" finds solace in his sweet memories of nature "'mid the din / Of towns and cities," the speaker of "The Horses" finds nature's peace and beauty spiritually restorative. Through its lush, awe-filled language, "The Horses" illustrates how being in nature—or even just *remembering* nature—can bring lasting contentment.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 27-38

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I climbed through ...
... cast in frost.

"The Horses" begins with an unnamed "I," the speaker, "climb[ing]" through the woods in the very early morning, before the sun has risen. The blunt alliteration of "dawn" and "dark" makes the poem's language feel heavy and labored, perhaps evoking the effort it takes for the speaker to "climb" this hill.

The speaker uses rich imagery to convey the cold and darkness of the world at this hour, which is so still it seems to be frozen through and through. The "air," meanwhile, is "Evil"—menacingly dark. There's no movement or sound whatsoever—"Not a leaf, not a bird," the speaker says, using both anaphora and asyndeton to emphasize just how still and silent the landscape is. The "world," in fact, seems "cast in frost"—a phrase that suggests the world is covered with ice crystals and that it's a statue *made* of frost. The full stop caesura in the middle of line 4 brings the poem to a halt, evoking that frosty stillness even more:

> A world cast in frost. I came out above the wood

These opening lines also establish the poem's form. "The Horses" is written in free verse couplets, two-line stanzas without regular meter or rhyme. The lines vary in length (line 1 is quite long, while lines 2 and 3 are much shorter), and most (but not all) of them are end-stopped, which adds to the sense of emptiness, darkness, and cold in these first few lines.

LINES 4-8

I came out ...
... the sky ahead.

The second half of line 4 marks a change: the speaker emerges from the woods onto a "moor-ridge," or a raised area overlooking the moor below. A moor is an area of open, uncultivated, sometimes boggy land common in northern England, where Ted Hughes was from. The poet spent much of

his childhood exploring the moors, in fact, where he also developed his lifelong love of nature.

Line 4 is the first enjambed line of the poem; all the preceding lines have been strongly end-stopped. By continuing into line 5 without a pause, the poem mirrors the speaker's physical movement out of the woods and onto the "moor-ridge":

> [...] I came out above the wood
> Where my breath [...]

Things slowly begin to change once the setting shifts from the woods to the moor-ridge. The atmosphere is still fairly ominous; in another bit of memorable imagery, the speaker describes the "tortuous," or twisting, "statues" their breath leaves in the gray, metallic light before sunrise. But in line 6, the speaker observes the gradual beginnings of the dawn, a slight brightening of the absolute darkness earlier in the poem.

The valleys below "were draining the darkness," the speaker says, almost as if these lowlands had a will of their own. Though this moment can be a little confusing, what the speaker is describing is pretty straightforward: the very first hints of light from the sun, which is about to rise, are gradually making the sky turn grey instead of black. The valleys, on the other hand, remain dark as "dregs" (think of the remnants at the bottom of a coffee cup), almost as if they're sucking the darkness out of the sky. The result is the distinct appearance of the horizon line, the "moorline," which seems to split the sky in two.

In lines 6 and 7, booming alliteration ("draining the darkness"; "blackening" and "brightening") adds drama to the speaker's description of the time just before the sunrise.

LINES 8-15

> *And I saw ...*
> *... grey silent world.*

After seven and a half lines, readers may well be wondering if the horses of the poem's title are ever going to show up at all! At last, here they are: "And I saw the horses," the speaker says matter-of-factly, yet with a touch of romantic drama.

While horses are often depicted as classically beautiful, friendly, colorful, and perhaps even neighing, jumping, or running around, these horses are absolutely still, silent, and almost colorless. They are alive—the speaker observes them breathing—but they are probably sleeping, and they almost seem like ghosts.

Indeed, in a striking image, the speaker describes them as "Megalith-still"—that is, still as the large stone monuments that ancient people used for worship (think of Stonehenge). The horses are "[h]uge," and they have a kind of strange beauty about them; the speaker focuses on their "draped manes and tilted hind-hooves." Seen in this pre-dawn light, the horses are "[g]rey silent fragments // Of a grey silent world." This striking metaphor, along with the preceding description, begins to lay the groundwork for the poem's use of the horses as a symbol of the steadfastness, stability, strange beauty, and even indifference of nature. Like the natural world, the horses are grey in the pre-dawn light; like all of nature before the sunrise, they are silent and unmoving, and they take no notice of the speaker.

As in earlier sections of the poem, alliteration makes the speaker's description of the horses sound more lyrical and intense: "horses"/"Huge"; "ten together"; "making no move"; and "hind-hooves." The repetition in "making no move" and "Making no sound" as well as in "Grey silent fragments // Of a grey silent world" adds yet more drama to these lines.

LINES 16-18

> *I listened in ...*
> *... from the darkness.*

After encountering the still and silent horses, the speaker listens "in emptiness on the moor-ridge." In other words, the speaker takes in the overwhelming silence while standing on the plateau overlooking the moor below.

But that silence doesn't last forever; suddenly, the "curlew's tear turned its edge on the silence." A curlew is a bird, resembling the sandpiper, that's common in the moors of Scotland and northern England. It has a distinctive, two-note call that many people think sounds sad. By calling the bird's call a "tear," the speaker draws attention to its potentially mournful sound. The word is also a pun: the sound can be thought of as ripping, or "tear[ing]," the silence apart, in an almost violent way.

The curlew's tear, which occurs approximately halfway through the poem, is the only sound in "The Horses." As such, it marks a key moment of transition. Just after the bird announces itself to the world, detail begins to "leaf[] from the darkness," almost as if the bird's sound had caused the world to flower forth. In this metaphor, which communicates the speaker's growing sense of wonder at the splendor of nature, the visual details of the world seem to come alive and grow out of the darkness, as leaves from a tree branch.

LINES 18-26

> *Then the sun ...*
> *... to the horses.*

The speaker's wonder reaches a dramatic climax in lines 18–22, which describe the sunrise. In a way, the whole poem up to this point has been anticipating this moment, and the sudden burst of color and light—combined with the speaker's vivid imagery—makes a moving testament to the beauty, power, and mystery of nature.

The sunrise almost seems to take the speaker by surprise; the sudden change is communicated by the dramatic enjambments

in lines 18–20:

> [...] Then the sun
> Orange, red, red erupted
> Silently, and splitting to its core tore and flung cloud,

The speaker also uses a special kind of repetition, called epizeuxis, to emphasize the sun's intense colors: "[o]range, red, red erupted." These lines are full of alliteration and sibilance, creating intensity even though the sun itself rises "[s]ilently." Just listen to the growling /r/, crisp /c/, liquid /l/, biting /t/, and hissing /s/ sounds here:

> [...] Then the sun
> Orange, red, red erupted
> Silently, and splitting to its core tore and flung cloud,

There's even an internal rhyme between "core" and "tore," further conveying the drama of this moment.

The main mood of these lines is one of overwhelmed awe and wonder, though as in the speaker's earlier encounter with the horses, there's also a vague sense of danger, violence, and uncertainty. Though it's beautiful, the sun (like the horses and the curlew, and even the "[e]vil air" from the beginning of the poem) also has a threatening edge. It erupts, splits, flings, and shakes—these are dramatic action verbs to describe a beautifully, silently rising sun.

For the speaker, the sunrise is a dramatic, profound, perhaps even life-changing event, one that brings on "the fever of a dream." Though "The Horses" remains a moving testament to nature's beauty, the poem never forgets the awesome, potentially violent, and ultimately unknowable power of the natural world.

After the sun rises, the speaker returns to the horses. This moment of return, back "down towards / The dark woods," marks another key transition in the poem. It also establishes a sense of formal symmetry: the speaker begins in the woods, leaves the woods, passes the horses, and ends up at a high point on the moor-ridge, where the sunrise causes the speaker to experience "the fever of a dream." Now, the emotionally worked-up speaker begins to come back down toward the woods. It's during this return journey that the speaker will meet the horses once more.

LINES 27-34

> *There, still they ...*
> *... red levelling rays—*

When the speaker meets the horses again, the animals are for the most part unchanged: "There, still they stood," but now the sunlight has begun to melt the frost on their bodies, making them steam and glisten. The melting "frost showed its fires," the speaker says, describing the way sunlight reflects off the icy land in vivid, fiery flashes.

The horses' bodies, too, seem to "thaw" in the warmth of day, even as the animals themselves remain unmoving (notice the subtle pun on "still," which means both "without motion" and "in the same way as before") and silent. These lines also contain several phrases that are prominently repeated from lines 8–15, emphasizing that the horses haven't really changed. So still are the horses that the speaker metaphorically describes their manes as "stone"; not a hair moves.

The horses' constant, steadfast nature inspires the speaker to say that the animals' "hung heads," which are unmoved by the sunrise, are "patient as the horizons" themselves. This metaphor implies that like the horizons—which are alternately brightened and darkened each and every day, without end, by the cycle of the rising and setting sun—the horses are patient, unchanging, and a fundamental expression of nature's enduring power, beauty, and mystery.

The sun's "red levelling rays," meanwhile, suggest that the sunlight falls across every inch of the landscape. The word "levelling" also might mean that everything is *made* equal by the sunlight, emphasizing the harmony and interconnectedness of the natural world.

The speaker seems to wish for the patience of the horses, who are "fragments" of nature and can go on sleeping through the drama of the sunrise. Perhaps it's a comfort to know that even if humans are constantly changing, nature (including the horses) just continues on, whether in "evil air" and "a frost-making stillness" or in the resplendent beauty and growing warmth of the newly risen sun.

LINES 35-38

> *In din of ...*
> *... the horizons endure.*

The poem undergoes a sudden shift as the speaker imagines returning to the "din of crowded streets," a clear reference to the noise and tumult of city life. It's possible that the speaker lives in the city (perhaps London, perhaps somewhere else) and is only visiting the countryside; it's also possible that the speaker lives in the countryside now but will have to live in the city one day.

Either way, the speaker suddenly wishes to "still meet my memory" of this beautiful morning sunrise whenever they do find themself in the city. The speaker feels that remembering precious moments spent "[b]etween the streams and red clouds" will be a source of solace in the chaos and noise of the city, which is "so lonely a place."

This belief in the redeeming, comforting power of nature—or even just memories of being in nature—is a classic Romantic trope. Indeed, Hughes may have been specifically alluding to Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," in which the speaker makes a wish strikingly similar to that of Hughes's speaker, or to W. B.

Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," whose speaker yearns for the pleasures of the countryside even while standing on "pavements grey."

In "The Horses," the speaker's wish sounds especially poignant thanks to the humming alliteration of the /m/ sound in "May I still meet my memory," as well as the gentle repetition of the word "hearing" in the last two lines. That final repetition of the word "still," moreover, recalls its earlier uses in describing the moor and the horses. In a sense, the speaker wishes to be *like* the horses, and the whole of the natural world, and retain the ability to be patient, steadfast, and at peace no matter what's going on around them.

The speaker's wish to "[h]ear[] the horizons endure" may seem strange at first—the horizons are silent, readers may think, so how can they be *heard*? But much like when the speaker attentively listens to the silence on the moor-ridge, the poem's final line expresses the speaker's—and, perhaps, all of humanity's—ability to be moved and redeemed by the mystery, beauty, and power of nature.

SYMBOLS

THE HORSES

The horses symbolize the serenity and stability of the natural world, something the poem sets in stark contrast to the "din" of modern life.

These animals are "[h]uge," still, and silent, and they appear to be sleeping. The horses are also utterly indifferent to the speaker's presence; they don't snort or jerk their heads when the speaker passes. Early in the poem, in a striking metaphor, the speaker compares the horses to "[g]rey silent fragments // Of a grey silent world." Nature is a colossal force, all this language suggests, made of many individual "fragments" that are themselves mysterious, powerful, and moving.

Later in the poem, when the speaker again encounters the horses, they are essentially unchanged. Though they are now "steaming and glistening under the flow of light" following the sunrise, they're still unmoving and silent, "their hung heads patient as the horizons." For the speaker, the horses come to symbolize the unchanging, steadfast, patient quality of nature that makes it a source of comfort and solace, especially amid the "din of crowded streets" the speaker dreads returning to.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-15:** "And I saw the horses: / Huge in the dense grey—ten together— / Megalith-still. They breathed, making no move, / With draped manes and tilted hind-hooves, / Making no sound. / I passed: not one snorted or jerked its head. / Grey silent fragments / Of a grey silent world."
- **Lines 26-38:** "And came to the horses. / There, still they stood, / But now steaming and glistening under the flow of light, / Their draped stone manes, their tilted hind-hooves / Stirring under a thaw while all around them / The frost showed its fires. But still they made no sound. / Not one snorted or stamped, / Their hung heads patient as the horizons, / High over valleys in the red levelling rays— / In din of crowded streets, going among the years, the faces, / May I still meet my memory in so lonely a place / Between the streams and red clouds, hearing the curlews, / Hearing the horizons endure."

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

"The Horses" is filled with striking metaphors that bring its imagery to life.

For example, in line 4, the speaker says that the world is "cast in frost." This just means that the world is icy cold, covered in a thin layer of frost; the phrase "cast in frost" makes it sound like the world is a *sculpture* made from ice, however, emphasizing just how cold and still the landscape is.

The metaphors in line 5 similarly convey the harshness of this environment. The thick, gray, twisting fog of the speaker's breath becomes "tortuous statues" in the metallic, pre-dawn light. Later, the speaker says that "frost showed its fires": metaphorical imagery conveying the way the sunlight flashes brilliantly off the frost-covered land.

Many of the metaphors in the poem focus on the horses themselves, which the speaker compares to megaliths (large stones used in ancient religious practices), "[g]rey silent fragments," and the horizon. Their flowing manes are so still they might as well be "stone." All of these imaginative comparisons emphasize the unmoving, quiet, patient nature of the horses, who take no notice of the speaker's movements, nor the curlew's call, nor even the rising sun. Ultimately, the animals' constancy comes to symbolize the unchanging reliability of nature itself, which comforts the speaker in the face of the chaotic "din" of crowded city streets.

The speaker also uses a striking metaphor to describe the curlew's sudden, piercing call. Instead of describing this as a sound, song, whistle, or simply call, the speaker uses the word "tear." The word (which is also a pun) implies both the mourning sound of the bird's two-note call and also its violent edge. It's almost as if the sudden sound rips the silence apart, thereby prompting the sudden change in the sky as the sun begins to rise in earnest.

Likewise, when the speaker observes that "detail leafed from the darkness," there's a metaphorical comparison being made between the details of nature, which the rising sun makes gradually visible, and the organic growth of plants' leaves. The metaphor enriches the speaker's sense that the rising sun makes the natural world come alive in a particularly vivid, moving way.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "A world cast in frost."
- **Line 5:** "tortuous statues in the iron light"
- **Line 6:** "the valleys were draining the darkness"
- **Line 10:** "Megalith-still."
- **Lines 14-15:** "Grey silent fragments / Of a grey silent world."
- **Line 17:** "The curlew's tear turned its edge on the silence."
- **Line 18:** "Slowly detail leafed from the darkness."
- **Line 29:** "draped stone manes"
- **Line 31:** "The frost showed its fires"
- **Lines 33-34:** "Their hung heads patient as the horizons, / High over valleys in the red levelling rays—"
- **Lines 37-38:** "Between the streams and red clouds, hearing the curlews, / Hearing the horizons endure."

IMAGERY

"The Horses" is rich with imagery, plopping the reading into the natural world alongside the speaker. That is, the poem's richly descriptive language helps readers see, hear, and feel the speaker's surroundings.

Much of this imagery emphasizes the contrast between the world before and after dawn. At the beginning of the poem, for example, the speaker says this world is "cast in frost," a particularly chilly image that contrasts with the moment after sunrise when "[t]he frost show[s] its fires" (that is, when the sunlight glinted off the icy land).

The speaker also describes their breath as leaving "tortuous statues in the iron light," a metaphorical image that conveys just how cold and eerie the speaker's surroundings are: the speaker's breath leaves twisting shapes in the frigid air. The speaker's rich description of the horizon just before the sun rises ("blackening dregs of the brightening grey") further underscores the contrast between the pre-dawn darkness and the gradually brightening sky. The horizon line is like the bottom of a cup of coffee or tea, thick with the final remnants of the night, and it cuts the sky before the speaker in half.

Imagery also heightens the speaker's description of the horses themselves, who are Megalith-still" and "Grey silent fragments" of the natural world. These descriptions convey just how massive, motionless, and majestic these creatures appear. Later, once the sun has risen, the speaker says the horses are "now steaming and glistening under the flow of light"—a particularly resplendent, beautiful way to describe the sun melting the frost off their bodies.

When the sun rises, the speaker's language seems to itself "erupt[]" in a flurry of excitement, color, and intense detail. The richness of red and orange—combined with the slightly violent edge of the sun's "splitting," tearing, flinging, and shaking—creates an ecstatic emotional climax that leaves the speaker "in the fever of a dream" and prepares the poem's wistful, tender end.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "A world cast in frost."
- **Line 5:** "tortuous statues in the iron light."
- **Lines 6-8:** "But the valleys were draining the darkness / Till the moorline—blackening dregs of the brightening grey— / Halved the sky ahead."
- **Lines 9-10:** "Huge in the dense grey—ten together— / Megalith-still."
- **Lines 14-15:** "Grey silent fragments / Of a grey silent world."
- **Lines 18-22:** "Then the sun / Orange, red, red erupted / Silently, and splitting to its core tore and flung cloud, / Shook the gulf open, showed blue, / And the big planets hanging—"
- **Lines 28-31:** "But now steaming and glistening under the flow of light, / Their draped stone manes, their tilted hind-hooves / Stirring under a thaw while all around them / The frost showed its fires."

ALLITERATION

"The Horses" is packed with alliteration (as well as more general consonance), which creates moments of intensity and signifies the awesome beauty and mystery of nature.

In the very first line, for instance, the heavy /d/ sound in "hour-before-dawn dark" underscores the ominous power of that darkness and the uncertain, mysterious, even threatening atmosphere that surrounds the speaker before the sunrise.

Alliteration also makes the poem's imagery pop, as with the image of "valleys [...] draining the darkness" and "blackening dregs of the brightening gray." The /m/ sounds of line 10 similarly intensify the poem's first image of the horses themselves:

> Megalith-still. They breathed, making no move,
> With draped manes and tilted hind-hooves,

That humming sound suggests a subtle undercurrent of energy and power vibrating beneath the stillness. Note that these lines are filled with assonance as well ("Megalith still," "making"/"draped manes"), making them feel even more charged and intense.

Later, the sharp /t/ sounds of "The curlew's tear turned" convey the violence of the bird's call. And lines 27-32 are filled with /s/, /t/, and /st/ sound: "still," "stood," "steaming," "stone," "stirring," "sound," "snorted," "stamped." The mixture of crisp and hissing sounds suggests the "steam" emanating from the horses in the sunlight, while the general sibilance of these lines evokes the hush of the speaker's surroundings.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dawn dark"
- **Line 4:** "cast," "came"
- **Line 6:** "draining," "darkness"
- **Line 7:** "blackening," "brightening"
- **Line 8:** "horses"
- **Line 9:** "Huge," "ten together"
- **Line 10:** "Megalith," "making," "move"
- **Line 11:** "manes," "hind-hooves"
- **Line 17:** "tear turned"
- **Line 18:** "detail," "darkness"
- **Line 20:** "Silently," "splitting"
- **Line 21:** "Shook," "showed"
- **Line 24:** "dream, down"
- **Line 25:** "dark"
- **Line 27:** "There," "still," "they," "stood"
- **Line 28:** "steaming"
- **Line 29:** "stone," "hind-hooves"
- **Line 30:** "Stirring"
- **Line 31:** "frost," "fires," "still," "sound"
- **Line 32:** "snorted," "stamped"
- **Line 33:** "hung heads"
- **Line 34:** "red," "rays"
- **Line 36:** "May," "meet my memory"
- **Line 37:** "clouds," "curlews"
- **Line 38:** "Hearing," "horizons"

REPETITION

"The Horses" uses several instances of repetition to create moments of intensity.

Early in the poem, the anaphora of "Not a leaf, not a bird" underscores just how *empty* the environment surrounding the speaker really is. Likewise, the repetition in the speaker's description of the horses—who are "making no move" and "Making no sound"—emphasizes just how still and silent the animals are. And when the speaker calls the horses "Grey silent fragments // Of a grey silent world," the diacope highlights just how soundless and dim the landscape is at this hour, as well as the idea that the horses are just *one piece* of a vast, imposing natural world.

Later in the poem, the speaker describes how the horses are *still* unmoving and silent, in language that closely, but not exactly, repeats language from earlier in the poem: "[t]heir draped stone manes, their tilted hind-hooves"; "still they made no sound"; "[n]ot one snorted or stamped." These near-repetitions emphasize that, though the sun has risen and the horses are just beginning to stir, they are fundamentally the same as they were before. The animals' unchanging, patient, steadfast nature inspires the speaker to compare them to the "horizons" themselves.

The speaker's solace at "hearing the curlews, / Hearing the horizons endure," with its poignant repetition of the word "hearing," grows out of the natural world's beauty and mystery—but also out of nature's ability to repeat itself, cyclically, seemingly without end.

In the speaker's description of the sunrise, a special type of repetition called epizeuxis contributes to the moment's particular intensity. The immediate repetition of the word "red" in "[o]range, red, red erupted" vividly communicates the abundance, suddenness, and richness of color the speaker witnesses as the sun peaks above the horizon. The ecstatic intensity of this moment, in turn, prepares the speaker to re-encounter the unchanging horses, which leads to the moving, wishful emotions at the poem's end.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Not a leaf, not a bird—"
- **Line 10:** "making no move,"
- **Line 11:** "With draped manes and tilted hind-hooves,"
- **Line 12:** "Making no sound."
- **Line 13:** "not one snorted"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Grey silent fragments / Of a grey silent world."
- **Line 19:** "Orange, red, red erupted"
- **Line 29:** "Their draped stone manes, their tilted hind-hooves"
- **Lines 31-32:** "But still they made no sound. / Not one snorted or stamped,"
- **Lines 37-38:** "hearing the curlews, / Hearing the horizons endure."

ENJAMBMENT

Most of the lines in "The Horses" are end-stopped, meaning they end with a period, comma, dash, or some other piece of punctuation. These end-stopped lines reflect the overall sense of cold, silence, and stillness that permeates much of the poem. For example, the hard stop at the end of line 3 ("Not a leaf, not a bird—") highlights the stark emptiness of the natural setting that surrounds the speaker.

That said, a few lines in the poem are enjambed; the way these lines continue into the next without pause emphasizes motion, change, and moments of special emotional intensity.

Consider line 4, the first enjambed line in the poem, which marks a significant change when the speaker comes "out above the wood":

> A world cast in frost. I came out above the wood
> Where my breath left tortuous statues in the iron
> light.

It's appropriate that the first major change in setting, which involves the speaker literally walking from one place (the woods) to another (the moor-ridge), would be marked by an enjambment that mirrors the speaker's motion.

In even more dramatic fashion, the rising sun is marked by two successive enjambments (lines 18–20):

> Slowly detail leafed from the darkness. Then the sun
> Orange, red, red erupted
> Silently, and splitting to its core tore and flung cloud,

These create, again, a powerful sense of motion (the sun is literally rising) as well as a feeling of opening, eruption, and even explosion—all appropriate to the speaker's vivid imagery describing the sunrise.

The enjambment at the end of line 36 is more subtle. Instead of mirroring literal motion or a sudden burst of light and drama, the smooth connection between the stanzas creates a moment of poignant, deeply felt sincerity. The speaker's wish to "still meet my memory in so lonely a place // Between the streams and red clouds" gains heartfelt tenderness—and perhaps even a sense of gentle, moving desperation—from extending over the line and stanza break.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "wood / Where"
- **Lines 6-7:** "darkness / Till"
- **Lines 14-15:** "fragments / Of"
- **Lines 18-19:** "sun / Orange"
- **Lines 19-20:** "erupted / Silently"
- **Lines 23-24:** "turned / Stumbling"
- **Lines 24-25:** "towards / The"
- **Lines 29-30:** "hind-hooves / Stirring"
- **Lines 30-31:** "them / The"
- **Lines 36-37:** "place / Between"

VOCABULARY

Frost-making (Line 2) - Cold enough to produce ice crystals in the air.

Tortuous (Line 5) - Painful; twisting and turning.

Moorline (Line 7) - The edge of the moor, an expanse of open, rolling, sometimes boggy land, especially in northern England. In this case, the moor's edge marks the horizon, dividing the "sky ahead" in half.

Dregs (Line 7) - The last remnants of something. Here, the moor is the last of the darkness, which the speaker contrasts with the "brightening grey" of the sky.

Megalith (Line 10) - A large stone, like those at Stonehenge, often used by ancient cultures for worship or other purposes. The speaker compares the horses to megaliths to emphasize their primordial, seemingly ancient qualities.

Hind-hooves (Line 11) - The back hooves of the horses, which are angled.

Moor-ridge (Line 16) - The raised, plateau-like area overlooking the moor where the speaker stands.

Curlew (Line 17) - A brown bird, related to the sandpiper, with long legs and a long bill. The curlew, which commonly nests in moorlands in Scotland and northern England, is famous for its piercing two-note call.

Tear (Line 17) - The piercing two-note call of the curlew, which sounds mournful to many listeners. The pun implies both the call's sadness and also how it rips, or tears, the silence in an almost violent way.

Leafed (Line 18) - Emerged or grew organically. The word emphasizes how the detail of the natural world almost seems alive to the speaker.

Kindling (Line 25) - Small sticks or twigs. Here, the word indicates the tops of the trees.

Steaming (Line 28) - The horses are giving off steam, or water vapor, because the light of the sun is melting the frost that covers them.

Fires (Line 31) - The glistening, bright reflection of the sunlight on the frost.

Levelling (Line 34) - Implies that the rays of sunlight travel in a uniform, level way—but also that the light falls on everything (the trees, the horses, the frost, the speaker) equally. Before the beauty and grandeur of the sun, everything is placed on an equal plane or playing field.

Din (Line 35) - Chaotic noise, in this case referring to a city, probably London.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Horses" is written in free verse couplets: two-line stanzas with no regular meter or rhyme scheme. The use of couplets makes the poem appear longer on the page; it stretches the speaker's descriptions out and fills the poem with blank space, evoking the stillness, silence, and isolation of the pre-dawn natural world.

In two instances, one line of the couplet is broken apart, creating two half-lines. This is the case with lines 14-15 ("Grey silent [...] silent world") and lines 26–27 ("And came to the

horses [...] they stood,"). These breaks create moments of special intensity, adding yet more space and silence to the poem.

METER

"The Horses" doesn't follow any particular meter. Its couplets are written in free verse, and the lines vary in length from quite short (line 23 has only two words: "I turned") to fairly long. Free verse keeps the poem's language feeling meditative and intimate, as though readers are getting a glimpse into the speaker's mind.

RHYME SCHEME

Again, "The Horses" is written in free verse. As such, it doesn't have a regular rhyme scheme. As with the poem's lack of meter, the lack of regular rhyme keeps things feeling intimate and unpredictable. A steady rhyme scheme would likely feel overly stiff and controlled for a subdued poem that marvel's at nature's stately, serene beauty.

That said, there are a few isolated, subtle instances of rhyme that contribute to the poem's sonic texture and emotional richness. There's a subtle end rhyme between "move" in line 10 and "hooves" in line 11, for example. And there's an internal rhyme in line 20 as the speaker describes the rising sun "splitting to its core tore and flung cloud." The close chime between "core" and "tore" produces a moment of extraordinary intensity that reflects the breathtaking beauty of the sunrise. The internal rhyme also highlights the almost violent nature of the sun, which the speaker describes as erupting, splitting, tearing and flinging, and shaking. Though the speaker finds the sunrise beautiful, the poem also acknowledges the awesome, raw power of nature.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Horses" is never identified by age, gender, appearance, or any other characteristic. It's clear, however, that the speaker is an early riser (at least on the morning the poem takes place!) and appreciates being in the natural world. This person climbs a wooded hill before "dawn" and finds beauty in both the icy, silent darkness and in the vibrant colors and stirring warmth of the sunrise.

When the speaker imagines a future moment "[i]n din of crowded streets," it's clear that this vision of the city is less than pleasant. The speaker prefers the solitude, quiet, and beautiful mystery of nature to the hustle and bustle of city streets. That preference explains the speaker's wish to "still meet my memory" of this life-changing morning on the moors. The speaker's memory of nature's beauty acts, in some sense, as a talisman against the potentially corrupting or depressing effects of the city.

It's possible, though by no means necessary, to take the speaker of "The Horses" as being Ted Hughes himself. Hughes grew up in the Yorkshire moors, so the natural setting of "The Horses" would've been familiar to him. In fact, he may well have been thinking of a particular place when he wrote the poem, though it's impossible to know for sure. Hughes also had a lifelong passion for nature and especially animals.

SETTING

"The Horses" takes place during the speaker's early morning walk through a rural, isolated landscape. When the poem begins, the sun has yet to rise: it's "the hour-before-dawn." The speaker climbs up a thickly wooded hill and looks down on the still-dark valleys below. The world is "cast in frost," icy, silent, and, importantly, utterly still: the speaker repeatedly points out the complete lack of motion. Eventually, the sun rises, revealing more detail as its vivid colors illuminate the landscape. The gray sky becomes blue as the sun burns away the clouds. The lush beauty of this natural setting, as contrasted with the harsh "din" of the city, brings the speaker solace.

Though the poem never specifies as much, it's likely that "The Horses" takes place in, or was at least inspired by, the Yorkshire moors where Ted Hughes spent his childhood. A moor is an open area of uncultivated land, often on a large, elevated plateau; it's sometimes also called a heath. In the North York Moors, today a national park in the United Kingdom, there are wide expanses of heather, a type of evergreen shrub, and many valleys, woodland areas, and hills and overlooks—much like the terrain the speaker traverses in "The Horses." Moreover, the presence of the curlew, which primarily favors moorlands, grasslands, and bogs in Scotland and northern England, makes it likely that the poem is set somewhere in Yorkshire. It's even possible that Hughes had a particular place (a specific wood and moor-ridge) in mind, though it's impossible to say.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Horses" was published in 1957 in Ted Hughes's first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain*. The book garnered immediate acclaim and became a major turning point in English poetry, especially in the U.K., where it found a wide readership and continues to influence contemporary poets.

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 nature, 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.

"The Horses" plays with a classic Romantic trope: an emotional speaker recalling the quiet, peaceful countryside in the middle of the noisy city. When the speaker hopes to "meet my memory" of the beautiful sunrise on the moors "in so lonely a place" as a bustling city (likely London), Hughes may be alluding specifically to Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," whose speaker similarly recalls his sweet memories of nature "'mid the din / Of towns and cities." Hughes may also be thinking of Yeats's "Lake Isle of Innisfree," whose speaker dreams of building a small cabin in nature while standing "on the roadway, or on the pavements grey."

Hughes's early work was also a reaction to the Movement, a group of English writers including Philip Larkin, Donald Davie, and Kingsley Amis that emphasized Englishness and tradition while rejecting what they saw as the romantic excesses of poets such as Dylan Thomas. Hughes's inventive, expansive use of alliteration and rhythm—especially the incantatory, sensuous, and indeed romantic style on display in poems like "The Horses"—was a reaction against the polite, polished verse of the Movement poets.

Finally, Hughes was also 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.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though the setting of "The Horses" isn't clearly identified, the poem—like many others in *The Hawk in the Rain*—is undoubtedly influenced by Ted Hughes's childhood in the Yorkshire Moors, where he was surrounded by woods, animals, and the bounty of nature. Hughes had a lifelong affection for animals and was a serious fisherman, and nature remained a powerful influence on, and presence in, his work throughout his life.

"The Horses" was also written at a time of transition and uncertainty in the U.K. World War II had been won at a heavy cost, and the economic, social, political, and literary contrasts between urban centers, especially London, and the countryside were becoming increasingly stark. Moreover, the colonial legacy of the U.K. had come under increased scrutiny, and British intellectuals and artists sought, in many cases, to define what it meant to write in English while reevaluating the global position of both the British Empire and the English language itself.

This context may have spurred Hughes's desire to dig deep into the history of the language and revive a primordial, elemental, perhaps purer mode of English poetry.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of "The Horses." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9V14VIGB_oY)
- Who Was Ted Hughes? — A short biography from the Academy of American Poets. (https://poets.org/poet/ted-hughes)
- The Hawk in the Rain — A short discussion of Hughes's first book, in which "The Horses" appeared, by scholar Heather Clark. (http://thetedhughessociety.org/hawk)
- Ted Hughes at Cambridge — A video exploring Hughes's connection to Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he studied myths and legends as a student. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKMaeZ7Q1IM)
- Poets in Love: Hughes and Sylvia Plath — Frieda Hughes discusses the love, complicated relationship, and poetic legacy of her parents, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ze5p9B_XtY)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER TED HUGHES POEMS

- A Picture of Otto
- Bayonet Charge
- Cat and Mouse
- Football at Slack
- Hawk Roosting
- Relic
- Roe-Deer
- Snowdrop
- Telegraph Wires
- The Harvest Moon
- The Jaguar
- The Other
- The Thought Fox
- Wind

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