

"The Thought Fox" by Ted Hughes

The Thought-Fox

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:
Something else is alive
Beside the clock's loneliness
And this blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star:
Something more near
though deeper within darkness
Is entering the loneliness:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow
A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;
Two eyes serve a movement, that now
And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow
Between trees, and warily a lame
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,
A widening deepening greenness,
Brilliantly, concentratedly,
Coming about its own business

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox,
It enters the dark hole of the head.
The window is starless still; the clock ticks,
The page is printed.

Analysis

'The Thought-Fox' has a special place among Ted Hughes's early poems. Although it wasn't the first poem in *The Hawk in the Rain* (Hughes's first collection, published in 1957) he later moved it to first place in his *Selected Poems*. It is at least partly a poem about writing poetry – one might say about poetic inspiration. In his collection of radio

talks, *Poetry in the Making*, he wrote that he composed it after writing nothing for a year. So we might see the fox as representing the renewal of the poet's imaginative powers. We should be cautious about accepting everything Hughes writes about his own poetry. In *Poetry in the Making* he also writes that 'The Thought-Fox' was 'the first "animal" poem I ever wrote'.^[1] It wasn't: he had written and published 'The Jaguar' the previous year. But this does show us that he thought the poem was especially important. When he read it in public he used to introduce it by telling the audience about a dream he had had two years before writing it, when studying English at Cambridge. He believed that academic study of literature stifled his creativity, and in the dream a burnt and bloody fox, the size of a man with human hands, entered his room, put a bloody hand on the essay he was writing and said, 'Stop this – you are destroying us.'^[2] When he wrote 'The Thought-Fox', he may not have been thinking about this dream at all, but it is significant that he later made the connection.

The Thought Fox is a six stanza poem, all quatrains, with one or two full end rhymes and hints of slant rhyme here and there. There is no set metre (in US meter) but through careful use of punctuation and **enjambment** (where one line runs into another without losing the sense) the rhythms of the fox as it moves onto the page come through.

Set in the present, this poem entices the reader in to an intimate midnight world that is not quite real and not quite imagination. The poet, the speaker, is all alone near the window with just the clock ticking.

In his mind there are stirrings, *something else is alive* and very close but it is deep within the interior, perhaps in the subconscious, almost an abstract entity. The only way to coax it out is with words, conscious living words.

Tone/Atmosphere

The tone is one of mystery and dream-like suspension; the speaker is alone so all is quiet as the imagined time of midnight approaches. It's dark. Just what is this person up to as they move from the mind to the real world and back again?

The atmosphere is pregnant with anticipation in the first two stanzas. Something is *entering the loneliness* but the reader isn't given explicit details, in fact, this is not an objective look at a fox at all.

- This fox, this hybrid thought-fox, is subjected to the quiet will of the poet who slowly but surely draws the fox out of the imagination and onto the page in an almost magical fashion.

Detailed Analysis

The Thought-Fox touches on the mystery of creation and brings to the reader the idea that the act of creating, in this case the writing of a poem, is sparked by something beyond time and space.

The first two stanzas set the scene. They suggest that within the loneliness and darkness is a life process, an energy that exists and moves instinctively into time. It has no form or shape or consciousness at this moment. The poet has to write it into reality.

The **alliterative** soft consonant **m** is gentle (and similar to the first line of the *The Windhover* by Gerard Manley Hopkins) and compliments the repeated *loneliness, the deeper within darkness*. Note too the long vowels that stretch out time as the consciousness awakens.

In the third stanza the **soft consonant d** and skilfully placed punctuation, help keep the pace and rhythm slow. The reader knows something is

about to appear but is uncertain until line 2 when the fox's nose manifests, smelling a twig, a leaf in the imaginary forest.

This is a wonderful image. The dark snow is the blank page; the poetic energy is about to be released, is being released. But both silence and solitude are necessary for the words to form, for the fox to make progress.

Ted Hughes chose to use the fox as the poetic impulse because it was a creature close to his heart, a symbolic guide. The flow and rhythm of the latter part of the poem capture the silky movements, the light measured skips, the quick trot of the now lively fox.

The third stanza beautifully reflects the careful steps the fox has to make, as now repeats four times and the reader is taken along into the fourth stanza with the tracks already being 'printed' in the snow.

Imagery intensifies as the shadow of the fox, the poetic doubt, makes progress through the snowy wood, slowing down, being wary, then bold and always instinctive. This is the poem as the mind and finger construct it out of imaginary material, the personified fox transformed into words that seem to form of their own accord.

And the poet's vision finally, unmistakably becomes one with the page as the darkness of the mind and Reynard meet once again, the senses alive with *a sudden sharp hot stink of fox*, the real world left none the wiser as the poem is crafted.

Ted Hughes is popularly known for the use of animal imagery. The title of the poem itself is loaded with animal imagery where the fox is compared with the thought process of a writer before composing something great. Both for the fox to make a move and for the thought to

be released, they need silence and solitude. The measured and quick steps of the fox is the process of contemplative writing, and the use of 'now' for the four times focuses on the careful steps a fox takes before entering into the head of the poet. This process beautifully connotes the forming of the thought more clear and concrete. The shadow of the fox is becoming more clear and clear and its advancement through the snowy woods, leaving the foot print beautifully and artistically states that the dim thought is now clear and it is being printed in white paper. The white snow with the foot print stand for the blank paper printed with the poetic creation of the poet.