

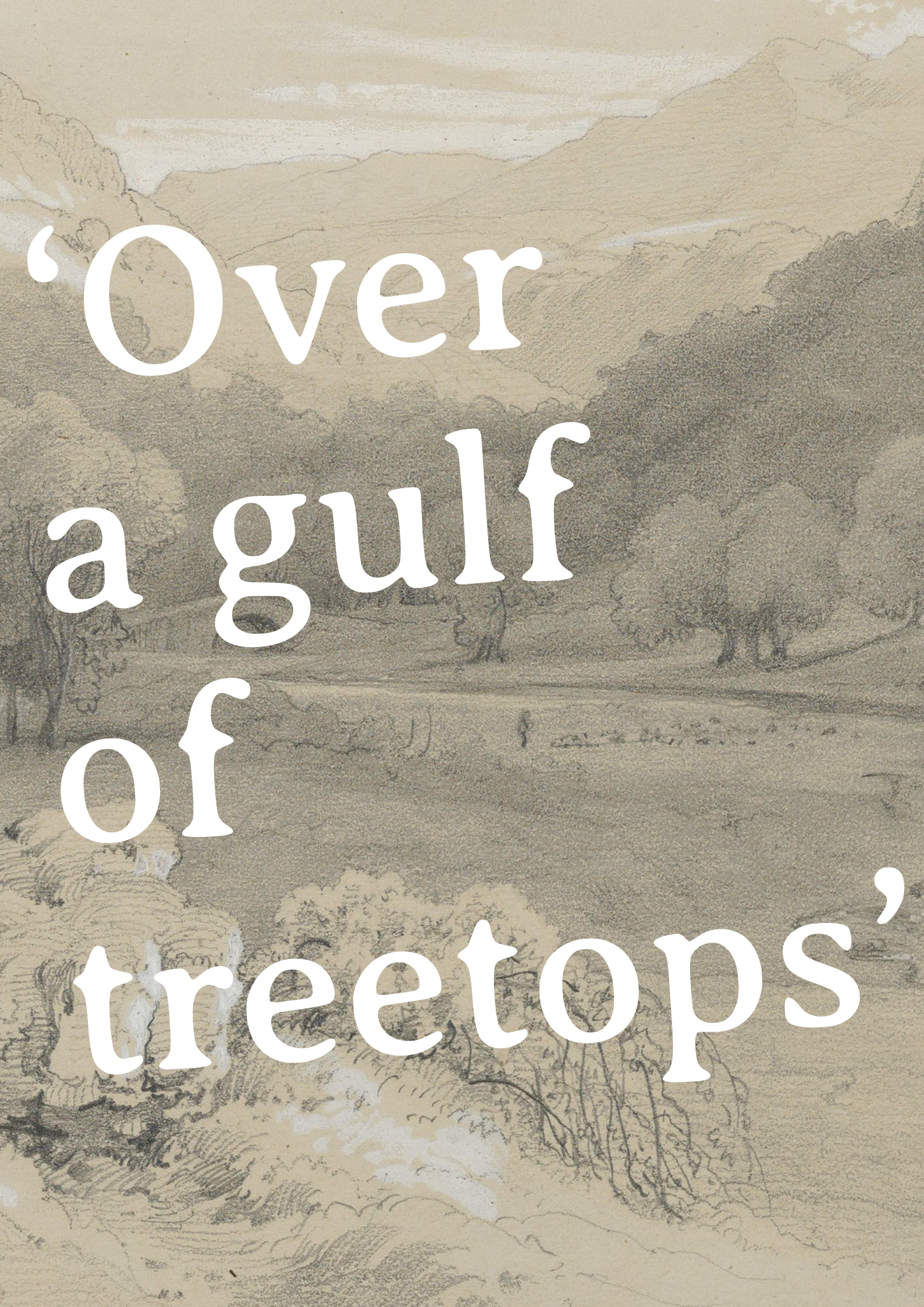
A black and white photograph of several football players sitting on a bench. The player in the center is wearing a dark vest over a light-colored shirt and has his arms crossed. The image is used as a background for the book cover.

Revision Guide

# Football at Slack

Ted Hughes

*Scrbply.*



‘Over  
a gulf  
of  
treetops’

# Football at Slack

## Ted Hughes

'Between plunging valleys, on a bareback of hill  
Men in bunting colours  
Bounced, and their blown ball bounced.'

*(Full poem unable to be reproduced due to copyright restrictions)*

## VOCABULARY

**Slack** – characterised by idleness, activity that lacks seriousness. Also the quality of being loose or not held tightly

**Plunging** – pushing inwards, or falling fast

**Bareback** - on an unsaddled donkey, horse, or other animal;

**Bunting** – cloth flags used as decoration

**Merry-coloured** – jovial, extreme delight

**Sprouted** – develop; appear suddenly and in large numbers - like a plant growing

**Downwind** - in the direction of the wind

**Rubbery** – elastic, like rubber. Able to bend out shape and then return to the previous form.

**Gulf** - A deep ravine

**Fiery** – Fearsome, volatile

**Glooms** – depressed mood; partial or total darkness

**Steel press** – a force to be reckoned with

**Plastered** – stuck on

**Tread** – to step on something, past tense: trod

**Glitter** – radiant, shimmering with reflected light

**Bobbed** – to appear and disappear, moving up and down

**Humped** – arched, deformed, curved

**Atlantic Depression:** a technical weather term that describes where the Atlantic sea air meets north sea air across the UK. Also symbolic of vastness and emotional depression

**Wingers** – attacking players who play down the sidelines in a football match

**Bicycled** – A football technique where a player jumps backwards to kick the ball behind them over their head

**Holocaust** – Forceful invasion or massacre

## STORY + SUMMARY

Between deep valleys, on a bare patch of hilly grassland, men wearing bright colours bounced about playing football, just as their ball bounced in the wind.

The inflated ball flew, and the brightly-coloured men jumped like water spouts, trying to head it up into the air. Someone kicked the ball downhill, and the faster men ran after it. The ball jumped up and hung in the wind, looking like it would blow off the field. They all shouted together, and the ball fell back towards them.

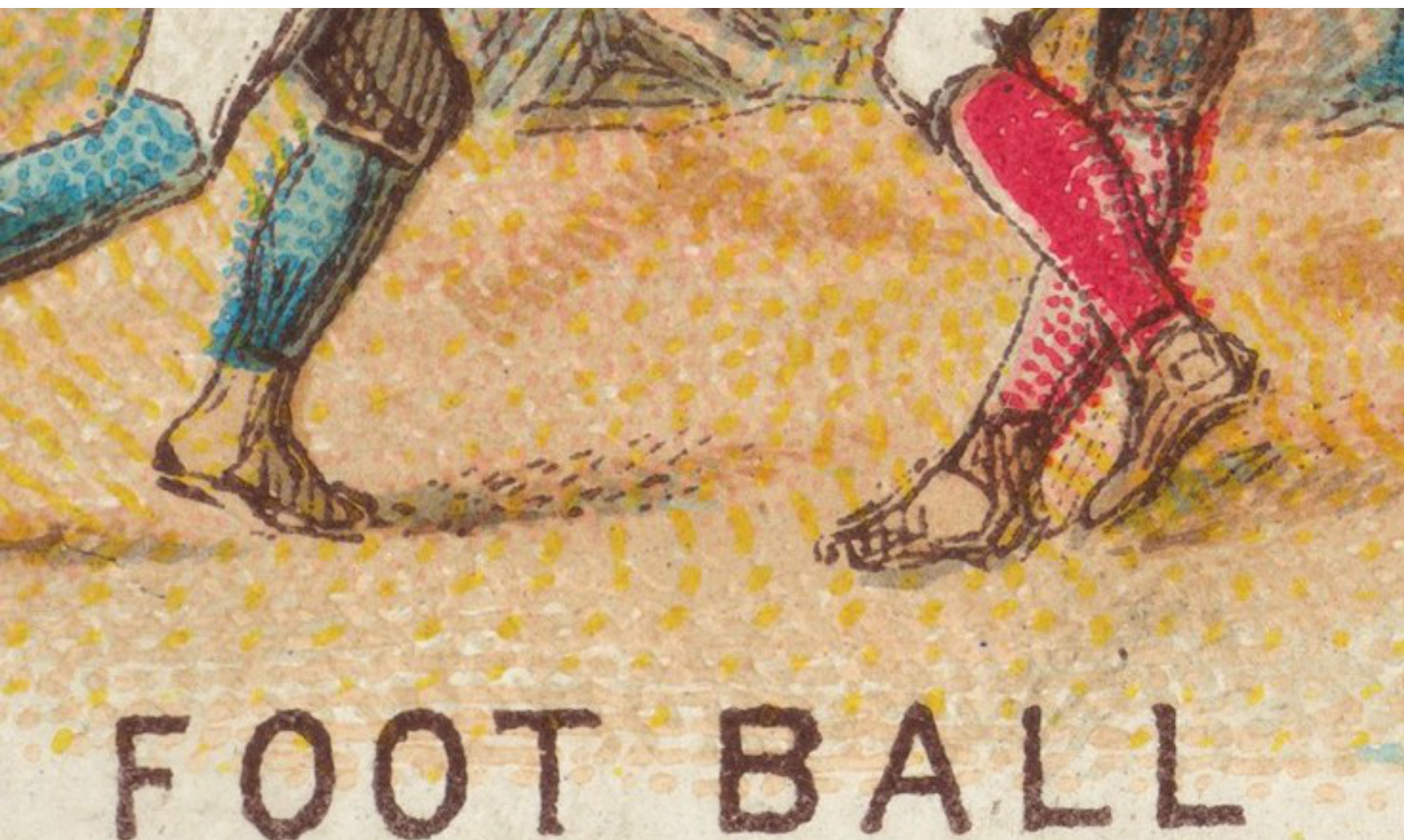
A burst of wind through the gaps in the clouds gathered in the hills, darkening the clouds, made them feel a sense of shock and awe. The sharp light mixed with the darkness like a painting and then heavy rain fell down, pressing on them.

Their hair was glued to their skin; they all splashed in the water, stirring puddles. And their shouts rose, sounding fine but tired, washed and happy.

While the hills around them turned into mire and the landscape of the valleys turned blue and strangely different, under the Atlantic air bringing the rainy weather.

But the wide forward players still leapt and manoeuvred in the air, and the goalkeeper flew horizontally - he was diving to save the ball from getting into the net.

Afterwards, the golden sun swept away the dark and rainy weather, as it peeked through the clouds like it was watching them.





## SPEAKER + VOICE

'Football at Slack' is centred around an amateur football match. The speaker, using **third person omniscient perspective**, lays out the setting - he describes the rugged hills and dramatic weather, as well as the behaviour of the soccer players. The players seem to be enjoying the match immensely in spite of the difficult weather; this shows their classic sportsmanship and positive attitudes.

At first, the speaker focuses on the ball, just as a professional videographer of a match would zoom in on the action. The speaker uses a range of verbs at this point, such as the repetition of "bounced" and "jumped". These serve to keep the momentum of the poem going, like the movement of the ball in the match itself.

The speaker uses **pastoral, idyllic imagery**, which romanticises life in the countryside. The players don't get tired or angry, even when the weather throws "glooms" on them. Instead, the speaker even draws attention to the players' unity in wanting to get the ball back in play when it nearly leaves the field - "they all shouted together". It seems as though the players care less about teams and winning than they do about the enjoyment of the experience.

Hughes portrays nature (or specifically, the weather) as a force that is difficult and contrary sometimes, but also impressive and awe inspiring . The rain, which comes unexpectedly, causes no discomfort to the players. The speaker describes the rain as a "steel press" as the sky "mixed its mad oils" and the world seems as if it's "under the depth of Atlantic depression" - these are all dark, oppressive images. In spite of the difficult weather, the players are happy - they "[tread] the water to puddle glitter", look "washed and happy" and wear "merry-coloured" clothes.

# LANGUAGE

**Personification:** The weather is personified throughout 'Football at Slack'. For example, the sky "mixed its mad oils" and "threw glooms", dropping rain like a "steel press". The metaphorical language helps the reader visualise the sky's colours and the way they change as it starts to rain, as well as demonstrating the dangerous and oppressive atmosphere that is created by the shift in weather.

**Pastoral Imagery:** Pastoral art (both writing and painting) depicts the countryside as a beautiful, fun and perfect place to live - showing county folk as simple, happy people who are in touch with the natural world. Pastoral painters often put shepherds and rural working people into focus in this kind of art, so comparing the sky to a painter's oils creates an allusion to pastoral art in general.

**Dynamic Verbs:** The poem is characterised by an extravagant **use of verbs**. For example, the first stanza contains three **dynamic verbs** – "plunging", "bounced", "bounce". These verbs are directly related to sporting action and they effectively describe the football match.

The second stanza also contains **three verbs** – "jumped", "sprouted" and "blew"; the fourth stanza has **five verbs**, including "darkening" and "threw". Other notable **verbs** that appear in the text are "flew", "bobbed", and "foundering".

**Repetition:** The speaker employs **alliteration and repetition** together throughout the first three stanzas. For example the phrase "blown ball bounced" creates a **repetition** of the "b" sound in close succession, almost becoming **onomatopoeia** as it is echoing the sound of the ball bouncing around.

**TASK: Analyse the following language features, exploring how and why they are used in the poem:**

**Personification:**

"The glare light / Mixed its mad oils and threw glooms."

**Visual imagery:**

" the wingers leapt, they bicycled in air / And the goalie flew horizontal"

**Metaphor:**

"a golden holocaust / Lifted the cloud's edge, to watch them."



## STRUCTURE + FORM

**Form:** Football at Slack has **eight stanzas** and uses a **free-verse** structure, so it does not adhere to a fixed rhyme scheme. This freedom allows the poem to have **irregular line lengths**, representing the chaotic and unpredictable nature of the football game and the weather.

**Dash** - “The ball blew away downwind – // The rubbery men bounced after it.” - the dash and subsequent **stanza break** demonstrate the movement of the ball as it blows away in the air, creating space in the poem that is evocative of the ball’s trajectory.

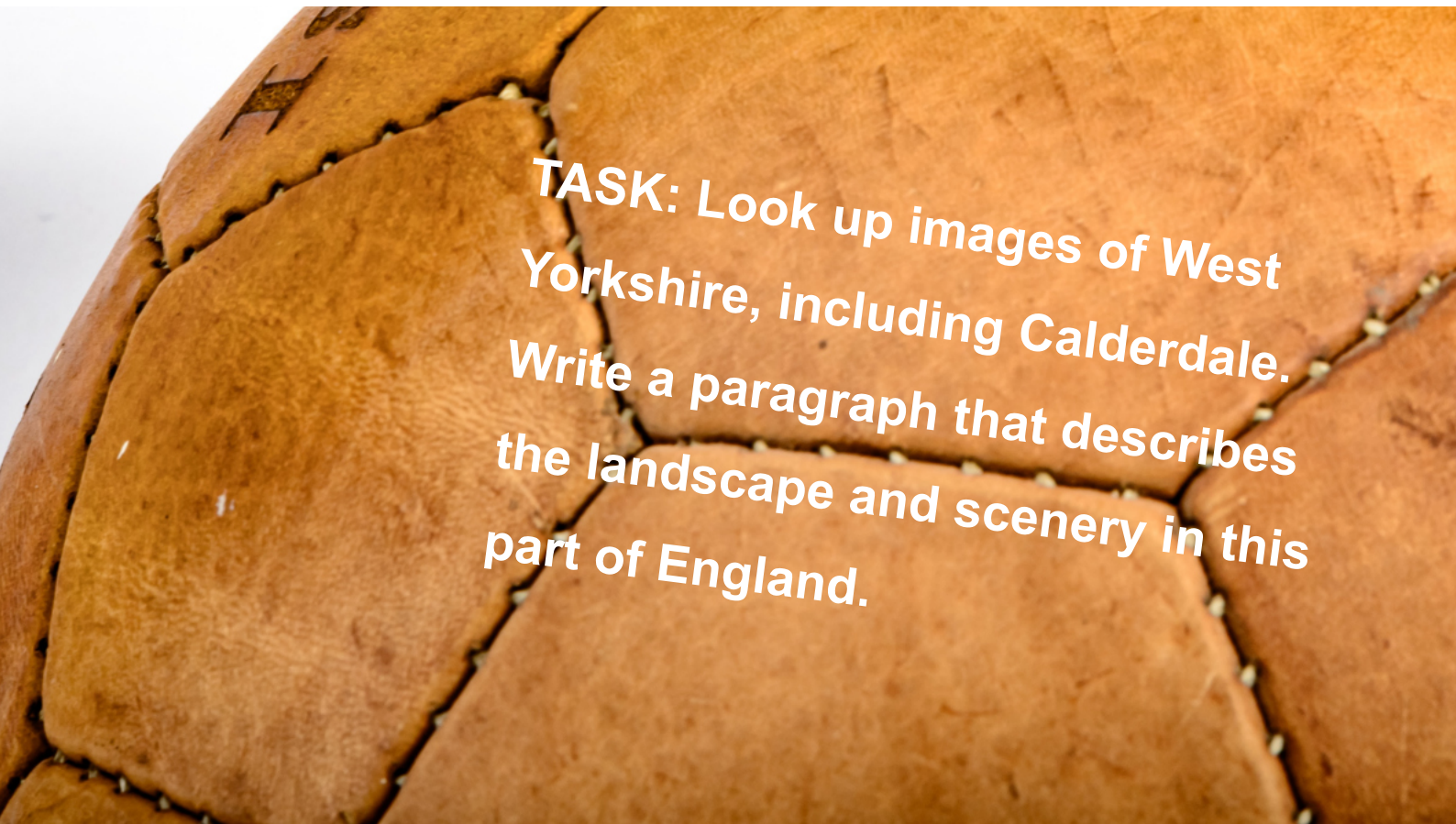
**Couplet** - the final two lines of the poem create a couplet - a two line stanza - which neatly closes the scene. They also **shift focus** from the players to to the sky, which seems to be watching the game too, as a form of entertainment.

## CONTEXT

Ted Hughes (1930-1998) is one of England's most celebrated modern poets. *Football at Slack* was published in the collection *Remains of Elmet* in 1979. This was when Hughes was in his middle age, so he probably wasn't able to play much football himself - which may have influenced the speaker's views on the game in the poem. The speaker is a spectator in the poem, who watches the game with interest rather than participating in it himself.

Some literary critics have proposed that the exact location of the poem is probably in a village in Calderdale, West Yorkshire. Ted Hughes himself grew up in Yorkshire in Northern England. It appears that the poem could be a reminiscence of a childhood event.

One thing that might be interesting to note, is that English football was in trouble in the late 1970s when *Football at Slack* was published. Throughout the decade there were a lot of violent fans (called hooligans) at football matches. This would have been in the newspapers over the years before this poem was published. So by looking back at the past history of football as a game of camaraderie, and portraying football players and the sport as a happy and noble activity, Hughes could be reflecting on the changes that had happened to the sport during his life. He may also be encouraging readers to get back to a time when football was a fun, social sport - rather than one that promoted animosity and violence.



**TASK:** Look up images of West Yorkshire, including Calderdale. Write a paragraph that describes the landscape and scenery in this part of England.





## ATTITUDES

**Sports are ultimately a bit of fun, but also an important part of human experience:** Hughes maintains the joyful and humorous tone throughout *Football at Slack* - when talking about the players at least. It has echoes of a modern pastoral poem, romanticising the players and their team unity. Even as the intense weather rages around them, they stay happy and joyful. They all shout together, even under the pressing concern of the rain. And, in the end, the sun comes back out to watch them.

**Nature is a powerful force to be respected:** While the men are shouting at the ball, the skies change in favour of a heavy downpour. The use of the phrases 'mad oils' and 'fiery holes in heaven' portray the intensity of the moment effectively.

**Enjoy the moment, whatever it brings:** The poem suggests we should learn to enjoy the things of the present wholeheartedly. Even through the storm the "wingers leapt" and "bicycled in the air". Human nature will constantly encounter storms, floods or raging waters - but we have to try and enjoy the world and have fun anyway.



## **TASK**

Pick two of these themes, make a mind map and add four separate quotations from the story that relate to it. Make short notes of analysis, explaining how and why each one relates to your theme. What, in your opinion, is the author's final message or statement about each theme that you chose?

## **THEMES**

**Man and Nature**

**Sports and sportspeople**

**Football**

**Memories**

**Weather**

**Fun and Joy**

**Identity**

**Unity and teamwork**

**Storms and rain**

**Different perceptions**

## EXERCISES

1. List 10 verbs in the poem 'Football at Slack'. Why do you think the poet used so many? Which one is your favourite, and why?
2. What is the impact of repetition in the poem 'Football at Slack'?
3. Why would we expect the speaker and players to be depressed when it starts to rain, and why do they remain happy?
4. Explore your own experience of playing a sport. Try to describe the game or match in detail, using lots of imagery.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. "The result of the match was not important to the speaker of this poem." To what extent do you agree or disagree with that statement? Give your reasons.
2. Examine the ways in which the speaker used humorous, childlike or whimsical imagery in the poem 'Football at Slack'.
3. Compare the presentation of sport and sport players in Football at Slack and one other poem you have studied. Think about language, themes and context.
4. How does Hughes powerfully create a sense of place through setting in 'Football at Slack' and one other poem from your collection?

**Find more English Literature and Language  
resources at [www.scrbbly.com](http://www.scrbbly.com)**