

Revision Guide



The Jaguar

Ted Hughes

Scrbblly.

A detailed illustration of a tiger in a cage. The tiger is shown in profile, looking towards the left. Its fur is a mix of orange, black, and white stripes. The cage is made of dark, textured bars. The background is a light, textured surface, possibly a wall or a backdrop. The overall style is that of a classic illustration, possibly from a children's book or a historical document.

‘but
there’s

no
cage

to him’

The Jaguar Ted Hughes

'The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun.
The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut
Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut.
Fatigued with indolence, tiger and lion'

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

VOCABULARY

Strut: To walk in a showy or eye-catching manner

Cheap tarts: A disparaging word in the United Kingdom that can refer to either promiscuous women who like sexual attention

Stroller: A person who walks by casually

Indolence: avoiding work or action; laziness

Boa-constrictor: a big snake that suffocates its victim by squeezing it

Nursery: A British term for preschool; it might also describe a typical child's room or playroom

Mesmerize: to thoroughly capture someone's attention such that they are unable to think about anything else

Fuse: a wire or rope that, when set on fire, ignites an explosion

Visionary: Someone with extraordinary ideas and insight - a prophet or free thinker that has a touch of genius and progressive opinions about the world

Stride: a lengthy step

Wildernesses: lands that are unoccupied by people



STORY + SUMMARY

The monkeys and chimps yawn and love picking their fleas in the sun. The parrots squawk and scream, as if they were on fire, or they walk around confidently like cheap women to attract a person who's passing by with a nut. Tired with laziness, tiger and lion

Lie still as the sun. The boa-constrictor's coil is a fossil. Cage after cage seems empty, or it stinks of sleeping animals who lie in the breathing straw. The scene before us might be painted on a nursery wall. But a person who runs like the rest of the people past these empty or sleepy cages arrives at a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized, like a child in a dream, at a jaguar hurrying angrily through prison darkness, following the drills of his eyes.

The jaguar is on a short fierce fuse. He is not bored — his eye satisfied and blind in fire, by the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear — He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him

There's no cage for him, any more than the visionary in his prison cell would feel like he was caged: the jaguar's stride represents wildernesses of freedom: The world rolls underneath the long thrust of his heel, over the cage floor as he walks around, the new horizons come to him.





SPEAKER + VOICE

The speaker uses a **third person omniscient** perspective to describe his visit to the zoo. He is a zoo visitor who has deep opinions about the personalities and existence of the animals there. The speaker mostly thinks that visiting the zoo is a boring experience. Most of the animals appear bored and dull, and are too exhausted from confinement even to move.

But the speaker's attitude changes when he runs to join a group of people who are "mesmerized" by the sight of the jaguar. The jaguar, like the others, fascinates the speaker, since this wild animal appears to defy the restrictions of its captivity.

The jaguar communicates an uncontrollable, powerful, natural energy that should be feared and respected, even though he is behind bars. A recurring theme in Hughes' poetry is his respect for ancient strength that is found in the power of nature, and the poem ends with Hughes' reverence for this power, which he sees as manifested by the jaguar - it is as if the magical power of nature works through the creature.

LANGUAGE

Visual imagery: ‘The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun’, ‘The parrots shriek as if they were on fire’ - the poem opens with a range of **visual and auditory images** to set the scene of the zoo. The characterisation of animals in this opening depicts them as bored and lazy, or a little distressed and confused - this **juxtaposes** them with the jaguar, who is majestic and powerful to a point where the bars do nothing to contain his power and confidence.

Repetition: “Cage after cage seems empty,” The poem uses repetition to convey the monotony of going past a range of disappointing cages, where animals are hiding or sleeping - this **builds suspense** for the moment where the jaguar appears.

Sibilance: “Stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw.” The hushed sibilance implies the whispery breath of sleeping animals.

Consonance: “As a child at a dream, at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged” The consonant sound /d/ is repeated several times in this line of the poem, and this makes a heavy, drumming effect in the line which conveys the thud of people’s feet as they rush to see the jaguar. Tripartite structure: ‘a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized,’ - the commas at the end of this sentence creates a compressed portrayal of ‘the crowd’, who are stunned by the beauty and power of the jaguar.

Simile: ‘As a child at a dream, at a dream,’ - the crowd are placed into a childlike state of awe and wonder - akin to the feeling of ‘The Sublime’. They are unable to respond to the jaguar, they just silently marvel at its strength and beauty. This is also reflected in the looping phrase ‘at a dream’, as if the jaguar’s magnetism draws in viewers without them being able to resist it.

TASK

Research the idea of ‘The Sublime’ in poetry, focusing on Romantic poets in particular. What is this phenomenon, and how does it apply to ‘The Jaguar’?



STRUCTURE + FORM

Regular structure: 'The Jaguar,' by Ted Hughes, is a five-stanza poem divided into four-line sections known as **quatrains**.

Rhyme scheme: There is **no rhyme scheme**, yet there are multiple **full rhymes** and **half-rhymes**. For instance, lines two and three in the first stanza, with "strut" and "nut," are full rhymes. At the same time, "straw" and "wall" are half-rhymes with the **long "a" vowel** sound in lines three and four of the second stanza. In lines one and two of the fourth stanza, there is another fascinating **half-rhyme** with "arrives" and "mesmerized.". The rhymes accentuate certain precise moments and images in the poem, and also at times give it a nursery-rhyme feeling - which mirrors the childlike state of the crowd as they watch the jaguar.

Metre: The poem lacks a precise metre, yet the lines are all of a similar length. It does, however, occasionally fall into **iambic rhythms**. Line 8 is in perfect iambic pentameter, which employs five iambs, metrical feet, and a da-DUM beat. "It **might** | be **paint-** | ed **on** | a **nurse-** | ry **wall**.". This again conveys the childlike atmosphere of the spectators at the zoo.

CONTEXT

"The Jaguar" was first published in Ted Hughes' debut poetry collection, *The Hawk In the Rain* (1957). The book was a critical and economic success, even though it was very different from the work of other poets at the time. Hughes' collection provided something more instinctual, primitive, and raw—perhaps more jaguar-like!

Hughes's wife, the American poet Sylvia Plath, believed that Hughes's poetry was "the richest and powerful since that of Yeats and Dylan Thomas," and critically acclaimed poems like "The Jaguar" signalled the beginning of a lengthy career. Hughes continued writing and publishing poems and stories up until his death in 1998.

Animals play an important role in Hughes' poetry, metaphorically reflecting the human psyche. The jaguar, for example, represents an ancient power manifested in the flesh. Hughes' poetry implicitly appreciates such energies—and it often argues that modern society frequently ignores them, whereas more ancient cultures and civilisations were personally in touch with the powers of the natural world. 'The Thought Fox' and 'The Hawk in the Rain', both from the same collection as 'The Jaguar', combine a literal admiration for the natural world with something deeper, more symbolic and more spiritual. Nature's raw, furious heart glows with wonder in Hughes' writings. Additionally, Hughes returned to jaguars several times in his work, including a later poem titled "Second Look at a Jaguar" and an unpublished poem titled "Jaguar Skin." The poem may also draw parallels with Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "The Panther," but Rilke's big cat is discouraged and "weary," and the jaguar appears full of life and anger.

TASK

Read 'The Tyger' by William Blake (a Romantic poet). What similarities and differences can you find between Blake's Tyger and Hughes' Jaguar?

Tyger, Tyger

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat.
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp.
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

William Blake

If you have time, read
a further three poems:
Hughes' **'Second
look at a Jaguar'**,
'Jaguar Skin', and
Rainer Maria Rilke's
'The Panther'.
Compare and contrast
the presentation of
the wild cat in all five
poems.

ATTITUDES

It is cruel to keep animals in captivity, for the benefit of humans: The poem seems to be a critique of the way in which we capture and force the natural world to suit our own ends; it implies that a zoo is not a suitable environment for wild species, as it causes animals to be bored, disaffected or stressed. The apes appear bored, the parrots seem anxious, and the tigers and lions appear tired. Overall, the zoo seems to take the wildness out of the creatures, leaving them very confused. The first two stanzas establish an overall mood of lethargy and disinterest. But, this is a ruse to set the stage for the future jaguar. The latter two stanzas are essentially situated in the speaker's mind as the poem imagines life from the flaming perspective of the jaguar.

The jaguar is a very different animal in the zoo: The speaker emphasises the fact that the jaguar is not like other animals in the zoo; all the others are content to sit or sleep all day, bored and hiding as they are accustomed to a lazy, caged life - even the other wildcats. In contrast, the jaguar is restless and always on the move, as if it knows it is not meant to be in captivity.

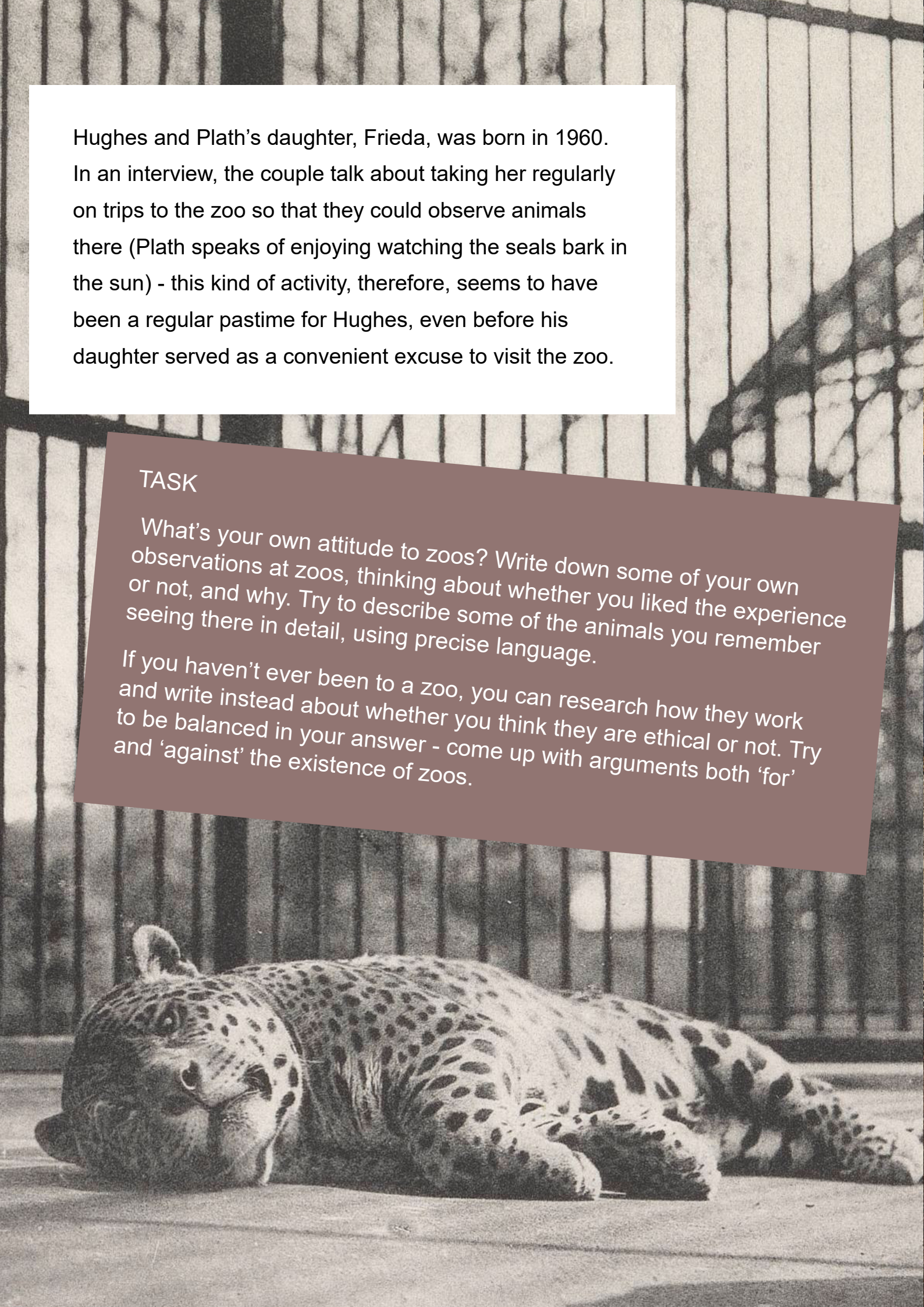
Jaguars have complex, ancient characteristics: The speaker encourages us to compare the jaguar to humans, who have lost their natural instincts and become too civilised. When the people are watching the jaguar, it is as if they are less powerful beings than it is. The speaker perhaps suggests that we need to be more like animals, which are more in tune with nature, to survive - the humans in the poem are depicted as infantile, moving in a 'crowd' almost mindlessly, whereas the jaguar stands majestically in command of them and their attention.

Freedom isn't just a physical condition: The poem starts with the jaguar in a zoo, pacing back and forth in its enclosure—the speaker states:

there's no cage to him

More than to the visionary his cell:
His stride is wildernesses of freedom

This implies that though the animal is physically confined, he is psychologically free - in tune with the universe around him, and comfortable in his magnetic power. He is like a 'visionary [in] his cell'. This implies that the genius or prophet who is physically trapped in a prison would be similar to the jaguar in his current state - though his body is confined, his mind is free to wander. When the jaguar is compared to a trapped human, Hughes is perhaps implying that there is a hierarchy in nature, and some beings with superior intellect or natural power react differently to others when trapped by a cage or prison.



Hughes and Plath's daughter, Frieda, was born in 1960. In an interview, the couple talk about taking her regularly on trips to the zoo so that they could observe animals there (Plath speaks of enjoying watching the seals bark in the sun) - this kind of activity, therefore, seems to have been a regular pastime for Hughes, even before his daughter served as a convenient excuse to visit the zoo.

TASK

What's your own attitude to zoos? Write down some of your own observations at zoos, thinking about whether you liked the experience or not, and why. Try to describe some of the animals you remember seeing there in detail, using precise language.

If you haven't ever been to a zoo, you can research how they work and write instead about whether you think they are ethical or not. Try to be balanced in your answer - come up with arguments both 'for' and 'against' the existence of zoos.



THEMES

The relationship between humans and nature

The cycle of life and death

The power of the natural world

The fragility of life

The beauty of nature

Romanticism

The Sublime

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?

TASK

Describe a jaguar, lion or tiger that you've seen - either in real life, or in film. Use poetic and descriptive language, as well as poetic features, to try and capture a feeling of the animal.

EXERCISES

1. What does the jaguar represent in Ted Hughes' poem "The Jaguar"?
2. What is the tone conveyed in the poem "The Jaguar" by Ted Hughes?
3. What key messages does the poet convey in the poem?
4. What are the characteristics that separate the jaguar from the rest of the animals in the zoo?



ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. To what extent does the poet convey ideas about freedom and captivity by describing the jaguar?
2. In what way does Hughes explore the power of nature in the poem?
3. How far can we feel sorry for the jaguar in the poem?

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