

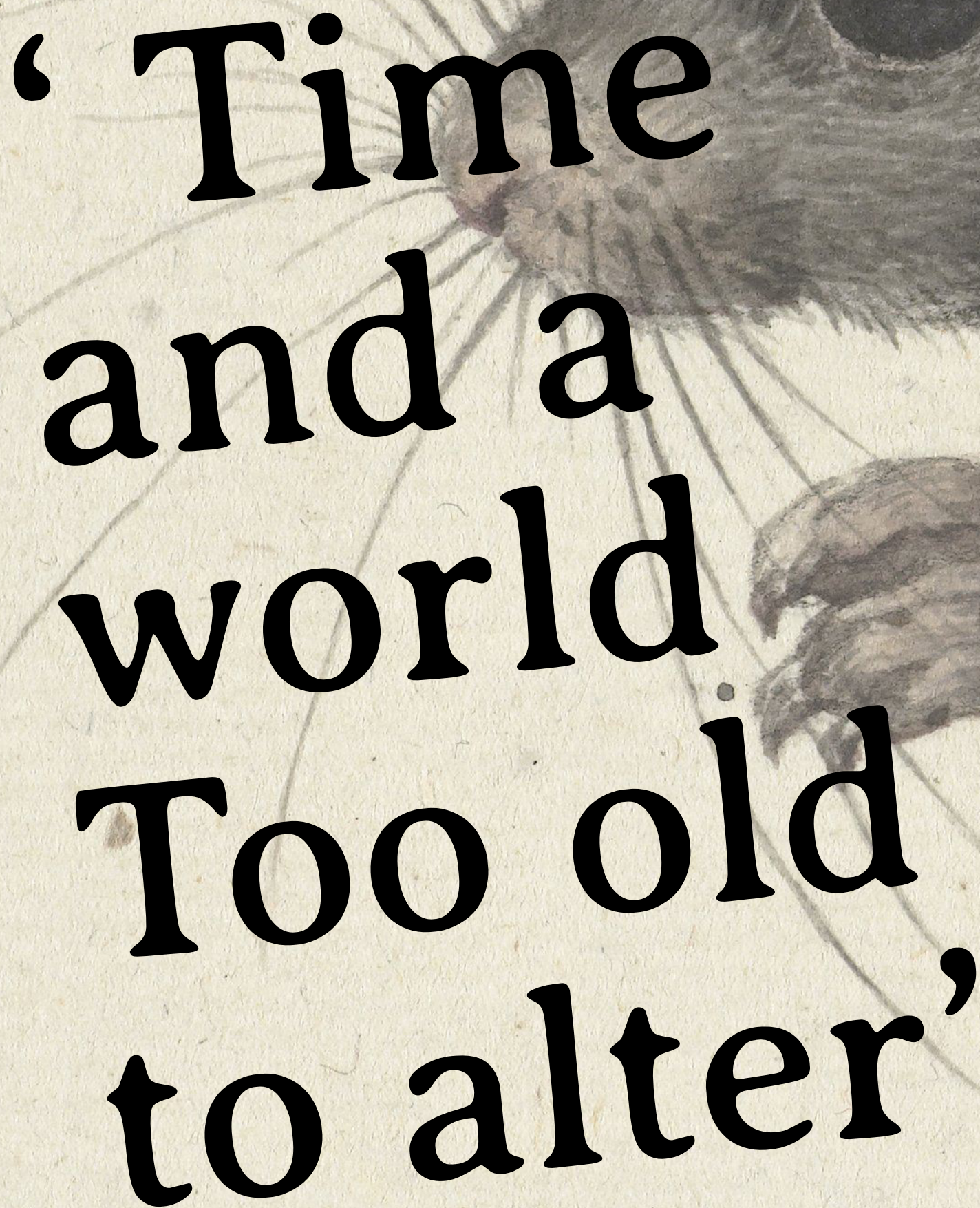
# Revision Guide

## Cat and Mouse

Ted Hughes

*Scribbly.*

C.B. 10/04



**'Time  
and a  
world  
Too old  
to alter'**



**Cat and Mouse**  
**Ted Hughes**

‘On the sheep-cropped summit, under hot sun,  
The mouse crouched, staring out the chance  
It dared not take.’

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

## VOCABULARY

**Crouch:** To bend close to the ground. Specifically used to refer to an animal preparing to spring or shrinking with fear

**Stupor:** A state of consciousness marked by decreased responsiveness to environmental stimuli and absence of spontaneous movement

**Summit:** The highest point of a hill or mountain

**Sheep-Cropped:** Grass eaten or kept short by sheep

## STORY + SUMMARY

On the hill where grass had been cropped by sheep grazing under the hot sun, the mouse bent close to the ground, staring out at the world, not daring to take a chance and run.

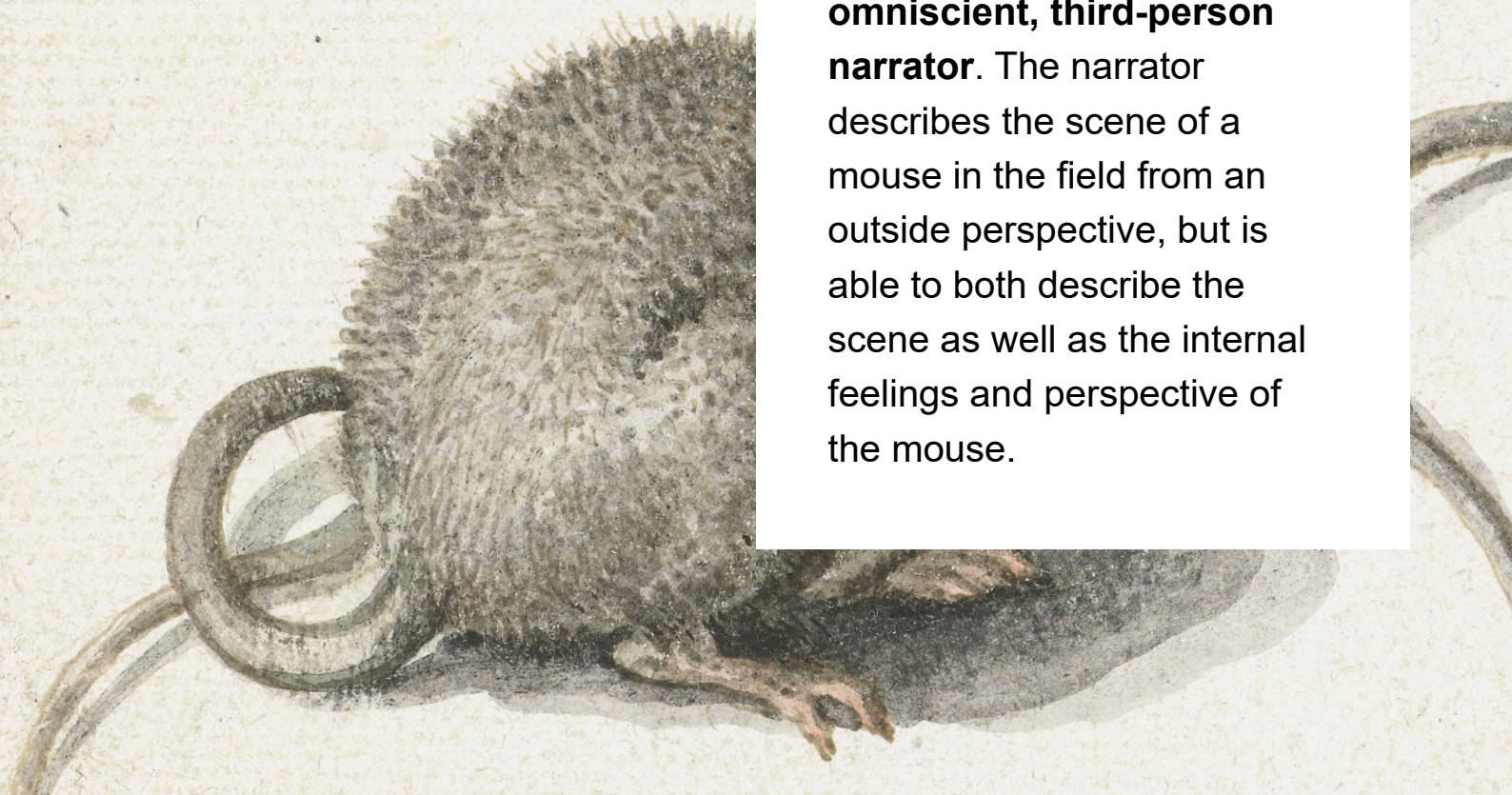
Time and the world are both too old to change. Five miles of woods, villages and farms lay before the mouse. The air was heavy and hot, and the mouse was left unable to move.

Whether human or animal - oh, how they pray! Whether being watched by God or the eye of a cat.



## SPEAKER + VOICE

This poem is written from the perspective of an **omniscient, third-person narrator**. The narrator describes the scene of a mouse in the field from an outside perspective, but is able to both describe the scene as well as the internal feelings and perspective of the mouse.



# LANGUAGE

The poem opens up with vivid **imagery**, which sets the scene for the reader. The scene is brought to life through the use of **compound adjectives** and **metonymy**. The **visual image** “sheep-cropped summit” is used to describe the image of a field with grass which has been grazed by sheep. Conversely, the **tactile image** of the “hot sun” creates an intense atmosphere.

**Personification:** This technique is used through-out the poem, where the mouse is described as having human emotions of fear, and viewing the world through a human-like lens. The use of personification evokes emotion from the reader, and plays into the double meaning of what the mouse and his fear of the cat may represent for humanity as a whole.

**Allegory:** The overall idea of the poem can also be viewed as an **allegory** - a story that references a larger story within it. The poem describes the scene of a mouse fearfully deciding its next move as it is being watched by the cat. The mouse is portrayed as praying to the cat, but its fate is inevitably in the hands of the cat. This could be representative of the wider idea of the ever-watching eye of God over humanity; and the idea that our fate is ultimately decided by God or a higher power.

**Double Meanings:** The last stanza of this poem has two double meanings.

‘Whether to two / Feet or four, how are prayers contracted!’

Two feet or four can be viewed as either the two or four feet of a human and animals respectively. Or, it could mean things that are two or four feet, as in length, in size. The word ‘contracted’ can also mean to agree upon a contract, or to contract as in become smaller.

These double meanings engage the reader with mystery, while also showing that the world of animals might be beyond our complete understanding. Whether life is seen through God’s eye or a cat, it’s still confusing and uncertain!

**Alliteration:** The poet uses alliteration throughout Cat and Mouse. For example, “*under the sheep-cropped summit, under the hot sun” and “*farms hummed its heat-hheavy”.**

Alliteration not only keeps the poem rhythmically interesting, but it also creates a sense of childlike wonder. This is appropriate for a poem about a Cat and Mouse, which are often used in children’s tales - overall, the poem has a **fabulist style** to it - as if it is telling a nursery story, lullaby or fable.

## STRUCTURE + FORM

**Title:** The phrase 'A game of cat and mouse' is an **idiomatic expression** which refers to two beings that engage in predator-prey behaviour, or a game that seems that way - one chasing, the other being chased.

**Free verse:** Cat and Mouse is structured with three stanzas, and has no fixed rhyme scheme. Interestingly, the **first lines** of the second and third stanzas are **indented** so that they structurally flow on from the previous ones - creating a sense of continuity across the whole poem.

**Short Length:** This poem is **succinct** and **intense**, as it describes the scene of a mouse in a field, and his feelings of being fearful of the ever-watching cat. Tension is created through short phrases, and the use of commas separators, which creates a punchy rhythm.

**Rhythm:** The poet uses rhythm in the poem through the use of **iambic pentameter** and **trochaic pentameter**, stressed and unstressed syllables are alternated. This rhythm further adds to the uncertainty and tension created in the poem.

Rhythm and tension is important in the context of the poem, as this fear and tension is the central emotion evoked in the poem; as well as the central theme of poem.

### TASK:

Identify one line of iambic pentameter (unstressed-**stressed** syllables), and another of trochaic pentameter (**stressed**-unstressed syllables) in the poem. Read them aloud. How do they create different moods?

**Enjambment** is used in the poem to create tension. Lines run over and cut-off before their natural stopping point. This leaves the reader feeling uneasy and uncertain about the direction of the poem, which evokes the uncertainty experienced by the mouse as it decides on its next move.

## CONTEXT

This poem was written by Ted Hughes, whose poetry was often themed around animals and nature.

Examples of other works of a similar theme include “Hawk in the Rain”, “View of a Pig” and “Crow” . His genre of writing can be described as “naturalism”, where there is a focus on the realistic aspects of life and the natural laws and forces which operate in the world.

This poem was published in 1960; which was largely seen as a time of rebellion for younger people. Many young people had grown tired of the conservative views of the past, and rebelled through many forms including art. Hughes was also of the belief that people had become too conservative and repressed; and instead encouraged a more naturalistic approach through his art. His poetry encouraged people to get in touch with the earth and natural way of life and embrace the freedom that comes with accepting our part in the natural world.

## TASK

Write your own poem about a cat and a mouse. Try to use a range of imagery and poetic devices. How is it similar or different from Hughes’ poem?

# ATTITUDES

## **Lack of control over one's fate**

In this poem, the narrator describes a scene of a mouse left frozen in fear as it goes about its day. The mouse fears making its next move, as it fears being attacked and killed by a cat which is portrayed as being ever-watching. The mouse is displayed as praying to the cat (or even God) to spare his life; but the narrator suggests that this prayer is futile and ultimately the cat will decide the fate of the mouse.

The narrator uses this description as **symbolic** for the idea that humans ultimately have little control over their fate. Although humans may have the illusion that they can control their fate in life, or in some ways influence it through prayer - ultimately God or powers beyond their realm, controls the fate of humans.

***TASK: Explore your own ideas on fate vs free will. Do you think we have much choice in life about what we become and how we live? Why/ why not? You can include your personal beliefs about religion in your answer.***

## **Fear of God and Power**

Throughout the poem, a tense feeling is created. This represents the deep fear the mouse experiences, rendering it unable to move. The poet here conveys the fear humans tend to have of God. The poet neither commends nor critiques this explicitly, but instead portrays the idea of the God-fearing man and how it can sometimes lead to humans feeling helpless and stuck in life as they look to God for answers. The poet leaves the outcome of the mouse's fate open-ended, and therefore leaves the reader to contemplate and question the role of fear of God in their own lives.

## **The natural circle of life and death**

The poem describes a specific scene, but portrays the wider realities of the harsh and often cruel natural world. The mouse is carefully calculating its next move, reliant on its instincts to stay alive as it hides from its predator (the cat). There is a power hierarchy at work, as the mouse is clearly defenceless against the cat which watches over him. The poem represents that humans too are in the daily fight for survival, except that they are governed by the higher power of God and/or fate. The speaker leans into the idea of naturalism, and the fact that life and death is a natural cycle which all beings must go through. Just as the mouse phases threats to its life as it crosses the field, humans could face death at any given moment. However, the speaker does not seem to suggest that one must fear death; but rather that death is a natural course of life and should be accepted as such.





## **THEMES**

**Fate**

**God**

**Fear**

**Nature**

**Death**

**Religion**

**Predator - Prey Relationships**

**Perspective**

**Time and Space**

## **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?

## EXERCISES

1. Tension and anxiety are key emotions portrayed in this poem. Describe 3 ways in which the structure or language of the poem creates tension.
2. Explain, with references to the poem, what you think the key message is of Cat and Mouse.
3. Nature is described vividly in the poem and is used to set the scene. Pick one poetic device used in the poem to describe the environment; and explain why the use of this device makes the description effective.
4. The cat, one of the title figures, is only mentioned directly as the very last word of the poem. Why do you think the poet chose to do so, and what effect does it have?

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Examine the themes of fate and God explored in the poem through the figures of the cat and the mouse. Include whether you agree with the poet's view of fate as described in the poem.
2. Analyse the parallels between nature and human life described in 'Cat and Mouse', and one other you have studied. Consider structure, language and context.
3. "We feel no pity for the mouse in the poem, because he is just part of the natural life cycle." To what extent do you agree with this interpretation?

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