Cat and Mouse

SUMMARY

The poem describes a countryside scene: on a hill where the grass has been chewed to stubble by sheep, in blazing sunshine, a little mouse cowers, wanting to run out into the open but feeling too scared.

Time and the world itself, the speaker reflects, are too ancient to be changed. Describing the view from the hill, the speaker imagines seeing five miles into the countryside; the whole scene seems to vibrate with hot, weighty, barely-conscious life.

Both humans and animals, the speaker imagines, say their prayers—whether they believe they're praying to God, or just hoping a cat won't catch them.

THEMES

NATURE, POWER, AND DEATH

"Cat and Mouse" presents the natural world as a harsh, risky place where life is always threatened by violence and instinct. The poem offers a snapshot of an environment in which a creature (here, a mouse) must calculate the risk of death in order to survive. It portrays this potential violence as a fact of life, built into a natural system based on a hierarchy of power. The poem implies that these same brutish rules govern humankind, too: that we are menaced by "God" or fate just as small creatures are menaced by predators.

The poem portrays nature as a dog-eat-dog—or, rather, cat-eat-mouse—world. It depicts a nervous country mouse crouching under cover on a hot summer's day, hoping to make a break for it. But one wrong move could result in death by cat. By instinct, the mouse knows that running across the landscape is a chance it "dare[s] not take." Though the environment appears "sheep-cropped" and tame, it's full of hidden danger.

The poem zooms out to suggest that this instinctive assessment of risk is part of what it means to be a living creature on Earth. The world, says the poem, is "too old to alter"—that is, it's defined by ancient and unchangeable laws, ones that govern humanity as much as animals. The poem implicitly links the mouse's predicament with the human community in nearby "villages" and "farms." Just as the mouse might be caught by the cat at any moment, so, too, can human beings get struck down by all kinds of threats, such as illness or natural disaster. The poem suggests, then, that simply to live is to be endangered, and that the mouse's fear of the cat is hardly different from people's feelings as they contemplate death.

And if both people and animals are always threatened, they're also both always appealing to higher powers for their survival. The poem likens the mouse's desire to escape the cat to a prayer "contracted" to the cat: the cat has the power to make the mouse's wish come true or not. Similarly, the poem suggests, human beings who wish to survive might offer up prayers to God. Both animals and human beings, in other words, are "contracted" to powers beyond their control, whether in "God's eye" or the plain luck involved in everyday existence. (Perhaps these prayers are also "contracted" in the sense that they're made *small* by their context. The mouse's prayer means little in the grander scheme of nature; human wishes and desires, the poem suggests, are similarly puny.)

Put simply, the poem argues, living comes with risk—and there's little anything or anyone can do about it except to assess that risk and hope for the best.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

On the sheep-cropped ...
... dared not take.

The poem's first long sentence sets the scene: it's a summer's day on a hilltop, and a mouse is "crouched," hoping to make a break for it and evade the claws of a predatory cat.

The first line creates atmosphere through imagery. The hilltop is "sheep-cropped," meaning its grasses have been nibbled short by sheep. Though this might seem like an insignificant detail, it subtly introduces the poem's main theme: the natural world is governed by ancient instinct, not by reason. The sheep eat the grass because it's their nature to do so, just as a lurking predator might snap up a tasty mouse without a second thought. And a world ruled by sheep-eat-grass, cat-eat-mouse instinct, the poem will go on to suggest, is a pretty terrifying one to live in!

The "hot sun" beating down already hints at that terror and anxiety. Thick /uh/ assonance in this line—"summit, under hot sun"—makes the moment feel heavy with tension.

The poem's main verb doesn't arrive until line 2: "The mouse crouched." This subtle delay creates a mood of suspense: the mouse is pausing to weigh up its options. The /ow/ assonance in "mouse crouched" links the little creature with its posture, suggesting its tension as it considers whether to scurry out into the open or not.

This humble little country mouse, then, is contemplating a risk which, in the end, "it dare[s] not take." That is, it can see an opportunity, but its instincts are telling it to hold back. An enjambed line here mirrors its anxiety:

> [...] the chance
> It dared not take.

That mid-sentence line break leaves the reader in suspense for a moment, waiting to see what the mouse will do. In the end, it seems, the risk is just too great: this mouse is frozen in terror.

Throughout the poem, flexible free verse reflects the action in its form. Without a regular meter, the poem can stop and start as abruptly as a mouse thinking about making a dash for it.

LINES 4-5

> ...
> *... five mile prospect—*

In lines 4 and 5, the poem zooms out from the miniature scene of the nervous mouse to show readers the whole countryside. This passage will survey everything that's going on around the mouse, drawing attention to the rhythms that govern *all* life—not just animal life. People, the poem will suggest, are just as much a part of nature's violence as cats and mice.

Here, the speaker begins with a broad proclamation. The world, the speaker says, is "too old to alter": in other words, the forces that govern life are ancient and unchangeable (a common theme in Hughes's poetry). By layering this observation on top of a picture of a terrified mouse, the speaker suggests that the threat of sudden violence and death are facts of life.

Not only are these facts ever-present, but they apply to the wider world too. The poem suddenly zooms out from its close-up on the mouse to a "five mile prospect" of the landscape all around—in other words, a wide view. This broadened perspective symbolically suggests that the poem is making a general point about all of life, not a specific point about animal life.

But it also gives the reader a sense of what it's like to feel as small and helpless as a mouse. To a mouse, five miles is practically an entire universe. The long /i/ assonance in "five miles" makes the distance seem that much more daunting.

LINES 6-7

> *Woods, villages, farms—hummed ...*
> *... Stupor of life.*

In lines 6 and 7, the poem describes the "five mile" view from the top of the hill, painting a picture of a countryside full of "woods, villages, [and] farms." Those "woods" might be the domain of little creatures like the mouse—but the villages and farms are sites of *human* activity.

Mentioning these human dwellings here, the speaker draws a connection between the mouse's predicament and the similar challenges human beings face. In a world "too old to alter," the poem's wide view from the hilltop suggests, people live under the constant threat of death just as much as mice do, even if they aren't always as conscious of that threat.

The speaker goes on: all life, whether animal or human, "hum[s]" along in a "heat-heavy / Stupor." The imagery here suggests that all living things are part of a constant low-burning energy—one that smolders like coals, and moves as slowly as the sun seems to on a long hot summer afternoon, as if in a "stupor." The word "stupor," meaning a drowsy near-unconsciousness, also hints that all this activity takes place mostly unconsciously. Life, in other words, doesn't go on because people and mice *think* about it or make it happen: it just *goes*.

Whatever happens to the mouse, whatever happens to *anyone* or *anything*, the mysterious forces of life keep the world moving. The specific words the speaker chooses here conjure up both the literal scene on the hot hillside, and a grander feeling that everything is part of the same mighty (and dangerous) process.

LINES 8-10

> ...
> *... of a cat.*

In the last three lines, the speaker compares the mouse's desire for survival to humanity's prayers. The speaker presents this idea as a cry of surprise, as though marveling at the deep, frightful mystery at the heart of existence:

> Whether to two
> Feet or four, how are prayers contracted!

These lines suggest that two-legged creatures (that is, people) and four-legged animals (like mice) aren't that different: every living thing is just trying to survive from one moment to the next. And if that's true, every creature, animal or human, is always "pray[ing]" for the same thing: survival. They're trying to make a "contract[]" with either the cat that hunts them or the God that guides them.

In both cases, there's a power imbalance here. The cats have the power over the mice, and God is much stronger than any individual human being. And to the mouse, the cat is *like* a god, possessing the power to decide if it lives or dies.

God, the poem thus suggests, might seem to have power over human life in much the same way a cat has power over a mouse. "Contracted," then, might also mean *made smaller*. The mouse's prayer to stay alive means little to the cat; humankind, as compared to God, is puny.

Listen to the way the speaker uses repetition in the poem's final line:

Whether in God's eye or the eye of a cat.

That diacope on "eye" underlines this poem's stark perspective: humanity is to God, this repetition suggests, as a mouse is to a cat. And, by extension, a mouse and a human being are both just little creatures caught up in the "heat-heavy / Stupor of life," hoping the big creatures will either be merciful to them or overlook them.

SYMBOLS

THE MOUSE

The poem's tiny, quivering mouse is a symbol of the fragility of life—a predicament that people and animals share.

As the poem's titular mouse "crouch[es]," terrified, in its hiding place, it reminds readers that humans are under the constant threat of death just as much as animals are. In the grand scheme of things, every living creature could be snuffed out in an instant.

Symbolically, then, the mouse suggests that all life is fragile and tenuous (even if people don't always feel that truth as acutely as mice do).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "On the sheep-cropped summit, under hot sun, / The mouse crouched, staring out the chance / It dared not take."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem uses moments of alliteration to bring images to life on the page.

In the first five lines, for instance, the /s/ sibilance in words like "summit" and "sun" (line 1) creates a hushed, tense atmosphere. And the /t/ in "take," "Time," and "Too old to" (lines 3-5) has a spiky quality that suggests the threat of violence; it's as if the cat might pounce at any moment.

The most prominent example of alliteration appears in line 6, when the poem surveys the view from the hilltop where the mouse is hiding. The "five mile prospect"—which is full of life, both animal and human—"hum[s]" and is "heat-heavy." These breathy /h/ sounds evoke the heat of the sun. For a moment, it sounds as if the poem is panting like a hot dog.

At the end of the poem, the speaker concludes that humans and mice aren't really that different at all: both pray (or just fervently hope) to survive under the watchful eyes of gods or cats. The alliteration of "to two/ Feet or four" (lines 8-9) strengthens the speaker's link between humans and other life by tying different words together.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "summit," "sun"
- **Line 3:** "take"
- **Line 4:** "Time"
- **Line 5:** "Too," "to"
- **Line 6:** "hummed," "heat-heavy"
- **Line 8:** "to two"
- **Line 9:** "Feet," "four"

ASSONANCE

"Cat and Mouse" uses assonance to create music and atmosphere.

In line 1, for instance, similar vowel sounds create a sense of delicate tension:

On the sheep-cropped summit, under hot sun,

These carefully-balanced sounds give the line a sense of poise that reflects the mouse's situation: the mouse, like this line, seems suspended in a moment of tension, trying to decide whether or not to make a break for it.

The following line uses a similar approach to evoke the mouse's perspective: the long /ow/ sounds of "mouse," "crouched," and "out" stretch the tension out that little bit longer.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "On," "cropped," "summit," "under," "hot," "sun"
- **Line 2:** "mouse crouched," "out"
- **Line 4:** "Time"
- **Line 5:** "five mile"
- **Line 8:** "to two"
- **Line 9:** "or four"

CAESURA

Caesura alters the poem's pace to match its mood. In the first two lines, for instance, caesurae evoke the mouse's terrified dithering:

On the sheep-cropped summit, || under hot sun,
The mouse crouched, || staring out the chance

Notice how the first caesura delays the arrival of the main verb ("crouched"), building a hesitant atmosphere even before the reader even really knows what's going on. The second, meanwhile, mirrors the mouse's frozen fear as it "crouche[s]" and waits for an opportunity to run.

Caesurae can also compress lines, as in the list-like first half of line 6, which describes the view from the hilltop: "Woods, || villages, || farms[.]" These caesurae, combined with asyndeton (the lack of an "and"), allows the poem to quickly sketch an entire landscape, and to remind readers that this landscape is full of countless miniature dramas: the mouse isn't the only living creature grappling with matters of life and death on this sunny afternoon.

Finally, caesura can also act as an intensifier, as it does in line 9:

> Whether to two
> Feet or four, || how are prayers contracted!

This comma adds emphasis to the word "how," which captures the speaker's astonishment at the world's primal violence and the shared predicament of all living creatures.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "summit, under"
- **Line 2:** "crouched, staring"
- **Line 6:** "Woods, villages, farms—hummed"
- **Line 9:** "four, how"

ENJAMBMENT

"Cat and Mouse" uses enjambed lines to control its pace and the flow of its thoughts.

The enjambment in lines 2-3, for instance, helps to create tension as the mouse "crouche[s]" in hiding:

> [...] staring out the chance
> It dared not take.

This enjambment helps to show that the mouse is hesitating: the line break creates a strained pause, mirroring the mouse's anxiety about whether or not to make a break for it. The erratic jumpiness of this enjambment also mimics herky-jerky, mouse-like scurrying more generally.

Lines 6-7 similarly use enjambment to draw out a long pause—but one that feels rather different. Here, the speaker regards the landscape, which:

> [...] hummed its heat-heavy
> Stupor of life.

This mid-sentence line break makes for a heavy landing on the word "Stupor." And that's exactly the point: the world is moving slowly and heavily, burning with hot life like a low fire. Placing special emphasis on "Stupor," the enjambment here reminds readers that the force of life is older and slower than the small, quick movements (and lives!) of mice and men.

The poem's final enjambment returns to quick, jerky movement:

> Whether to two
> Feet or four [...]

Here, the enjambment creates a sense of surprise, reflecting the speaker's amazement over everything humanity has in common with the animal kingdom.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "chance / It"
- **Lines 4-5:** "world / Too"
- **Lines 6-7:** "heat-heavy / Stupor"
- **Lines 8-9:** "two / Feet"

IMAGERY

The poem uses imagery to set the scene and to play up the contrast of scale between the tiny mouse and the wide world around it.

The poem's imagery starts with the "sheep-cropped summit" and "hot sun" of the first line. These images set the poem firmly in a natural world governed by ancient powers. That blazing sun, these images hint, gives life both to the grass and the sheep; everything is in balance, including, by extension, the mouse and the cat. What's more, the scale of the setting—the high summit and the mighty sun itself—makes the mouse seem even more vulnerable and tiny.

The same sense of scale is at work in the second stanza. Here, the "five mile prospect," which takes in all the nearby "woods, villages," and "farms," is full of vibrant (and violent) life. Again, this wide view makes the mouse seem that little bit smaller—and reminds readers that they, too, are just little creatures in a big world.

The image of the "heat-heavy / Stupor of life," meanwhile, makes the whole world seem charged with weighty, burning, slow-moving energies, whether of survival or annihilation. Again, this all applies to human beings, too, who, in the grand scheme of things, are driven by the same forces as the mouse.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "the sheep-cropped summit," "hot sun"
- **Lines 5-7:** "the five mile prospect— / Woods, villages, farms—hummed its heat-heavy / Stupor of life."

REPETITION

Repetition appears in two different forms in the last three lines of the poem:

> Whether to two
> Feet or four, how are prayers contracted!

Whether in God's eye or the eye of a cat.

First up, there's the anaphora on the word "Whether," which insistently links people and animals, suggesting that "prayers" and hopes are pretty much the same for all living creatures—whether they're two-footed like humans or four-footed like mice. The repetition here suggests that, while God might dictate what happens to a human being, the cat plays the same role for the mouse: the mouse's hopes that the cat will leave it alone, in this speaker's eyes, are much same as people's prayers that God will be merciful to them.

The diacope of "eye," meanwhile, makes the rather stark suggestion that humanity is to God as a mouse is to a cat: just a little creature hoping a bigger creature will be merciful to it. This repetition suggests that the whole universe is a predatory and dangerous place. There's no loving God here: just the big staring "eye" of a toothy predator.

All in all, then, the poem's repetitions help to draw clear parallels between the predicaments of animals and human beings. Every living creature, the poem suggests, is just doing its best to survive in a big, dangerous, and carnivorous world.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Whether"
- **Line 10:** "Whether," "eye," "eye"

VOCABULARY

Sheep-cropped (Line 1) - In other words, the hilltop is covered in grass nibbled short by sheep.

Summit (Line 1) - Hilltop.

Prospect (Line 5) - View.

Stupor (Lines 6-7) - A dulled state of near unconsciousness or sleepiness.

Contracted (Line 9) - "Contracted," here, can both mean "drawn up like a legal agreement" and "shrunk."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

A free verse poem, "Cat and Mouse" invents its own form rather than using a traditional shape (such as the sonnet). The poem is written as one continuous stanza, but that stanza can also be divided into three distinct parts: a three-line tercet that describes the mouse's dilemma, a four-line quatrain that zooms out to take in the whole landscape, and another closing tercet that philosophically reflects on the terror of existence.

Abrupt shorter lines mark the transition between these sections, giving the speaker's voice a herky-jerky, unpredictable feeling that suits the poem's description of a nervous mouse (and, by extension, its depiction of the danger and tension of all lives, animal or human).

METER

"Cat and Mouse" is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't use a regular meter. This gives the poem a spontaneous feeling, as though it's just a snapshot of a particular moment in time—a snapshot that happens to capture a little mouse considering whether to risk its life by running into the open. The poem's unpredictable rhythms might also mimic the jerky, hesitant movements of the mouse itself.

RHYME SCHEME

"Cat and Mouse" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. Perhaps rhyme would feel too neat for the dangerous, chaotic, uncertain world this poem describes. Rhyme often suggests order, harmony, and predictability—but in this poem, no one, not even the cat, knows whether the mouse is about to meet its end!

SPEAKER

Readers don't learn much about the speaker in "Cat and Mouse." In fact, the speaker is more a detached observer than a character, observing first the hilltop, then the mouse, then the surrounding landscape.

But readers do start to get a picture of what the speaker believes in when the speaker makes some general remarks on the mouse's predicament in lines 8 and 9:

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

The speaker, in other words, feels that there is little difference between the mouse hoping for survival and a human being praying to God: both are at the mercy of a higher power.

SETTING

"Cat and Mouse" is set somewhere in the countryside. Through its images of the "sheep-cropped summit" and the "hot sun," the poem builds a picture of a summer's day on a particular hilltop. First, the poem focuses on the mouse's miniature drama; then, it zooms out to take in the "five mile prospect" of the landscape all around, with its "villages" and "farms."

The setting's wide sweep thus supports the poem's argument that human beings, like mice, are just little creatures steered (and destroyed) by forces much bigger than they are.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Ted Hughes (1930-1998) is considered one of the foremost writers of the 20th century. His arrival on the scene with his 1957 debut, *The Hawk in the Rain*, was a shock to the system of British poetry, challenging the dominance of more restrained and formal poets like Philip Larkin. To this day, Hughes remains one of the most widely read poets in the English language.

"Cat and Mouse" was first published in *Lupercal*, Hughes's second collection. Like much of Hughes's early work, this book explores the natural world while resisting sentimentality. Nature, Hughes argues, isn't just beautiful and wise, as 19th-century Romantic poets like William Wordsworth might have claimed. Rather, it's full of violence, brutality, and death. As this poem puts it, nature is "too old to alter," and human beings would be foolish to think they can control it. Hughes also confronted the instinctive violence of the animal kingdom in poems like "Hawk Roosting" and "Esther's Tomcat."

Hughes saw it as a poet's duty to reveal and explore the ancient powers of the world. In his own words, "any form of violence, any vehement form of activity, invokes the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the universe." Many of Hughes's most famous poems deal with similar themes, such as "The Jaguar" (which depicts a caged jaguar as a kind of visionary) and the *Crow* series (whose folkloric Crow character delivers Hughes's reflections on instinct and religion).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lupercal, the collection this poem first appeared in, was published by Faber and Faber in 1960, three years after Ted Hughes moved to America with his wife (and fellow poet) Sylvia Plath. But Hughes never severed his English roots; this poem's landscapes draw on his memories of his childhood in the Yorkshire countryside.

While this poem might seem to deal mostly with eternal, primal forces and changeless landscapes, it's also a product of its times. In the 1960s, many young people became dissatisfied with the staid, stiff-upper-lip conservative attitudes of their parents' generation, and rebelled in all sorts of ways—artistically, politically, and personally. Youth culture became truly powerful and influential for the first time.

Hughes was among those who believed that society had become too repressed in the years that followed World War II, and he felt that people needed to get back in touch with the kinds of ancient, earthy forces he describes in this poem. He thus welcomed the outpouring of iconoclastic, youthful energy that the '60s brought about.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Five Views of Ted Hughes — Listen to a series of short radio documentaries exploring different aspects of Hughes's life and work. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0000tqz)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Hughes at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-hughes)
- Hughes's Influence — Watch contemporary poet Alice Oswald discussing Ted Hughes's work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vop3NOGMExs)
- Ted Hughes on Film — Watch a documentary about the poet. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbAGbjXPCP8)
- Hughes and Animals — Read an essay discussing the role of the natural world in Hughes's poetry. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2016/08/poems-as-animals-a-ted-hughes-bestiary)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER TED HUGHES POEMS

- A Picture of Otto
- Bayonet Charge
- Hawk Roosting
- The Jaguar
- The Thought Fox
- Wind

HOW TO CITE

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