The Pride of Lions

SUMMARY

Beginning the poem as though in the middle of a thought, the speaker says that before she and her husband could wed he transformed into a lion—complete with a thick layer of fur and an intense, animalistic odor.

It was hard for him to get used to walking on four legs. His arms, now front legs, had to support the bulk of his body's weight. His shoulder muscles hardened like bumps on trees, and so the speaker rubbed them while her husband slept.

Prickly bits from plants got tangled up in his mane, but, for a while, he refused to let the speaker brush his hair and remove the stuck bits of debris. Whenever she'd try to do so, he'd swat her back with the padded part of his paw and growled at her neck.

He also refused to eat and drink things like fruit and milk, yet ravenously gobbled up the carcasses the speaker brought to him.

Because his sharp, curved nails would get stuck in the carpet's fabric, the speaker removed all the rugs from their home and cleaned the wooden floorboards below, making them so shiny and smooth that his claws clacked musically against the wood as he walked.

The speaker now caresses his thick yellow hide and buries her fingers in his mane. She pulls him close to her so that he is wrapped around her. She is eager to be with him, and the light in his yellow eyes expresses eagerness, too.

So does the mesmerizing swish of his tail and the rough lick of his tongue on the speaker's thighs.

THEMES

PRIDE, VULNERABILITY, AND ACCEPTANCE

"The Pride of Lions" tells the story of how a man's transformation into a lion affects his relationship with his wife (the poem's speaker). Although this dramatic change brings about (understandable!) hardships for the couple, the speaker displays unwavering patience toward her husband in his new state. This steadfast love, in turn, seems to allow her husband to become more open—to let go of his "pride" and accept his wife's help and affection. The poem ultimately implies that lasting relationships require vulnerability, acceptance, and compromise.

Readers might take the husband's transformation as literal in the mythical world of the poem, or they might see it as a metaphor for him taking on lion-like qualities (many of which—such as stoicism, ferocity, and dominance—are not coincidentally linked with stereotypical masculinity). Either way, it's clear that there's been a major shift in identity and that the husband is suddenly in pain and out of sorts.

His "switch to all fours" isn't "easy," the speaker says, and he carries a new "weight" from his shoulders—a result of his physical change but also perhaps also some unstated burden he's trying to manage alone. Because despite becoming a fearsome creature, he has also become in some ways helpless and unable to care for himself; he's like a wounded animal made skittish by human touch, at odds with himself and his environment.

Making matters worse, the husband doesn't feel comfortable letting the speaker help him in this condition, slapping her away and snarling at her throat when she tries to remove the "burrs" from this "matted" mane.

There is the potential for violence here, but—in one interpretation, at least—the husband deliberately holds himself back, using only his soft "suede paw" and *not* his claws because *doesn't* want to hurt his wife. Perhaps he's frustrated by his inability to speak about what is bothering him and yet feeling in control of his body in its new form.

These burrs, meanwhile, could represent any number of problems he's facing that his wife could help with if only he'd let her. His discomfort thus seems to stem in part from his own pride and refusal to admit that, outward appearances aside, he's frightened and vulnerable.

The husband's transformation is obviously difficult for the speaker as well, who must contend with a very different, and potentially volatile, partner. At the same time, the speaker is steadfast in her commitment to caring for her transformed husband, recognizing that he's experiencing confusion and discomfort.

She "burnish[es]" his knotted muscles when he sleeps and cannot put up a fight, for example, the verb "burnish" suggesting that she regards him as precious (to burnish something is to rub or polish it until it shines). Seeing that his "claws" get "caught on the carpet," she strips "the rugs from the floor," sacrificing part of her home for his benefit. And after he pushes her away for attempting to groom him, she remains patient and determined, trying "for days" until he lets her help him.

This commitment, in turn, seems to break down her husband's walls: he comes to accept her contributions unabashedly, tearing "meat from the bones" she provides and seeming to delight in walking across the floor she has polished for him. And

once her lion husband has opened himself up to her love and help, the speaker feels comfortable instigating intimacy, eagerly pulling him toward her in the poem's final moments. Their coming together suggests they've found a new balance based on acceptance, sacrifice, and compromise.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

GENDER, POWER, AND DESIRE

In addition to reading the poem as a commentary on acceptance and support within a love-filled partnership, the poem can be read as an unsettling allegory about gender roles, power, and sexual desire. The wife is mesmerized by her lion husband and does everything she can to ease his adjustment into this ferocious creature—even when doing so makes her physically vulnerable. Through its images of servitude and self-sacrifice, the poem might be critiquing antiquated gender roles in which men are expected to be dominant and women servile and submissive.

The husband's transformation brings about discomforts, yet it also makes him physically threatening. He may be confused and disoriented, but he's still a *lion*—a mighty animal with the ability to hurt the speaker. What's more, his initial rejection of his wife's help suggests a refusal to be vulnerable—perhaps because vulnerability is a trait linked with femininity. When she dutifully attempts to remove his burrs, he exhibits his independence by slapping her away and snarling against her throat.

On the one hand, the use of his "suede paw" rather than his claws might be his way of deliberately *not* hurting her, pushing her away as gently as he can since he cannot yet control his animalistic instincts. Yet his slap is still an act of violence, and his snarl is a threat of yet more violence—behavior typical of a lion but reprehensible in a husband.

And while the speaker's intense devotion to her husband can be read as the mark of a loving, supportive, and loyal partner, she's also putting herself in danger. The reader might conclude that the speaker shows a strong physical attraction to her husband and a genuine desire to care for him. After all, her descriptions of him are largely positive. His new smell—"the musk of beast"—is "rich." His claws on the polished floor ring as a "chime." The speaker strokes his "saffron hide," drawing him up around herself, apparently eager for sex.

Yet the positive descriptions of him, culminating with "the gleam of his topaz eyes," and the agency she exerts as the instigator of sex might be diminished by the final stanza. His tail is "hypnotic," and the reader might question whether or not she's actually the one pulling the strings here. In a way, she seems to exist to fulfill his needs, losing her sense of selfhood and perhaps sacrificing too much in support of her husband.

In the end, then, it's ambiguous whether the speaker's selflessness, patience, and willingness to compromise are the marks of a strong partnership, or if this is a relationship is a toxic cocktail of desire, submission, and dominance.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

But before we ...
... musk of beast.

The poem opens with a conjunction: "But." This creates the impression that the reader is jumping into the middle of a story. People usually say "but" when introducing a statement that's in some way *different* from or *at odds* with the statement that came before it. The word "but" thus suggests that the speaker might have just been talking about how great her relationship was going or how simple things were—until her soon-to-be husband "became a lion."

The phrase "before we could marry" also allows for two possible readings:

- The first suggests that the marriage *never* took place because the speaker's fiancé turned into a lion *before* the ceremony could literally occur.
- The second reading centers on his transformation as a *condition* of marriage: "before we were able to get married, he first had to become a lion." This interpretation invites readers to consider the various things partners must do, or are expected to do, before or shortly after their marriage.

The opening line sets up two additional ways to read the poem. In one, a man literally transforms into a lion, setting the poem in a magical or fantastical environment. In another reading, this is really an extended metaphor: the man took on the qualities *associated* with lions, such as ferocity, stoicism, and, of course, pride. (Note that these qualities are also associated with traditional masculinity.)

In either case, the speaker's attitude seems pretty clear even from these two lines: she comes across as loving and supportive, referring to her husband in positive terms after his transformation. He is "rich with the musk of beast," for example, a line implying that she finds his new smell intense and attractive (with the word "rich" suggesting not only suggests that he is abundant in this smell but also that she places a high value on it).

LINES 3-6

The switch to ...
... as he slept.

The husband's transformation from a man to a lion is physically difficult for him. This makes sense: he was used to walking around on two legs but now walks on four. His front legs carry the bulk of his weight, and this exertion caused his shoulder muscles to swell and harden like "teak burls"—the hard knots growing out of tree trunks.

This simile is somewhat gruesome: burls can be unsightly, and they typically appear when trees are undergoing some kind of stress (often as a result of disease). This comparison thus suggests that the husband's new condition isn't healthy for him.

Note, too, how the enjambment here seems to evoke the heaviness the husband feels:

> The switch to all fours was not easy – all his weight
> slung from the blades of his shoulders.

The line break after "weight" adds emphasis to this word and pulls readers down the page.

This image also suggests that the husband is carrying not simply physical but also *mental* weight. Treating the lion transformation as metaphorical, rather than literal, perhaps this image speaks to the way the husband grapples with the "weight" of some new stress or responsibility.

The passage itself feels thick and heavy with sound, perhaps evoking the husband's sheer physical size and his discomfort. Listen to the intense alliteration, consonance, and assonance here—those liquid /l/ sounds, sharp /k/ and /t/ sounds, bold /b/ and /d/ sounds, and throaty /ur/ sounds:

> His deltoids knotted like teak burls,
> and I burnished them as he slept.

The speaker clearly recognizes her husband's pain, and she rubs his muscles while he sleeps. The verb "burnish" does not simply mean "rub," however; the word describes a process of making a valued object shine. Its use here implies that the speaker values her husband and considers him precious even in his altered state filled with discomfort and confusion.

The speaker takes care to note that she does this service for him only when he's asleep, however—when he can't push her away, and when she perhaps feels more comfortable approaching him. It's worth remembering that these lines represent an early stage in the couple's marriage and the husband's transformation. Their relationship doesn't seem balanced yet.

LINES 7-10

Burrs matted his ...
... against my throat.

Stanza 3 continues to show how discombobulated the husband has become in his lion state. He has prickly plant burrs tangled throughout his "mane," implying that he's incapable of keeping himself clean and orderly (or perhaps is too stressed and downtrodden to even try to do so). The muffled alliteration of "matted" and "mane" calls attention to his disheveled state.

The speaker attempts to remove these burrs. Rather than accepting this help, however, the husband pushes her away with his paw and growls at her. This moment can be interpreted differently depending on how the reader views the husband's transformation:

- If the reader imagines the man having changed *literally* into a lion, then the husband's actions seem excusable. The lion-husband shows restraint, using the soft "suede" part of his "paw" rather than his sharp claws to push away his wife. The snarling at his wife's throat might simply be him warning her to be cautious, to stay away from him because he's worried about accidentally hurting her. (Remember, he's still getting used to his new lion body.)
- But if readers interpret the husband's transformation as an extended metaphor—and thus view the husband as a man being described in lion terms—then this scene becomes more disturbing. In this reading, the husband isn't gently swatting the speaker away with his paw but literally *slapping* her and then growling at a very vulnerable part of her body as a kind of threat.

In either case, the husband clearly feels uncomfortable with his wife's touch and resists her help. And the sibilance of these lines adds as a sinister hiss to this moment:

> slapped me away with a suede paw,
> snarled against my throat.

Whether the reader views the husband's actions as excusable or not, the speaker persists in her desire to help her husband. She doesn't give up; "for days" she attempts to groom him, and the implication is that eventually he relents and allows her to help him get cleaned up and presentable.

LINES 11-12

He would not ...
... bones I provided.

The husband's transformation into a lion has affected his tastes as well. A lion's primary diet is meat, of course, so, on the one hand, the husband's refusal to eat fruit or drink milk makes sense. But "fruit" and "milk" are also rather suggestive nouns and might symbolize other things he is leaving behind:

- Fruit often symbolizes temptation, indulgence, pleasure, and wealth, among other things. In the context of a relationship between two people who should be open with each other, the husband's refusal to eat fruit might suggest that he's become closed off to intimacy.
- Similarly, milk can symbolize nourishment, abundance, innocence, and dependence. Young, developing lions need milk. The husband's refusal to drink milk might suggest that, though he's new to being a lion, he doesn't want to be viewed as weak or dependent.

While he won't touch fruit or milk, the husband is happy to devour the meat that the speaker to him. This might suggest a swapping of stereotypical gender roles, in which men are the hunters/providers for their families. And yet, this also matches up with *lions*' actual dynamics: female *lions* regularly hunt and provide food for male lions. While his accepting the meat could show the husband's dependence on his wife, it could *also* show how both husband and wife are playing into the idea that women are meant to serve their male partners.

Either way, the wife's continued service toward her husband is pretty remarkable. The phrase "the bones I provided" suggests the level of her self-sacrifice. The primary reading is that the bones belong to an animal the speaker has brought to him, but the grammar of the phrase makes it possible to imagine, if only momentarily, that the bones belong to the speaker herself.

LINES 13-16

His claws caught ...
... of his nails.

While previous stanzas detailed the husband adapting to his new body, stanza 5 shows the husband in conflict with his surroundings. Having gotten used to walking on four legs, the lion-husband now moves around their home.

The sharp nails of his claws catch on the rugs over the floors. Note the sharp alliteration of "claws caught on the carpet," which perhaps evokes the scratch of the lion's nails across the floor. In response, the speaker removes all the carpeting from their shared space.

The speaker thus changes her own environment on her husband's behalf, while he, apparently, isn't expected to adapt to the way their home was previously arranged. *She* caters to *him*. She does so lovingly, but perhaps also out of a sense of obligation, as she has done throughout the poem, helping him along when he seems incapable of managing on his own.

In fact, the speaker goes beyond what is strictly necessary to help her lion-husband move around their space. After removing the rugs, she polishes the wooden floors beneath so that they shine. The gleaming floors seem to enhance the acoustics of the husband's nails tapping as he walks. The speaker describes the noise as a "chime." To her, the sound is pleasant and musical. Her word choices describing her husband continue to be positive. She's glad that she has been able to help him and that he can begin to feel good about himself walking around in his changed state.

LINES 17-20

I stroke his ...
... his topaz eyes

In stanza 6, the speaker shifts verb tenses. The previous stanzas were all written in the past tense, allowing the speaker to relay some backstory about the early days of her marriage. The shift to present tense in this stanza allows readers to feel as though they are now caught up to this couple's life together. Thanks to the use of present tense, this stanza and next feel more immediate and urgent.

Earlier in the poem, the speaker could only tend to her husband "as he slept"; while awake, he'd swat her away. Now, though, the speaker is able to "stroke his saffron hide" and bury her fingers "deep in his ruff," or the thick hair around his head. Note the gentle sibilance, breathy /h/ alliteration, and muffled /f/ consonance of these lines:

> I stroke his saffron hide
> and tangle my fingers deep in his ruff,

The soft sounds of the poem at this moment reflect the softness of the speaker's caress. By stroking his skin like this, she uses touch only for tenderness and intimacy. She had touched him tenderly in earlier moments, but those centered on her assisting him as he adapted to his body (loosening his muscles, for instance). Now, the speaker is able to pull him close to her for comfort and affection, and they both seem eager to be intimate with each other.

Their coming together thus shows how far their relationship has progressed: the husband, perhaps moved by his wife's dedication to him, is less closed off and willingly accepts her advances. She has shown steadfast love and patience throughout his transition into this very different creature, as well as a clear acceptance of who he is. He, in turn, lets down his guard here, perhaps peeling away some of the "pride" of the poem's title.

The reader might interpret these lines as the speaker instigating sex with her husband. Now that they have both overcome the difficulties of his change, she wants to be with him. She is "ardent," a word that means enthusiastic or passionate, and she reads the look in his "topaz," or golden, eyes as ardent too.

LINES 21-22

– the hypnotic ...
... on my thighs.

Whereas stanzas 1-5 each end with the firm pause of a period, stanza 6 ends without punctuation and continues its intimate scene into the final stanza:

> as the gleam of his topaz eyes
> – the hypnotic lash of his tail,

The lack of punctuation at the end of stanza 6 invites the reader to jump quickly into stanza 7, perhaps evoking the speaker's excitement at this moment.

The grammar of these final lines depends on the word "ardent," which appeared at the end of line 19. That word applies to each clause that follows: the speaker is ardent, the gleam in her husband's eyes is ardent, and both the hypnotic movement of his tail and the lick of his tongue are ardent. The scene thus bursts with intensity and desire.

Animals often swing their tails back and forth in excitement, and the husband's tongue on his wife's thighs shows a quick glimpse of vulnerability and enjoyment, the culmination of partners joining in pleasure after finally achieving a sense of mutual trust and openness. As if to emphasize their newfound sense of cooperation, the poem ends with its only pure rhyme ("eyes"/"thighs"), driving home the image of the couple as a balanced pair.

The speaker has shown constant love and support toward her husband, and these final moments of intimacy might read as a kind of reward for her self-sacrifice. That's not the only way to interpret them, however. Indeed, the word "hypnotic" might feel a little unsettling. While it might convey the speaker innocently expressing attraction to her husband, it *also* might create the sense that the speaker isn't totally in control here.

The reader should be open to the possibility that the husband has indeed mesmerized the speaker—that she is dangerously enthralled by him and has lost her own sense of autonomy in this relationship. All her self-sacrifice might also be the result of her fulfilling expected gender roles in a relationship where she's not on equal footing with her partner. In this reading, the poem serves as a warning against the dangers of conforming to expectations within a marriage that women be submissive, subservient, and accomodating.

To that end, the word "lash" is violent, much like "slapped" and "snarled" earlier in the poem. This language reminds readers that the speaker's husband remains a powerful and potentially threatening creature.

In the end, then, it's up to readers whether the poem creates a portrait of a couple overcoming dramatic changes in their relationship through love, acceptance, and self-sacrifice, or if it's a portrait of a dangerous, toxic, and potentially abusive dynamic in which a woman loses herself in an effort to be what her partner wants and needs.

SYMBOLS

THE LION

"The Pride of Lions" can be read literally, with the husband physically transforming into a lion in a mythical, magical world. The poem can also be read as an extended metaphor, with the husband described in lion terms from stanza to stanza in order to indicate certain changes in his personality and demeanor. In both cases, however, the lion might symbolize the negative aspects of traditional masculinity.

Such masculinity demands that men be aggressive, don't openly show their emotions, and remain in control of their surroundings. The husband exhibits all of these behaviors after his transformation, and they likely would have destroyed their relationship if the narrator had not displayed such unwavering patience and love toward him. In this way, the poem might be commenting on the ways that stereotypical, toxic masculinity can threaten loving partnerships.

The lion is also a symbol of a king (as in, "the king of the jungle")—of someone who is in charge, who is strong, fearless, and tough. But the poem shows that a healthy marriage cannot thrive with a king/subject dynamic. A healthy relationship, the poem implies, depends on an equal partnership. In this case, the husband must abandon harmful expectations of masculine behavior; he must relinquish his "pride," admit his vulnerability, and be open to his wife's help.

That said, it is possible to take a less positive view of this relationship. In a different reading of the poem, just as the husband displays stereotypically masculine traits, his wife plays into the role of the docile and submissive female partner. Perhaps she finds a sense of empowerment and satisfaction in doing so, or perhaps in catering to his needs she risks losing part of herself.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-5
- Lines 7-13
- Lines 16-18
- Lines 19-22

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears throughout the poem, filling its lines with sonic interest and intensity. Line 1, for example, opens in a striking manner with the conjunction "But," and that bold /b/ sound carries on in the unstressed initial syllables of "before" and "became" before resounding heavily again with the word

"beast."

Elsewhere, alliterative words appear closer together and help call attention to the poem's imagery. Take the tangled /m/ sounds of "matted his mane" in line 7, for example, or the crisp /c/ sounds of "claws caught in the carpet," the sharpness of which evokes those scratching claws getting trapped in the carpet fibers.

At times alliteration travels down lines, as in lines 11-12: "or drink milk, / but tore meat," and even down stanzas, as in lines 20-22: "of his topaz eyes // – the hypnotic lash of his tail, / the rasp of his tongue." In a poem without a clear rhyme scheme or meter, alliteration helps to lend the poem a sense of music and to keep the reader engaged.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "But," "before," "became"
- **Line 2:** "beast"
- **Line 3:** "switch"
- **Line 4:** "slung," "blades"
- **Line 5:** "burls"
- **Line 6:** "burnished," "slept"
- **Line 7:** "Burrs," "matted," "mane"
- **Line 9:** "slapped," "suede"
- **Line 10:** "snarled"
- **Line 11:** "milk"
- **Line 12:** "meat"
- **Line 13:** "claws," "caught," "carpet"
- **Line 17:** "stroke," "saffron"
- **Line 18:** "deep"
- **Line 19:** "draw"
- **Line 20:** "topaz"
- **Line 21:** "tail"
- **Line 22:** "tongue"

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery allows the reader to see, feel, smell, and hear the lion-husband and his surroundings.

The speaker never describes herself in the poem. Instead, she uses descriptive language to show her husband in his transformed state. She says that he is "thick pelted," words that don't simply evoke the *look* of the lion's skin but also the way it *feels* to the touch. In the same line, the speaker draws on smell, describing the husband's newly animalistic scent as "rich with the musk of beast." With this imagery, the speaker brings the lion to life; he immediately becomes an undeniable presence on the page.

The speaker uses similarly vivid imagery throughout the poem, engaging readers' senses and bringing them into contact with this animal. Readers can picture the lion's bulk "slung from the blades of his shoulders" and the thick knots of his muscles in his "saffron hide"; feel the prickly burrs tangled in his mane; and hear the "slap[]" of his paw, his "snarl[]" at the speaker's neck, the scratch of his claws pulling up threads of carpet, and the sound of nails tapping against the hardwood floor, which ring out musically as a "chime."

The poem's dynamic imagery thus provides an almost tangible experience for readers: in addition to seeing the lion, readers might just smell him and feel his thick skin and long hair with their own hands.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Lines 3-6
- Lines 7-10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 17-20
- Lines 21-22

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment pops up a handful of times in the poem, and these moments stand out clearly because the majority of the lines are end-stopped. This enjambment creates a couple of different effects.

For one thing, enjambment pulls the reader down the page, pushing them quickly from one line to the next. This lends the poem a feeling of urgency in momentum at certain moments, as in the lines:

> The switch to all fours was not easy – all his weight
> slung from the blades of his shoulders
> [...]
> Burrs matted his mane, and for days
> he wouldn't let me groom him –
> [...]
> draw him up around me, ardent
> as the gleam of his topaz eyes

Notice how in each of these three examples the enjambed phrase begins after a caesura (marked by the punctuation in the middle of the lines). The result is that after a pause in the *middle* of the line, the reader must rush past the *end* of the line in order to reach the grammatical completion of the phrase at hand. This creates tension and a quickened pace. (Note, too, how the pull of the enjambment between "weight / slung" in the first example above also seems to lend the line itself some heaviness, evoking the very "weight" being described.)

Interestingly, the end of line 20 gives the impression of enjambment without actually using enjambment:

> as the gleam of his topaz eyes
> – the hypnotic lash of his tail

Because there's no punctuation at the end of line 20, the reader will move down to the next line expecting the words to flow onward smoothly. But the surprising dash at the start of line 21 creates an abrupt pause at the line's beginning. This unexpected change of rhythm is much like the quick jolting of the lion's tail that has mesmerized the speaker.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "weight / slung"
- **Lines 7-8:** "days / he"
- **Lines 14-15:** "floor / and"
- **Lines 15-16:** "gleamed / and"
- **Lines 17-18:** "hide / and"
- **Lines 19-20:** "ardent / as"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton occurs in moments of intense action in the poem. The first example comes in stanza 3 as the speaker attempts to groom her lion-husband, a slow action that requires time and patience. The husband's first reaction is to refuse this help, and the poet's intentional omission of conjunctions brings the husband's actions to the reader in a quick, frantic manner:

> slapped me away with a suede paw,
> snarled against my throat.

Hear the difference with this manipulated version:

> but slapped me away with a suede paw,
> and snarled against my throat.

This altered version isn't quite as striking as the original, which hits the reader right away with these troubling actions. Thanks to asyndeton, each line begins on a strong, stressed syllable as well; had the speaker begun the lines with a conjunction, the opening beat would be unstressed, and far less jolting: "slapped me" vs. "but slapped"; "snarled against" vs. "and snarled." This scene is a disruptive moment in their relationship, so it makes sense that it *sounds* jarring.

Likewise, the asyndeton in line 19 comes at an intense moment for the speaker. For much of the poem, the speaker's actions towards her husband have been slow and under control: rubbing his muscles, grooming him, polishing the floor. But when the speaker demonstrates both her own power and her desire, the verb showing her action begins the line without a conjunction:

> and tangle my fingers deep in his ruff,
> draw him up around me,

As with the husband in stanza 3, here the technique highlights the speaker's intensity and strength, as well as the suddenness of this action.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "slapped me away with a suede paw, / snarled against my throat."
- **Lines 18-19:** "and tangle my fingers deep in his ruff, / draw him up around me,"
- **Lines 19-22:** "ardent / as the gleam of his topaz eyes / – the hypnotic lash of his tail, / the rasp of his tongue on my thighs."

EXTENDED METAPHOR

In line 1, the speaker says that her husband "became a lion" shortly before their marriage. That description might be relaying an actual event (meaning the poem takes place in a fantastical world). The poem does indeed treat this transformation literally, always referring to the husband's body in lion terms.

That said, the line also might mark the beginning of an allegory or extended metaphor meant to illustrate what happens when one partner in a relationship suddenly, drastically changes. Perhaps the speaker is describing how her husband took on qualities associated with lions, suddenly becoming combative, withholding, or even frightening to her.

Whether readers take this transformation as literal or not, the interactions between the speaker and her lion-husband mirror real-life struggles faced by many human partners, especially in new relationships, as they try to navigate each others' vulnerabilities and needs.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 7-10
- Lines 11-12
- Line 13
- Line 16
- Lines 17-18
- Lines 20-22

PUN

The title "The Pride of Lions" is itself a pun: the word "pride" can refer to a family unit of lions, but it can also refer to a person's ego or sense of self-respect.

The use of the article "the" in the title emphasizes this double meaning: were the poem titled "A Pride of Lions," then readers would probably assume it was about a lion family. Additionally, the phrase "the pride" can colloquially refer to a person held in high regard by others, as in, "he's the pride of the neighborhood."

Thus, in four carefully arranged words, the poem's title suggests a family structure (and the power dynamics within that structure), one person's sense of self, and a community's lofty elevation of an individual. In the poem, the reader sees that the husband is too prideful and needs to welcome the assistance of his wife. The poem is also about a family unit, and the reader sees that the male-controlled family unit is not the most beneficial to either member.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

VOCABULARY

Thick pelted (Lines 1-2) - A "pelt" is an animal skin; "thick pelted" implies that the husband's skin as a lion is strong and sturdy.

Musk (Line 2) - A strong, heavy smell. The word refers to a specific smell put out by male musk deer, so it is associated with both males and animals. It is frequently used to describe any smell that is potent and that lingers.

Deltoids (Line 5) - Shoulder muscles.

Teak burls (Line 5) - "Teak" refers to a tall, hardwood tree, while a "burl" is a knot or bump that grows on a tree. The husband's swelling enlarged shoulder muscles are like the hard, round outgrowths that occur in trees when stressed or diseased.

Burnished (Line 6) - To burnish an object is to rub it in order to make it shine. Items people might burnish include valuable cups, plates, swords, and jewelry. The speaker burnishing her husband's knotted shoulders implies that she considers her husband to be precious.

Burrs (Line 7) - Round seed containers found on some plants. They're covered in sharp prickles and they can easily get caught in animals' hair.

Matted his mane (Line 7) - Tangled up in the long hair around the husband's head.

Saffron hide (Line 17) - Yellowish-orange skin.

Ruff (Line 18) - A circle of hair or feathers growing around the neck. In the context of the poem, the ruff is the lion's mane, which was previously tangled with burrs but is now tangled with the speaker's fingers. The word "ruff" can also have sexual connotations, as it's the name of a bird that has erectile feathers around its neck during breeding season.

Ardent (Lines 19-20) - Eager and excited.

Topaz (Line 20) - Topaz can refer to a gemstone or to its yellow/yellowish-brown color. Here, the word not only describes the golden color of the husband's eyes but again compares him to something precious.

Rasp (Line 22) - Rough scraping.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Pride of Lions" consists of 22 lines broken up into seven stanzas (themselves a mixture of couplets and quatrains). Where there's no rhyme scheme or steady meter, most of the poem's lines are visually similar in length and generally stay within a few syllables of each other, creating a sense of uniformity from stanza to stanza. The stanzas also create a mirror-like structure with the three couplets at the beginning, middle, and end:

- Couplet
- *Quatrain*
- *Quatrain*
- Couplet
- *Quatrain*
- *Quatrain*
- Couplet

This structure offers a pleasing balance, which might reflect the balance the couple achieves at the end of the poem. Of course, to some readers, it might seem as if a pattern was established but left incomplete. That is, they might expect another two quatrains to follow that final couplet, but they never arrive.

METER

"The Pride of Lions" is a free verse poem: it doesn't follow a strict meter, instead featuring conversational, unpredictable rhythms that the poet manipulates to make certain moments stand out to the reader's ear.

Most of the lines contain three or four stressed beats and use a rising rhythm (meaning each poetic foot, or unit, moves from unstressed to stressed beats). Lines that have a rising rhythm open with an iamb (da-DUM) or an anapest (da-da-DUM). For example, line 18 consists of an iamb, an anapest, an iamb, and finally another anapest:

and tan- | gle my fing- | ers deep | in his ruff,

The poem occasionally switches things up, beginning lines with a trochee (DUM-da, like the word "trochee" itself) or a dactyl (DUM-da-da) to create a *falling* rhythm. For example, line 4 consists of a dactyl, a dactyl, and a trochee:

slung from the | blades of his | shoulders.

While a *rising* rhythm more closely mimics the speech patterns of the English language, a *falling* rhythm can be an effective tool for jarring the reader in intense moments. For example, note

how lines 9 and 10 both begin with stressed beats:

> slapped me [...]
> snarled against [...]

In a few spots, the poet places two stressed beats right next to each other. Listen to line 13, for example, where the stressed beats of "claws" and "caught" seem to trip up the line's rising rhythm, evoking the way that the lion's nails get snagged in the carpet:

> His claws caught in the carpet,

RHYME SCHEME

A free verse poem, "The Pride of Lions" doesn't have a rhyme scheme. As with the poem's lack of meter, this keeps things sounding conversational and unpredictable.

The poem does have has one end rhyme, however, which shows up in lines 20 and 22:

> as the gleam of his topaz eyes
> – the hypnotic lash of his tail,
> the rasp of his tongue on my thighs.

This rhyme takes the reader by surprise: the poem has entirely avoided rhyme so far, so the reader probably hasn't been listening for it. The final word in the poem, "thighs," thus stands out all the more clearly and lends the poem a satisfying-sounding conclusion.

In a way, the poem also ends by enacting, through sound, the connection experienced by the speaker and her husband, with each word referring back to their bodies (his "eyes" and her "thighs").

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Pride of Lions" is someone in the early stages of a marriage. The poem itself never says that the speaker is a woman, though Preston has said that she wrote it "from the point of view of a female partner."

Indeed, the poem does seem to critique (or at least comment on) antiquated gender roles within the structure of marriage: the husband might be reluctant to accept help because his masculine pride demands he be independent and stoic, while the speaker readily takes on a more traditionally female role of a caregiver—preparing food for her partner, fixing up the house, and so forth.

In any case, what's clear is that the speaker is someone who loves and accepts her husband. She demonstrates a great deal of patience with him throughout the poem, persisting "for days" even when he won't let her groom him. She shows love to her husband through her many actions in service to him—rubbing his sore muscles, for example. And she remains attracted to her husband despite his transformation and his selfish behavior, revealed by the fact that she instigates physical intimacy at the poem's end.

Whether the speaker's selfless love for her partner is admirable, dangerous, or a little bit of both is up to the reader to decide.

SETTING

The poem might take place in a mythical world where a human being can actually transform into a lion. The poem also might take place in a realistic setting in which the husband remains human and is simply being compared to a lion as part of an extended metaphor.

In either case, the physical world around the two characters remains sparse and domestic. The mention of rugs and hardwood floors suggests that the speaker is describing scenes from their home life, something for which her husband is no longer suited. In terms of its timeline, the poem begins just before their marriage, moves on to describe the early days of their life together after the husband's transformation, and ends after some time has presumably passed and the couple has grown more comfortable.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Pride of Lions" was collected in Joanna Preston's first book, *The Summer King*, published in 2009. It had earlier appeared in the 2005 edition of *The Best Australian Poems*.

Preston has written that an impetus behind the poem was *The Book of St. Albans*, which was published in 1486 and is mostly about hunting, hawking, and heraldry. It also contains a long list of unique collective nouns at its end, such as "a pride of lions" or "a gaggle of geese," which inspired a sequence in *The Summer King*. "The Pride of Lions" is the first in this "Venery" sequence of poems, each of which responds to one collective noun. The sequence's title "Venery," meanwhile, can refer both to hunting and sexual indulgence.

As a poem that invites the reader to analyze the behavior of an animal, "The Pride of Lions" is also related to a genre of writing known as a bestiary. Bestiaries are collections of writings in prose or verse that describe the behaviors of actual and mythical animals and then offer an interpretation for the reader to absorb. The genre dates back to the ancient period and was extremely popular in the medieval era.

"The Pride of Lions" is further reminiscent of folklore, fairy tales, and myths, which frequently feature people being

transformed into animals (often by vengeful gods). The poem also can be read as an example of magical realism, which is a genre of writing popularized in the 20th century in which magical characters and experiences exist not in a fantasy world but in realistic settings.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Joanna Preston was born in Australia in 1972 but has lived in New Zealand since 1993. As a child, she spent time in rural towns in New South Wales as well as on her grandparents' farm.

The poem does not appear to be influenced by any specific cultural or political events in New Zealand or Australia in the early 21st century. In fact, it "started from a bit of trivia," Preston has written. "I came across a reference to the surname *Singh* meaning *lion*, and being a name that a Sikh man takes when being baptised into that faith. [...] I started to wonder what it would be like if someone *literally* became a lion – the physical consequences, as well as the emotional and psychological."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Book of Saint Albans — Read all about the 1486 book that inspired Preston's poem. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Saint_Albans)
- The Poet's Personal Website — Learn more about the poet through her personal website and blog. She even has a post titled "The Pride of Lions - a guide for students" in which she shares background information on the poem and offers insightful discussion questions. (https://joannapreston.com/)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a recording of Preston's poem. (https://music.amazon.com/podcasts/fddee3dc-aa77-4fc4-bbb2-0bce814e1bc8/episodes/cbdef278-7ac5-4e97-878e-18702354d85d/poetry-plain-and-simple-the-pride-of-lions-by-joanna-preston)
- What Are Lions Like? — Learn some fascinating facts about the king of the jungle. (https://onekindplanet.org/animal/lion/)

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