Roe-Deer

🗒 SUMMARY

The speaker tells the story of an encounter with a pair of deer. It was in the low light of early morning on the year's snowiest day, the speaker remembers, that two deer appeared in the road and stopped to stare.

The deer seemed to have crossed over from another world just as the speaker got to this spot.

They'd been living their secluded, mysterious deer-lives for two or three years, the speaker says, and now here they were, suddenly visible through the snow, feeling like an otherworldly anomaly.

They froze in the middle of the disorienting snowfall to stare at the speaker.

And, for a minute, the speaker says, it felt as if the deer were just waiting for the speaker to say a magic word or make a gesture.

It felt as if the speaker were seeing into another world, where everything was different. On this boundary, feeling as if the trees and the road were no longer themselves, it felt as if the deer had come to fetch the speaker.

But finally, the deer took off, passing the hedges at the side of the road and trotting stiffly away down an empty, snowy hill.

Making their way toward the dark woods on the other side of a field, the deer looked as if they were whirling up into the air.

At last, they disappeared into the wild snow. Not only the deer, but their tracks vanished, the speaker remembers.

It seemed as if the snow were revising a poem, erasing a moment of pure inspiration and changing the world into something perfectly ordinary again.

◉ THEMES

THE MYSTERY OF NATURE

In "Roe-Deer," the speaker's encounter with the animal kingdom feels like getting a glimpse of a whole different world. Out for a dawn walk on a snowy winter morning, the speaker runs into two still, silent, watchful deer and feels for a moment as if a "curtain" between two worlds has been drawn back. The deer seem as if they might just be waiting for a "sign" to spirit the speaker away into their own "dimension," their strangeness reminding the speaker of the divide between humanity and nature. An encounter with animals, the poem suggests, can remind people that their own perspective is limited—and that the world is bigger and

stranger than they might think.

When the speaker goes out for an early-morning walk in a snowstorm and runs into two staring deer, their meeting feels like a moment of contact with a world that's usually hidden from human beings. Transfixed by this vision of "secret deerhood," the speaker feels as if the deer are visitors from another "dimension," offering an invitation beyond the "curtain" of everyday life. To the deer, the speaker realizes, this landscape is a completely different place than it is for people. Standing on the edge of the deer's world, the speaker feels that the "trees were no longer trees, nor the road a road"—lines that suggest that, to a deer, the concept of a "road" or a "tree" simply doesn't exist in the same way it does for a person. The deer, the speaker sees, live lives utterly and mysteriously separate from humanity's, and the speaker's own way of seeing the world is just one among many.

This moment of contact between animal and human thus gives the speaker a glimpse of just how mysterious the world really is—and how much people can't see as they go about their daily lives. When the deer at last walk away and the snow erases their footprints, the speaker feels the world has gone "back to the ordinary." But the "ordinary," the poem suggests, is only one way to see things—and perhaps it's even a limiting "curtain," a veil between people and the living world around them. Encounters with nature can thus remind people that the world is a rich, strange, and magical place, full of possibilities they might not even be able to imagine.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

🔍 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

In the dawn-dirty …
… arriving just there.

The first stanza of "Roe-Deer" works like a stage curtain rising to reveal a mysterious scene. Take a look at the anaphora in the first line:

> **In the** dawn-dirty light, **in the** biggest snow of the
> year

That repeated "in the" creates anticipation: what is it that the speaker will see "in the" early light and the snow? The second line reveals all:

Two blue-dark deer stood in the road, alerted.

The imagery of those "blue-dark" deer in "dawn-dirty light" draws readers right into the scene: this is the early, early morning, with heavy snow-clouds letting only dim, shadowless light through. The speaker, presumably out for a walk (or perhaps a drive), has come across two deer in the middle of the road. The single word "alerted" paints a vivid picture of the deer's turned heads and pricked ears, suddenly aware of the speaker's presence. And all on their own, these sights also conjure sounds—or the lack of them: the muffled quiet of a snowy dawn.

The speaker's encounter with those two deer in this silent landscape already feels more like a first contact with aliens than a picturesque moment in the countryside. These deer, the speaker goes on in the second stanza, seem as if they've come from another "dimension" at exactly "the moment I was arriving just there," a phrasing that insists on how unexpected and fortuitous this meeting feels. If the speaker or the deer had turned up just a few seconds later, their "dimensions" couldn't have overlapped this way. Through this chance meeting, the speaker will catch a glimpse of a whole different world.

This free verse poem's shape will mirror the speaker's vision of nature's strangeness. Readers may already have noticed that most of the stanzas here are unrhymed couplets: they arrive two by two, like the two deer themselves. (One notable exception will appear later on—keep an eye out!)

And while the poem doesn't use rhyme, it does use intense patterns of sound to create music and atmosphere. Listen again to those first two lines:

> In the dawn-dirty light, in the biggest snow of the
> year
> Two blue-dark deer stood in the road, alerted.

Here, /d/ and /b/ alliteration sounds like muffled footsteps in snow; /oh/ and /oo/ assonance evokes a faint winter wind, the only sound in a silent world.

LINES 5-8

> They planted their ...
> ... stared at me.

As the speaker and the deer stare at each other in the dim morning light, the world begins to turn strange. Already, the speaker feels as if the deer are a mystery: their "two or three years of secret deerhood," their unseen lives before now, have become suddenly visible, as if by magic.

Listen to the metaphors the speaker uses to describe what it's like to look at these animals as they "stare[]" back. The deer "planted" themselves, the speaker says:

> Clear on my snow-screen vision of the abnormal

And hesitated in the all-way disintegration

The deer might be "clear," but that "snow-screen vision" is disorienting in more ways than one:

- That "screen" might suggest a backdrop of white snow, like a movie screen, upon which the "blue-dark" shapes of the deer show up.
- But it might also suggest a screen of snowflakes in *front* of the deer, through which their outlines nevertheless stand out.
- For that matter, it might suggest both at once! Readers who have been out in a heavy snowstorm will know that snow really can blur the boundaries between background and foreground, making it hard to judge depth and distance.

That feeling of disorientation gets even stronger when the speaker describes an "all-way disintegration." This image suggests the flying snow makes it look as if the world is coming apart into tiny pieces. But it also suggests that something *else* is coming apart: the speaker's usual way of seeing the world. Something about the vision of these deer seems to break down the speaker's ordinary perceptions.

Perhaps part of the speaker's disorientation comes from the fact that the speaker and deer are doing exactly the same thing: freezing to stare at each other. Mirrored, they're both the same as each other and alien to each other.

Meanwhile, the poem's language makes time seem to slow down. Listen to the anaphora (and polysyndeton) here:

> And hesitated in the all-way disintegration
> And stared at me. And for some lasting seconds [...]

All these "and"s in a row make those "lasting seconds" seem to fall one by one, slow as the drips that form an icicle.

LINES 8-13

> And for some ...
> ... come for me.

The speaker's vision of the deer already feels like a disorienting moment of contact with "secret," alien lives. Now, as the "lasting seconds" stretch out, it's as if the world itself changes; the metaphorical "curtain" that separates human and animal has "blown aside." Now, it feels as if the speaker would only have to "remember the password and sign" to step across the border and into the deer's world.

The idea that the speaker might "remember" a password here suggests that the deer's world isn't *totally* alien. The speaker, perhaps, has been there before. And part of that sense of uncanny familiarity might come from what the speaker can glimpse beyond the imagined "curtain." In this place, the

speaker says:

> the **trees** were no longer **trees**, nor the **road** a **road**

The [diacope](link) highlighted here suggests that the speaker is seeing something that *there are no words for*: all the speaker can do to begin to describe this vision is to repeat the same word and negate it.

In the deer's world, in other words, language doesn't exist—and neither do the concepts of "trees" and "road" as humanity knows them. The deer are extending an invitation to a world that isn't seen through a "curtain" of language—or familiarity, or categories.

If this is a world the speaker might just be able to "remember" the password to, perhaps it's even a vision of the world the way it looks to humans before they've *acquired* language or familiarity with the world: the time when they're pre-verbal babies and everything seems new and strange. In other words, the world the speaker seems to sense in this encounter with the deer is a whole different kind of reality—and it's right there, so close that the speaker can almost touch it.

Here, the poem introduces its single stand-alone line, the one stanza that isn't a [couplet](link):

> The deer had come for me.

This single line suggests the thin, thin border the speaker would have to step across to join the deer in their world.

LINES 14-18

> *Then they ducked ...*
> *... of big flakes.*

The speaker's moment of contact with the deer's strange and wordless world only lasts a second; the "password" just doesn't come back to the speaker in time. There's no way, this moment suggests, for a person to completely make that crossing, no matter how thin the boundary between worlds seems. A fleeting glimpse behind the "curtain" might be the best one can do.

Instead, everyday reality intrudes again. When a human being and some deer stare at each other for long enough, the deer are eventually going to run away.

The speaker watches attentively as the deer break their stillness and trot off. Take a look at the [imagery](link) here:

> Then they ducked through the hedge, and **upright**
> **they rode their legs**
> Away downhill over a snow-lonely field

This picture will be familiar to any reader who's had an encounter at all like the speaker's: trotting deer indeed seem to be "riding" their legs, keeping their upper bodies still and alert as their feet move beneath them. Readers might also hear some of the speaker's feelings in the [assonance](link) here: the long /oh/ of "snow-lonely" (and the word "lonely" itself!) suggest an "oh!" of longing and disappointment.

But there's no crossing the border now: the deer are gone. In fact, they seem to become a part of the "all-way disintegration" of the snow, melting into their own "dimension" again. Listen to the way the speaker uses [enjambments](link) in these lines:

> [...] downhill over a snow-lonely **field**
> **Towards** tree dark—**finally**
> **Seeming** to eddy and glide and fly away **up**
> **Into** the boil of big flakes.

By running not just lines, but whole stanzas seamlessly into each other, these enjambments suggest just how swiftly and smoothly the deer dissolve back into the crazed, whirling "boil" of the snow—and into their own secret world.

LINES 19-21

> *The snow took ...*
> *... to the ordinary*

Glimpses beyond the "curtain" of the everyday, the poem concludes, are as fleeting as they're compelling. As much as the speaker might like to follow the deer into their wordless world, the vision of a different reality melts away—and so does even the memory of what that vision felt like.

As the snow erases all trace of the deer, the speaker imagines it as a second-guessing poet:

> Revising its dawn inspiration
> Back to the ordinary

This moment of [personification](link) hints that it's not just rare (and magical, and lucky) to get a glimpse of what the world looks like when one gets outside one's usual perceptions. It's also hard to *capture* and *remember* those transcendent moments—to keep them from fading right back into the "ordinary."

But then, that's exactly what this poem tries to do. By recording this glimpse of how the world looks beyond the boundaries of language, this poem's speaker captures both what's special and what's slippery about these moments. Reality, this poem suggests, is much, much bigger, richer, and stranger than human consciousness can usually admit. And a moment of connection with another kind of creature can remind human beings that, in truth, nothing in the world is "ordinary."

🛠 POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

Rich imagery helps readers to feel as if they're standing alongside the speaker, sharing a mysterious encounter with a pair of deer.

The poem begins by vividly painting the moment of this encounter:

> In the dawn-dirty light, in the biggest snow of the year
> Two blue-dark deer stood in the road, alerted.

That "dawn-dirty light" suggests the grayness of low winter sunlight through thick clouds; this is the kind of light that isn't even strong enough to make shadows. And it's so early that the deer, when they appear, are only "blue-dark" shapes against what the speaker will later call the "all-way disintegration" of snowflakes flurrying through the air. This is a vivid, exact image of a tricky, blurred, dimly lit landscape.

And listen to what happens at the end of the poem when the deer break the speaker's stare and trot away:

> [...] upright they rode their legs
> Away downhill over a snow-lonely field
> Towards tree dark [...]

The image of the deer "riding" their legs will be familiar to anyone who's ever watched a deer hot-footing it away: even as their legs move, their upper bodies stay upright, still, and watchful. As they disappear into the "tree dark"—that is, the shadow of the trees on the other side of that "snow-lonely" field—the speaker feels as if a portal to another world has closed right back up again.

> **Where Imagery appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 1-2:** "In the dawn-dirty light, in the biggest snow of the year / Two blue-dark deer stood in the road, alerted."
> - **Lines 14-18:** "Then they ducked through the hedge, and upright they rode their legs / Away downhill over a snow-lonely field / Towards tree dark—finally / Seeming to eddy and glide and fly away up / Into the boil of big flakes."

METAPHOR

Metaphors create a mood of disorientation and suspense as the speaker stands on the boundary between the human and animal worlds.

When the speaker first stops to stare at the deer, they appear against a "snow-screen vision of the abnormal." That image of the snow as a screen might suggest two opposite things at once:

- That the deer are highlighted *against* a "screen" of snow, like images projected on a wall
- Or that the deer are "clear" in spite of being *behind* a "screen" of snowflakes

That difficulty judging between background and foreground will be familiar to anyone who's been disoriented in a heavy snowstorm. But what really matters here is how the deer seem to break through this confusion, a crystal-clear "vision of the abnormal."

There's a similar sense of confusion and boundary-crossing when the speaker describes the snowfall as "the all-way disintegration." This metaphor suggests that the snow makes it look as if the world itself is coming apart into countless millions of tiny pieces. The speaker's encounter with the deer clearly feels like a step right up to the border of reality as the speaker knows it!

And the poem makes that point yet again when the speaker feels as if "the curtain had blown aside for a moment." That "curtain" suggests a veil of illusion: perhaps, for example, the scrim of habit that makes the world look ordinary and mundane. Seeing these deer gives the speaker a glimpse into a deeper, richer, more mysterious reality.

But such moments, alas, don't last forever. As the deer finally trot off and vanish into the "boil of big flakes"—itself a metaphor suggesting the snow's crazy, roiling motion, like bubbles in a pot of boiling water—the speaker imagines the snow as a person. More specifically, the speaker sees the snow as a *writer*: a person having second thoughts about a brilliant moment of "inspiration" and erasing it, turning the day "ordinary" again. This moment of personification hints that the speaker (perhaps representing the poet Hughes himself) understands just how hard it is to keep one's eyes open to the real mystery and magic of the world, and not to erase glimpses beyond the "curtain" of familiarity.

> **Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 6:** "my snow-screen vision of the abnormal"
> - **Line 7:** "the all-way disintegration"
> - **Line 11:** "the curtain had blown aside for a moment"
> - **Line 18:** "the boil of big flakes."
> - **Lines 19-21:** "The snow took them and soon their nearby hoofprints as well / Revising its dawn inspiration / Back to the ordinary"

REPETITION

The poem's repetitions help to create its awestruck tone.

Many of the repetitions here come in the form of anaphora.

Listen to what happens in the first lines, for instance:

> **In the** dawn-dirty light, **in the** biggest snow of the
> year

That repeated phrasing helps the scene to unfold slowly; the speaker gives readers a glimpse of one part of the landscape at a time, building up a little tension before revealing what the speaker saw in the midst of that snowy, "dawn-dirty" landscape.

The second and third stanzas also use anaphora:

> **They** had happened into my dimension
> The moment I was arriving just there.
> **They** planted their two or three years of secret
> deerhood [...]

Here, the repeated "they" suggests time stretching out as the speaker stares at the deer; there's plenty of time in this single "moment" for the speaker to reflect on where these deer came from and the "secret" lives they've lived.

The arrival of the deer makes the world seem suddenly strange to the speaker. Listen to the way diacope underscores that strangeness in line 12:

> And there where the **trees** were no longer **trees**, nor
> the **road** a **road**

These repetitions suggest that the speaker can suddenly see that the "trees" and "road" might not be as matter-of-fact as they usually appear, seen from the borderline between the animal and human worlds. But there's no new word to *replace* "trees" or "road" in the speaker's mind; all the poem can say is that, in this moment, the trees and the road are no longer what they were.

This glimpse of an unfamiliar world makes the speaker feel as if the deer are waiting for some response, ready to usher the speaker over the border of their world. Parallelism emphasizes that feeling of being beckoned. Take a look at the similar phrasing in lines 9 and 13:

> I could think **the deer were waiting for me**
> [...]
> **The deer had come for me.**

Repeating this similar idea with slightly different phrasing, the poem evokes a feeling that's both mysterious and unshakeable: the deer are extending an invitation that the speaker doesn't quite know how to take them up on.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "In the," "in the"
- **Line 3:** "They"
- **Line 5:** "They"
- **Line 7:** "And hesitated"
- **Line 8:** "And stared," "And"
- **Line 9:** "the deer were waiting for me"
- **Line 12:** "the trees were no longer trees, nor the road a road"
- **Line 13:** "The deer had come for me."

ENJAMBMENT

In the first part of the poem, enjambments help to evoke the speaker's entranced fascination with the deer. For instance, take a look at the enjambments in lines 3-6:

> They had happened into my **dimension**
> **The** moment I was arriving just there.
> They planted their two or three years of secret
> **deerhood**
> **Clear** on my snow-screen vision of the abnormal

By carrying thoughts seamlessly over line breaks, these stanzas evoke a stretch of timeless-feeling watchfulness: the rhythm of the lines here makes it feel as if the speaker and the deer are holding perfectly still to stare at each other, drawing the long moment out.

But enjambment also works in the opposite way, suggesting speedy motion and change. Look what happens when the deer finally trot away:

> Then they ducked through the hedge, and upright
> they rode their **legs**
> **Away** downhill over a snow-lonely **field**
> **Towards** tree dark—**finally**
> **Seeming** to eddy and glide and fly away **up**
> **Into** the boil of big flakes.

Crossing not just line breaks but stanza breaks, this long series of enjambments suggests the deer's steady progress across the field, away from the speaker, and out of sight forever.

By suggesting both drawn-out stillnesses and movement, then, enjambments reflect the poem's action, helping readers to share in the speaker's experiences with their ears as well as their mind's eyes.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "dimension / The"
- **Lines 5-6:** "deerhood / Clear"
- **Lines 8-9:** "seconds / I"
- **Lines 9-10:** "me / To"

- **Lines 14-15:** "legs / Away"
- **Lines 15-16:** "field / Towards"
- **Lines 16-17:** "finally / Seeming"
- **Lines 17-18:** "up / Into"
- **Lines 20-21:** "inspiration / Back"

CAESURA

[Caesurae](link) give parts of the poem a slow, swinging pace, evoking the speaker's rapt fascination with the deer.

For example, take a look at what happens in the first two lines:

> In the dawn-dirty light, || in the biggest snow of the
> year
> Two blue-dark deer stood in the road, || alerted.

Like the speaker and the deer, these lines *pause*, arrested in the middle of what they were doing. These caesurae suggest the careful movements of human and animal alike as, "alerted" to each other, they stand still and watch.

There's a similar pause in the fourth stanza:

> And hesitated in the all-way disintegration
> And stared at me. || And for some lasting seconds

That solid full stop evokes the "lasting seconds" of suspense the line describes, creating a moment of stillness and quiet in the middle of the verse.

And toward the end of the poem, another caesura marks the deer's departure:

> Away downhill over a snow-lonely field
> Towards tree dark— || finally
> Seeming to eddy and glide and fly away up

As the deer make their way across the field, they seem to be absorbed by the snow; the dash here marks a transition as they're finally lost to the speaker's sight. This more abrupt caesura suggests that moments of "inspiration" like the ones this poem describes vanish as suddenly as they arrive.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "light, in"
- **Line 2:** "road, alerted"
- **Line 8:** "me. And"
- **Line 12:** "trees, nor"
- **Line 14:** "hedge, and"
- **Line 16:** "dark—finally"

ASSONANCE

The poem's hypnotic [assonance](link) reflects the speaker's transfixing encounter with the deer.

Rich, harmonious assonance turns up right from the start. Listen to the sounds of the first stanza:

> In the dawn-dirty light, in the biggest sn**ow** of the
> y**ea**r
> Two bl**ue**-dark d**ee**r stood in the r**oa**d, alerted.

The sheer amount of assonance here demands attention. As a series of /oo/, /oh/, and /ee/ sounds weave in and out of each other, the poem already sounds trancelike, intense, even spellbound.

And listen to the focused assonance in lines 5-6:

> They planted their two or thr**ee** y**ea**rs of s**e**cret
> d**ee**rhood
> Cl**ea**r on my snow-scr**ee**n vision of the abnormal

The /ee/ and /ea/ sounds here (subtly different in Hughes's accent) put those "deer" right at the center of the poem's sounds; the deer's central /ee/ vowels will turn up over and over across the poem. The same sound links the deer to the speaker, in fact: a long /ee/ connects "d**ee**r" to "m**e**" in both lines 9 and 13.

Assonance also helps to conjure up the poem's theatrical aspects—its action and its landscape:

> Then they d**u**cked through the hedge, and **u**pright
> they rode their legs
> Away downhill **o**ver a sn**ow**-l**o**nely field

Here, the tighter /uh/ sound of "d**u**cked" and "**u**pright" suggests the deer's tense, rapid trotting, while the long /oh/ of "**o**ver a sn**ow**-l**o**nely field" suggests the speaker's long view out over that field—and perhaps even a softly m**oa**ning wind.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "snow," "year"
- **Line 2:** "Two blue," "deer," "road," "alerted"
- **Line 4:** "I," "arriving"
- **Line 5:** "three," "years," "secret deerhood"
- **Line 6:** "Clear," "screen"
- **Line 7:** "hesitated," "way," "disintegration"
- **Line 9:** "deer," "me"
- **Line 12:** "there where"
- **Line 13:** "deer," "me"
- **Line 14:** "ducked," "upright"
- **Line 15:** "over," "snow-lonely"
- **Line 16:** "tree"
- **Line 17:** "Seeming," "glide," "fly"
- **Line 19:** "soon," "hoofprints"

SIBILANCE

Sibilance helps to conjure the silence of a snowy morning.

Soft, whispery /s/ and /z/ sounds thread all through the speaker's encounter with the two deer, from the description of their "secret deerhood" to the speaker's "snow-screen vision" to the moment when:

> [...] for some lasting seconds
> I could think the deer were waiting for me
> To remember the password and sign

All of these /s/ sounds help to conjure up the absolute quiet of this scene. In the midst of muffling snowfall, the poem's sibilance suggests, neither the speaker nor the deer are making a single sound.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "biggest snow"
- **Line 2:** "stood"
- **Line 5:** "secret"
- **Line 6:** "snow-screen"
- **Line 7:** "hesitated," "disintegration"
- **Line 8:** "stared," "some lasting seconds"
- **Line 10:** "password," "sign"
- **Line 19:** "snow," "soon"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration, like assonance and sibilance, helps to intensify the poem's language and paint a picture of the snowy dawn.

For example, listen to the dense /d/ and /b/ sounds in the first stanza:

> In the dawn-dirty light, in the biggest snow of the year
> Two blue-dark deer stood in the road, alerted.

Those muffled sounds might evoke footsteps in snow. But they also simply stand out in the poem, working with these lines' intense assonance to grab the reader's attention, transfixing them just as the speaker and deer transfix each other. The alliteration of "boil of big flakes" in line 18 works similarly, pushing readers to linger on this intense image of swirling snow.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dawn-dirty," "biggest"
- **Line 2:** "blue," "dark deer"
- **Line 3:** "had happened"
- **Line 5:** "secret"
- **Line 6:** "snow-screen"

- **Line 8:** "stared," "seconds"
- **Line 9:** "were waiting"
- **Line 13:** "deer"
- **Line 14:** "ducked"
- **Line 16:** "finally"
- **Line 17:** "fly"
- **Line 18:** "boil," "big"

🗒 VOCABULARY

Roe-Deer () - A small, delicate species of deer.

Dawn-dirty light (Line 1) - This image suggests the low, dim light just before sunrise.

My snow-screen vision (Line 6) - This image might suggest that the speaker is seeing through a screen of falling snow, or that the deer stand out *against* a snowy backdrop—or both!

The all-way disintegration (Line 7) - This image suggests that the snow makes the world look as if it's coming apart into tiny pieces, flying this way and that.

Eddy (Line 17) - Make a whirling, spinning motion (like a current of water or air).

⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Written in free verse, "Roe-Deer" uses a form of Hughes's own invention. The poem's 11 stanzas are almost all two-line unrhymed couplets. That two-by-two form mimics what the speaker sees: a pair of deer, standing in the road and staring in the low, "dawn-dirty" light.

But the seventh stanza stands apart. This stanza is built from just one line: "The deer had come for me." This moment feels like an invitation into a mystery, and that one stark line suggests that the boundary between the deer's world and the speaker's has become, for just a few seconds, very thin indeed.

METER

This poem is written in free verse, so it doesn't have a regular meter. Instead, Hughes uses changing line lengths to give the poem rhythm and movement.

Most of the stanzas in the first 12 lines of the poem ("In the dawn-dirty light [...] nor the road a road") are around the same length, evoking the balanced, watchful stillness of the pair of deer the speaker observes on the road. But take a look at what happens when the deer finally trot away:

> Then they ducked through the hedge, and upright they rode their legs

Away downhill over a snow-lonely field

That combination of a longer and shorter line suggests the deer's sudden motion—and the sight of the deer getting smaller and smaller as they make their way over that "snow-lonely field" and are lost among the "big flakes."

RHYME SCHEME

This [free verse](#) poem doesn't use [rhyme](#). Instead, sonic devices like [assonance](#), [alliteration](#), and [sibilance](#) create its music.

Listen to the first stanza, for instance:

> In the **d**awn-**d**irty light, in the bigge**st** **s**now of the year
> Two **bl**ue-**d**ark **d**eer **st**ood in the road, alerted.

Here, dense /d/ alliteration, haunting /oo/ assonance, and whispery /s/ and /st/ sibilance evoke a whole winter scene of muted darkness and silent snowfall.

SPEAKER

All the reader learns about this poem's speaker is that they're is out for a dawn walk when an encounter with a pair of deer makes them feel as if they're standing on the boundary between two worlds. Both that solitary morning stroll through "the biggest snow of the year" and that sense of mystery, wonder, and awe suggest that this speaker is a thoughtful, introspective, and curious soul—a person open to the world's strangeness and magic.

The setting here—which sounds a lot like Ted Hughes's own England—might hint that this speaker is Hughes himself. Hughes often wrote of his [intense encounters](#) with the natural world. The poem's closing [metaphor](#) of the snow as a writer "[r]evising its dawn inspiration" suggests that this speaker is at the very least familiar with the art of poetry!

SETTING

This poem is set in the wintertime at dawn. The "hedge," the "field" edged with "tree dark," and the heavy snow all suggest the English countryside in which Hughes himself spent much of his life.

This landscape transforms from familiar to enchanted as the speaker encounters a pair of deer on an early-morning walk. The sight of the two staring animals makes the speaker feel as if "the curtain had blown aside for a moment"—as if it were possible to see beyond the everyday world and into a different, mysterious reality. In this instant, the commonplace "trees" and "road" become strange, "no longer" themselves.

By setting the poem in a landscape that unites human-made

"roads" and "fields" with wild nature, Hughes suggests that "ordinary" life comes right up to the edge of magical boundaries more often than one might expect. The mysterious is always right there behind the "curtain," even on an everyday walk.

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; Hughes's raw [imagery](#) challenged 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. "Roe-Deer" was first published in one of his mid-career collections, *Moon-Bells and Other Poems* (1978), a book of poems intended for children.

Hughes grew up in West Riding, Yorkshire, a relatively rural part of England, and he cultivated an early interest in the natural world that would influence his poetry. This poem is one of many he wrote that captures an intense, disorienting encounter with nature. Hughes was both reverent and unsentimental about the natural world, seeing it not just as a source of wisdom and beauty (as the 19th-century Romantics like [William Wordsworth](#) often did) but also as a place full of [instinctive violence](#) and danger.

Hughes was deeply influenced by the work of his wife, fellow poet [Sylvia Plath](#). Over the course of their (often tormented) marriage, the pair produced a rich, unsettling body of work. Both were [inspired](#) by the English countryside in which they set up home; readers might well imagine Hughes himself facing this poem's mysterious deer on a snowy morning.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Over the course of his long and prolific career (which ran from the 1950s until his death in 1998), Hughes saw wild social change. He began publishing his poetry during a period of rapid post-war urbanization and industrialization. Britain had a booming manufacturing industry in products as diverse as ships, cars, metals, and textiles, but with this boom came increasing pollution. Hughes's poetry, with its interest in wild nature and animal instinct, might be read as a skeptical rejoinder to a post-war enthusiasm for civilizing, scientific progress.

But "Roe-Deer," like a lot of Hughes's animal poetry, steps outside its specific historical context. The encounter with nature the speaker describes here could have happened at any time. This, perhaps, is part of the point: the otherworldly natural "dimension" the deer seem to invite the speaker into doesn't run to a human timescale!

Hughes also always found awe and inspiration in nature, even

in the natural world's harshest moments. Though he grew up hunting in the North Yorkshire countryside, as an adult he came to prefer capturing animals on the page.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Ted Hughes Society — Visit the Ted Hughes Society's website to learn more about Hughes's continuing influence. (http://thetedhughessociety.org/)

- Hughes's Legacy — Read an article by poet Alice Oswald in which she discusses what Hughes means to her. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/dec/03/poetry.tedhughes)

- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Hughes's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-hughes)

- An Interview with Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath — Listen to a 1961 interview with Hughes and his wife, fellow poet Sylvia Plath. (https://youtu.be/Vqhsnk6vY8E)

- An Appreciation of Hughes — Watch a talk celebrating Hughes's poetry, including clips of Hughes himself reading his poetry aloud. (https://youtu.be/vop3NOGMExs)

- What Are Roe Deer? — Learn more about the small species of deer featured in this poem. (https://www.britannica.com/animal/roe-deer)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER TED HUGHES POEMS

- A Picture of Otto
- Bayonet Charge
- Cat and Mouse
- Hawk Roosting
- Snowdrop
- Telegraph Wires
- The Jaguar
- The Thought Fox
- Wind

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