

# THE THOUGHT FOX

BY  
TED HUGHES

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- ▣ “The Thought-Fox” appeared in Hughes’s first collection of poems, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), and is one of his most celebrated and anthologized poems. This poem contains many of the stylistic and thematic elements that have come to define Hughes’s poetry.

- ▣ *The Thought-Fox* starts on a silent, clear night. The poet, sitting alone at his desk, attempts to write, but has no luck with it. He senses a second presence – ‘something more near / though deeper within darkness / is entering the loneliness’. Here, the night itself is symbolic of the depths of imagination, standing for the idea of dormant genius, and the muse, which typically visits at unorthodox hours. The poet is alone at night, laboring over his poem, when he feels the stirrings of an idea.

- ▣ The idea itself is symbolized by the fox's presence, and at first, it is not clear what the idea is, to the poet. As Hughes writes, 'a fox's nose touches twig, leaf;' showing, through the fragmented image of the fox's nose, that it is only a very basic view of an idea, not one stamped out clearly. The fox is shrouded in darkness; only the pinnacle of it can be seen by the watchful poet, and likewise, the muse visits but only leaves him with a fragment of an image to build into a poem. The fox remains half-hidden and elusive throughout the entire poem; the idea, likewise, remains half-hidden to the poet, allowing him only wisps of imagery to contend with.

- ▣ There is a certain softness about the way that Hughes writes his imagery: his penchant for mythical language comes through in spades as he talks about the 'dark snow', the 'eye / a widening deepening greenness'. Hughes has an almost cinematic quality of imagery – one can very easily imagine the quiet night, the poet at his desk, the fox touching a leaf in a separate shot – and he uses this to further evoke the idea of the playful muse, sneaking in, and sneaking out of the poet's grasp.

- ▣ Gradually, the fox emerges out of formlessness; a 'sudden sharp hot stink of fox', thus showing that the poet has reached the peak of his musing, and has managed to write the poem that has tantalized him throughout the night. The fox is suddenly visible, the idea is suddenly within the poet's mind, and has been immortalized on the page. The poem and the fox exist as one entity.

- ▣ Another thing to note is the very pattern of the poem itself. Ted Hughes writes with a pace that heightens the anticipation. At the start, only the fox's nose is visible. Then two eyes. The choppy punctuation shows the hesitancy of the fox/idea, the delicate way that Ted Hughes writes about the fox leaving prints in the snow is further emphasized by the sharp, short phrase 'sets neat prints in the snow'.

- ▣ *The Thought-Fox* moves almost like clockwork, starting out at an hour crawl, and quickening, the image of the fox becoming more concrete, until the final staggering end where the fox comes out in a rush – again, symbolized in the way that Hughes writes about it – only to dim back down into quiet – ‘the window is starless still; the clock ticks; / The page is printed’.



# Nature in *The Thought-Fox*

- The fox, an animal, represents Hughes
- Fox → sly, intelligent, clever, quick (thinking)
- The snow and woods → nature representing the poem and Hughes' writings

*“Cold, delicately as the dark snow,  
A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;  
Two eyes serve a movement, that now  
And again now, and now, and now  
Sets neat prints into the snow”*

- Fox's nose = pen/ink/poet
- Twig, leaf = paper
- Sets neat...snow = Hughes' writings

- ▣ Although the poem is written in free verse, **Hughes** retains the regular form of the quatrain, with each stanza composed of four lines. 'The Thought-Fox' is probably modern poetry's best-known poem about poetic inspiration. It remains one of **Ted Hughes's** most popular poems with readers