Thematic analysis of the Poem “Second Glance at a Jaguar” by Ted Hughes.

“Second Glance at a Jaguar” from *Wodwo* (1967) is a companion piece to the “The Jaguar,” and should be read along with the same. Ted Hughes wrote “Second Jaguar” ten years after he wrote the first “The Jaguar.” The ‘glance’ in the title, far from being a mere glance, focuses on intricate detail.

In the “Jaguar,” Ted Hughes depicted a zoo in which animals are caged in different slots, each characterized by sluggishness and sloth. In contrast to the other languorous creatures, the jaguar holds it own, through its magnificence and sounds its existence by asserting itself. Thus, the poem “The Jaguar’ is a statement on man’s modern state of existence where people are compartmentalized into leading a mechanical life. In a machine-like state, they relegate their individuality, and function like cogs in the wheel of society and pay no heed to voice their seity.

The poem “Second Glance at a Jaguar” focusses on the animal itself. The latter lacks the co-ordination and conventional form of the former poem. The poem succeeds in the effect it makes on the reader. The poem comes across as an artist’s instinctive stroke focusing on detail. Hughes foregrounds the Jaguar and marks his deviation from the System.…

Much of Ted Hughes’s early animal poetry is an attempt to capture the ‘Real’ in nature. Here he is not concerned with the effect of nature on man’s sensibilities but with ‘the thing itself’. One of his most successful poems in this respect is [Second Glance at a Jaguar](http://www.wright.edu/%7Ealex.macleod/summer05/300/jaguar.pdf). The poem literally gets under the skin of the jaguar, exploring every aspect of its physicality: in and out of the hip joint, under the spine, in the socket of the hind legs, the back teeth, the blackness of the mouth, fangs, bottom jaw, club-tail.

The poem demonstrates that it is only through an exploration of the physical aspects of its nature, the minute details, that the animal can be fully understood. The noble aggression of the jaguar is suggested in the verbs that describe its movements – grinding, swivelling, swiping, striding, club-swinging, coiling, flourishing. We get the jaguar’s violence through comparisons with the disemboweller and the gangster, and its overwhelming, unstoppable energy from the relentless drive of the body’s engine, ‘lifting the air up and shoving on under’, muttering ‘some drum song of murder’.

The poem’s various images are unified by references to roundness: the ‘skinful of bowls’, the stump-legged waddle that is ‘trying to grind some square/Socket between his hind legs round’, the ‘wearing himself to heavy ovals’, ‘rounding some revenge’ and ‘going like a prayer-wheel’. Jamie McKendrick comments on this in his essay ‘Hurrying through the underworld’ (published in [The Epic Poise: A Celebration of Ted Hughes](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Epic-Poise-Celebration-Ted-Hughes/dp/0571196861/ref=sr_1_1/026-0376685-8010826?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1191427152&sr=1-1)):

The whole poem worries at the jaguar’s internal geometry; it assumes something of the same ‘urgency of his hurry’, discarding in the process one shape after another just as the jaguar itself seems to be refining its movements towards a perfect (imaginary) kill.

This hurrying feels almost improvisatory, as if Hughes wants to capture the essential nature of the jaguar before it eludes him. It is suggested in the poem’s title, which makes clear this is a mere ‘glance’ at a jaguar, despite the intense focus and energy applied to its description. Hughes knew that whatever language he used to describe nature, it could only ever be an approximation. As he said in [Poetry in the Making](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Poetry-Making-Anthology-Programmes-Listening/dp/0571090761/ref=sr_1_1/026-0376685-8010826?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1191427267&sr=1-1) (quoted in [Ted Hughes: A Beginners Guide](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Hughes-Beginners-Guides-Charlie-Bell/dp/034084647X/ref=sr_1_1/026-0376685-8010826?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1191427241&sr=1-1) by Charlie Bell):

There are no words to capture the infinite depth of crowiness in a crow’s flight. All we can do is use a word as an indicator, or a whole bunch of words as a general directive. But the ominous thing in the crow’s flight, the bare-faced, bandit thing, the tattered beggarly gipsy thing, the caressing and shaping yet slightly clumsy gesture of the downstroke, as if the wings were too heavy and too powerful, and the headlong sort of merriment, the macabre pantomime ghoulishness and the undertaker sleekness – you could go for a very long time with phrases of that sort and still have completely missed your instant, glimpse knowledge of the world of the crow’s wingbeat. And a bookload of such descriptions is immediately rubbish when you look up and see a crow flying.

In [Winter Pollen](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Winter-Pollen-Occasional-Ted-Hughes/dp/0571174264/ref=sr_1_1/026-0376685-8010826?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1191427312&sr=1-1) Hughes talks of: ‘…the vital, somewhat terrible spirit of natural life, which is new in every second. Even when it is poisoned to the point of death, its efforts to be itself are new in every second.’ The subject of Second Glance at a Jaguar is ‘poisoned’ by its captivity, but its essential nature, while not transcending its cage, maintains its ‘unyielding ferocity’ (to borrow a phrase from Gifford and Roberts’s [Ted Hughes: A Critical Study](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Ted-Hughes-Critical-Terry-Gifford/dp/0571117015/ref=sr_1_1/026-0376685-8010826?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1191427358&sr=1-1)). It remains ‘new in every second’, and the poem defines this triumphantly. The jaguar is shown to us, defined by itself, in the moment, much as the last lines of another poem by Hughes,

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