



Dylan Thomas

(1914-1953)

Life and works

Dylan Thomas was born in Swansea, Wales, in 1914. His father, hoping he would become a poet, gave him a poetic name: **Dylan was the 'son of the sea' in old Welsh legends**. He left school at the age of 16 and divided his time between acting with the Swansea Little Theatre, reporting for the *South Wales Evening Post*, and writing poems. His first volume of poetry, *18 Poems*, was published in 1934 and had an immediate impact on literary critics because of its **unusual, violent and brilliant imagery**. These poems examined the complexities of feeling; in fact, since the very beginning of his career as a poet, Dylan Thomas's **task was centred on an attempt at unravelling the mysterious relationship between the perpetual cycles and processes of birth and death**, regeneration and destruction both in nature and in man's physical and psychological features. After **moving to London in 1936**, his second volume, *Twenty-Five Poems*, appeared; it opened with a probing of the nature of **man who is said to belong to a 'twin world'**: the world of matter and the world of the spirit. In the same year Thomas met his future wife, Caitlin Macnamara, who was to prove the mainstay of a life disrupted by **money problems and alcoholism**. In 1949 they went to live in Laugharne, a fishing village in Wales. Even if death was all around him in the 1940s, and although he had always been preoccupied with the birth-death paradox, **his volumes *The Map of Love* (1939)**, a collection of prose and poetry, and the more mature and simpler *Deaths and Entrances* (1946) showed a large measure of **inner serenity**. In these works there is a movement towards light, and despite the tragic themes of some poems, there is a sort of holy radiance surrounding many of them, which bathes the landscape of childhood innocence. His last collection of poems, *Collected Poems*, appeared in 1952. He also wrote some **autobiographical short stories**, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940), and worked for the BBC during the war and after, producing copious broadcasting material, the best-known of which is **the poetic radio play *Under Milk Wood* (1953)**. Thomas died in New York in 1953 because of brain damage caused by heavy drinking.

The Welsh environment

'One: I am a Welshman; two: I am a drunkard; three: I am a lover of the human race, especially of women.' This concise, humorous account of himself was given by Dylan Thomas to an audience in Rome in 1947. It shows that he was **aware of the extent to which his imagination and his temperament were the products of his Welsh environment**. The distinctive characteristics of his work, its lyrical quality, a religious attitude to experience, a romantic conception of the poet's function and love of words and

music, are shared by other Welsh writers, but they were not typical of the English poets of the Thirties.

The function of the poet

In his note to *Collected Poems* Thomas wrote: 'These poems, with all their crudities, doubts and confusion, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God, and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't'. Here Thomas defines **the poet as a man endowed with special wisdom**, a sort of religious prophet, a bard. This high conception of the poet's function derives from specific traditions of Celtic life and thought, for in ancient Wales and Ireland, a poet was not merely a professional verse-writer: he could **exercise extraordinary spiritual power**.

Main themes

It has been said that **birth, copulation and death** are Dylan Thomas's constant themes. He goes into the process of birth as no poet before him had done, he is **aware of the relationship between sex and birth**, and he recognises that what is born also dies. He is not concerned merely with birth, the physical act of love and mortality, but with every sort of creation, every form of human relationship, and with the possibility of transcending mortality and turning it into perpetual life.

Style

The success of his poetry is also primarily one of style: **his language is vigorous and exciting**; his ideas impress because of the intensity and elevation with which they are conveyed. From the beginning his talent lay more in stylistic than in intellectual originality. Thomas makes up a **new language**, using words, phrases and grammar altogether familiar in themselves, but arranged in an unusual way. The ambiguity implicit in giving the concrete noun an abstract meaning is enhanced because the poet does not maintain that relationship but varies it according to the context. **The verse is highly musical** because of the frequent use of alliteration and assonance.

Influences

Thomas's poetry blends the qualities of several literary lines: there is the Blake-Wordsworth line with its praise of childhood as a state of innocence and grace; the Donne-Whitman-Lawrence-Joyce-Yeats line with its concept of total love and its preference for emotion and impulse over reason; the Donne-Joyce-Eliot-Auden line with its crafting, wit, functional word-play; the Keats line with its sensuality, and the Browning-Eliot line with its sense of a poem as drama. All look for a lost Christian god, or a substitute in nature, art and history, and so does Thomas; his poetry is the record of a search, which is never satisfactorily concluded.

*Key idea***The eternal cycle of living and dying**

*And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked up clean and the clean bones gone
They shall have stars at elbow and foot [...]*

In these as in many other lines by Thomas, the poet points out that death is not the end of living but a metamorphosis, it is the end of a cycle and the beginning of another:
birth → life → growing-up → decay → death → rebirth

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 **READ** the texts about Dylan Thomas and complete the table below with the missing details.

1934	
1936	
	<i>The Map of Love</i>
1940	
1946	
	<i>Collected Poems</i>
1953	

2 **ANSWER** the following questions about Dylan Thomas.

- 1 Why was the Welsh environment important to Thomas?
- 2 What is the poet's task according to him?
- 3 What are his constant themes?
- 4 What are the most important features of Thomas's style?
- 5 What influences can be recognised in Thomas's line?
- 6 Does he think that death is the end of everything?



The force that through the green fuse drives the flower

Dylan Thomas
18 poems
(1934)

This early poem dwells on the fact that all life, animal and vegetable, is subject to the same laws of nature, and that all things grow old, decay and die. This idea is far from original, but the severe, slow rhetoric of the poem gives this message a tone of great authority.

The force that through the green fuse¹ drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts² the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked³ rose
5 My youth is bent⁴ by the same wintry fever.

The force that drives the water through the rocks
Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams⁵
Turns mine to wax⁶.
And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
10 How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

The hand that whirls⁷ the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand⁸; that ropes the blowing wind
Hauls⁹ my shroud sail¹⁰.
And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
15 How of my clay is made the hangman's lime¹¹.

The lips of time leech¹² to the fountain head;
Love drips¹³ and gathers¹⁴, but the fallen blood
Shall calm her sores¹⁵.
And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
20 How time has ticked¹⁶ a heaven round the stars.

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

- 1 fuse. Miccia; *qui*: stelo, gambo.
- 2 blasts. Fa scoppiare.
- 3 crooked. Contorta.
- 4 bent. Piegata.
- 5 dries ... streams. Prosciuga le correnti allo sbocco.
- 6 wax. Cera.
- 7 whirls. Fa turbinare.
- 8 quicksand. Sabbie mobili.
- 9 Hauls. Issa.
- 10 my shroud sail. Fanno veleggiare il mio sudario.
- 11 hangman's lime. La calce del boia.
- 12 leech. Succhiano (come una sanguisuga).
- 13 drips. Gocciola.
- 14 gathers. Si raggruma, si raccoglie.
- 15 sores. Ferite, piaghe, dolori.
- 16 ticked. Ha scandito.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

VOCABULARY

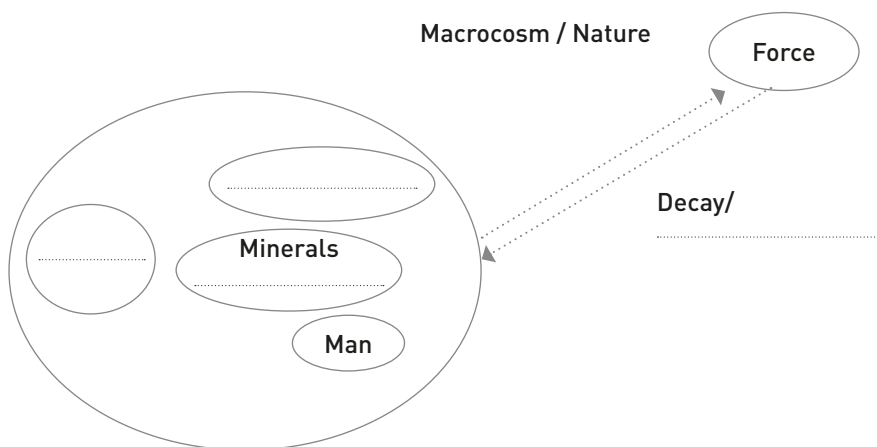
1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- | | |
|--|-------------------------|
| 1 form a word silently with one's lips | 6 source |
| 2 ties, fastens | 7 curved |
| 3 mixes | 8 immaturity |
| 4 covering | 9 unable to speak |
| 5 earth, mud | |



COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the first three stanzas again and complete the diagram below, bearing in mind that ' \leftrightarrow ' means interaction.



- 1 Is the energy of the universe identical to that through which the poet lives?
- 2 How does this energy work?
- 3 Which analogies are established in the final couplet of each stanza?

3 READ the rest of the poem again and complete the following sentences with the words from the box.

love

decays

time

process

- 1 The fourth stanza refers to the power of
- 2 Love calms the sores of
- 3 Everything grows old, and dies, and the poet feels part of this irrevocable

4 SAY what each stanza stresses.

COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

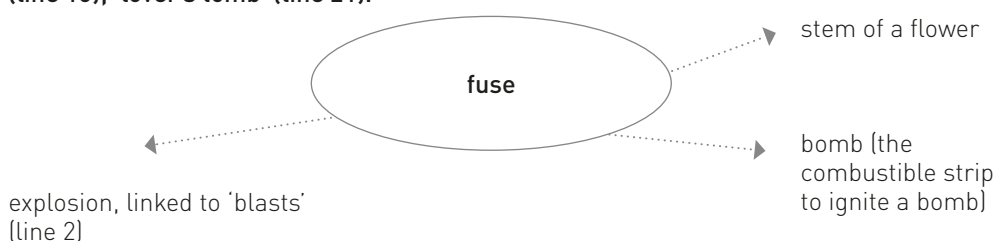
5 FIND the sound devices used in this poem.

- Basic iambic metre:
- Rhyme scheme:
- Layout of each stanza:
- Run-on-lines: lines 1-2;
- Alliterations: 'force'/'fuse'/'flower' (line 1);
- Assonance: 'Drives'/'my' (line 2);
- Repetitions of words: 'green' (lines 1-2)

6 IDENTIFY the function each item fulfils within the poem.

7 HIGHLIGHT the effect achieved by the recurring words 'I', 'my' and 'mine'.

8 LOOK at the diagram below about the meanings associated with the word 'fuse' and draw similar diagrams concerning the various meanings of 'crooked rose' (line 4); 'quicksand' (line 12); 'shroud' (line 13); 'fountain head' (line 16); 'lover's tomb' (line 21).



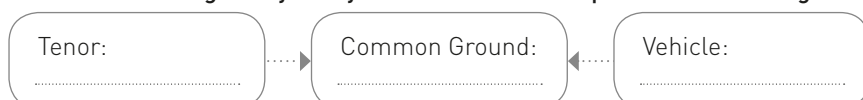


- 9 COMPLETE** the following table with words belonging to the semantic areas of youth, growth/force and decay/death. Then answer the questions below.

Youth	Growth/force	Decay/death

What is the most recurring colour? What is it the symbol of?

- 10 EXPLAIN** the images of youth you have listed in the previous task using the diagram below.



- 11 IDENTIFY** the main theme of the poem.

- ☐ All forms of life, both animal and vegetable, are subject to the same natural laws.
- ☐ The force that controls the growth of human life is similar to the one governing other natural phenomena.
- ☐ The poet is unable to explain the antithetical processes caused by natural forces.

➤ COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

- 12 DISCUSS.** Find out similarities and differences between the poetry belonging to the Romantic tradition and Dylan Thomas's.