

# Fern Hill

- by Dylan Thomas -

## Background information

Learners coming to Dylan Thomas' poetry for the first time may benefit from hearing the poem read aloud in different ways. Readings by Philip Madoc and Richard Burton are available online and Dylan Thomas' own reading of it, also available, may help to show the overall effect the poet wanted.

It may also be helpful to research a little into Thomas' childhood holidays on Fernhill Farm to highlight his use of a memory of a real location on which to base his poem.

## Activities

### A

Learners may be able to identify some key ideas from individual or group study or may need help to focus on the repeated motifs in the poem.

- The idealised, romantic version of nature should be noted, perhaps by simply drawing learners' attention to the wide range of creatures, plants and landscape featured in the poem.
- The idea of childhood is important in the poem and the associated connotations of innocence and nostalgia could be elicited here. Learners may discuss the use of repeated phrasing to build a picture of an idyllic childhood memory.
- Time and perhaps an awakening to the passage of time in the last part of the poem should be identified as a key idea.

Other ideas may be identified as important in the poem and can be pursued more closely as well as those above. Building confidence in responding personally to the poem is more important than asserting a particular interpretation.

### B

A more focused examination of the natural landscape in the first 3 stanzas can be used to study how Thomas creates an idealised version of nature. The perfection of the overall picture may be discussed using the highlighted details. The selection of wild but beautiful details such as the 'daisies' are combined with images of farming ('barley') - man's taming of nature - to create a simple but perfect whole. Some of the animals named mirror this harmony between nature and man, such as the 'calves' and the 'foxes'. Everything is as it should be in an ideal world - the grass is green, the sun shines all day and there are stars at night. Learners may focus on what is not in the picture to help them explore the poet's intentions here: there are no towns, no people, no images of industry or work, no conflict, no striving to survive.

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The last of these three stanzas may, for some, begin to signal a change in tone. The use of nature's elements has been gentle up to now though the addition of the 'fire, green as grass' may be less so. The animals used at the end may seem less benign – the owls are 'bearing the farm away' and the horses are 'flashing into the dark'. Some discussion of learners' responses to these images of nature may be helpful here.

## C

The three phrases in red are highlighted to draw attention to the musicality of the poet's language as well as his ideas about childhood. Patterning of sounds and phrases is important throughout the poem. Learners may notice and discuss the effects created by other patterns in the poem at this point. Perhaps the surprising combinations of words and phrases ('once below a time' etc.) help to create the gentle playfulness of the poem's tone here, for example.

The idea of being 'blessed', 'famous' and 'honoured' identifies the time of childhood as special and different and these terms introduce the idea of the child as the centre of his universe. Some learners may also hear the religious echoes in these terms which may help them explore the Edenic nature of the landscape described. The other religious references may also be noted here as linking nature with the idea of the divine.

## D

Both explicit and implicit references to time are important here to symbolise the effect of time passing on the poet. Phrases highlighted in red should elicit some discussion of why the poet personifies time here and what effect is created. Repeated patterns such as 'let me' might suggest time as an indulgent figure – many will see a benevolent father here in the way the child plays and climbs. The differences between the first and second stanzas' personification of time might tease out some ideas, such as 'the heydays of his eyes' with its echo of 'apple of his eye' and a possibly slightly darker note in 'the mercy of his means'.

The use of 'golden' as well as the repeated use of 'green', should elicit some thoughtful discussion of the connotations of each and how Thomas makes use of them here. Childhood as a 'golden' time or the idea of preciousness being linked with time in a poignant way may emerge, as well as the youthful energy of Spring suggested by 'green'. Other ideas should be encouraged and explored.

The phrases in blue highlight the passing of time and some learners may see the symbolism of day turning to night as an image of maturing and growing up. The rewording of some fairy-tale conventions – 'once below time', 'all the moon long' – may encourage some discussion of how Thomas both uses and subverts our expectations here and what he might be suggesting about time passing.

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## E

Some knowledge and understanding of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, the garden of Eden and man's fall from grace is essential here, however centres should be aware that context is not assessed. The highlighted phrases may provide some stimulus to discuss how Thomas uses story to represent his own 'awakening' from childhood innocence to an awareness of time passing and death. The mystical description of creation may be seen as the beginning of time itself but learners may respond in very different ways to this stanza and alternative ideas and interpretations should be encouraged.

## F

Sensitive readers may notice the desperation and yearning for the past in the tone of the last two stanzas. Closer focus on the highlighted sections may help to unpick how this tone is created:

- the first two lines closely match those of earlier stanzas in a depiction of an idyllic childhood landscape
- what does the reference to time ('the sun born over and over') suggest?
- what kind of tone does the repetition of 'nothing I cared' and the use of 'heedless' strike?
- the last lines depict the inevitable passing of time with a rather disturbing image of children being led by time out of their 'paradise'.

These ideas, and perhaps the structure of them too, are developed in the last stanza.

A closer focus on the details in the last stanza could include Thomas' selection of 'lamb white days' and 'swallow thronged loft'. The implied reference to Christ in the first may be explored as well as the more common connection with innocence and childhood. The swallows' associations with the passing of the seasons may also be considered.

The colours used in both stanzas here may promote some thoughtful discussion, particularly the way 'green' and 'golden' are used in a different way.

## Further Activities

Other 'Arcadian' or pastoral poems or poems which deal with themes of time and an awakening to the passage of time could be usefully studied. For example, Keats' 'Ode to Autumn' might also shed light on Dylan Thomas' different use of imagery to explore similar ideas.