

The Challenge of Modernism



READING 3 Evaluate the changes in sound, form, figurative language, graphics, and dramatic structure in poetry across literary time periods. **7** Analyze how the author's patterns of imagery, literary allusions, and conceits reveal theme, set tone, and create meaning in metaphors, passages, and literary works.

Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night Fern Hill

Poetry by Dylan Thomas

VIDEO TRAILER



KEYWORD: HML12-1182A

Meet the Author

Dylan Thomas 1914–1953

During his life, Dylan Thomas became a mythical figure, both for the beauty of his work and for the outrageousness of his personality. Today, he is remembered for his poetry. Marked by depth of feeling, complexity of sound, and freshness of language, Thomas's verse is among the most original of the 20th century.

Welsh Roots Thomas's work is deeply rooted in the countryside and culture of his native Wales. He grew up in the industrial city of Swansea but spent his summers at his aunt's dairy farm in Carmarthenshire, the place that inspired his famous poem "Fern Hill." Though his father encouraged his interest in Welsh culture, he raised his son to speak English rather than Welsh. Despite never learning the language himself, Dylan Thomas would later capture its cadences and word sequences in his poetry.

Precocious Poet An unruly and sickly child, Thomas performed poorly in all subjects except for literature and dropped out of school at the age of 16. A few years later, he was a published poet. Thomas wrote about the things closest to his heart, calling his poetry, "the record of my individual struggle from darkness towards some measure of light." He focused on his

own personal experiences rather than on social or political issues, writing about such topics as his childhood, the Welsh landscape, lost innocence, and death. He also experimented frequently with language, playing with sound devices and creating fresh imagery.

Financial Woes In the mid-1930s, Thomas moved to London and began writing fewer poems and more short stories, radio scripts, and screenplays. When he returned to Wales in 1938, he brought with him his new wife, Caitlin Macnamara. The marriage, volatile from the start, soured over time. Tired of living on the brink of poverty, Thomas and his wife took to begging money from friends as a source of income.

"Roaring Boy" In 1950, in an attempt to improve his finances, Thomas booked his first series of poetry readings in the United States. Wherever he went, Thomas enchanted audiences with charismatic performances. To his many fans, he personified the romantic image of the bohemian poet—reckless and flamboyant. Sadly, his charisma had a self-destructive edge. At the age of 39, in the midst of his fourth American tour, Thomas died in a hotel room from alcohol poisoning.

Author Online

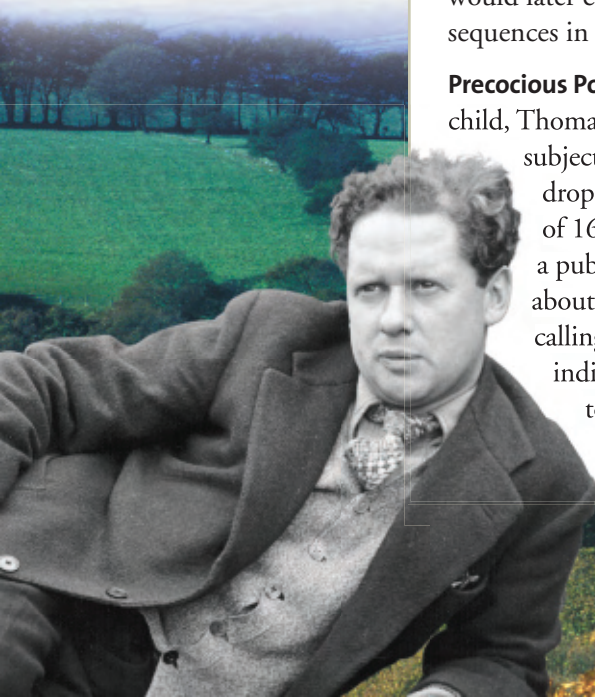
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DID YOU KNOW?

Dylan Thomas ...

- left school at age 16 to take a job as a reporter.
- had produced half of his literary output by the time he was 20.
- also worked as an actor and a radio broadcaster.



● POETIC FORM: VILLANELLE

“Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” is an example of a **villanelle**. While this French verse form is designed to give the impression of simplicity, it is intricately patterned. A villanelle has 19 lines, composed of five tercets (three-line stanzas), followed by a quatrain (a four-line stanza). The poem’s first line is repeated as a refrain at the end of the second and fourth stanzas. The last line of the first stanza is repeated at the end of the third and fifth stanzas. Both lines reappear as the final two lines of the poem. The rhyme scheme of a villanelle is *aba* for each tercet and then *abaa* for the quatrain.

● LITERARY ANALYSIS: CONSONANCE AND ASSONANCE

Dylan Thomas has been described as a poet in whose work “sound and sense are exquisitely blended.” Consider this line from “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night”:

Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay . . .

The recurrence of the final *z* sound in *eyes*, *blaze*, and *meteors* is an example of **consonance**, the repetition of consonant sounds within and at the ends of words. The line also provides examples of **assonance**, a repetition of vowel sounds in words—the long *i* sound in *blind*, *eyes*, and *like* and the long *a* in *blaze* and *gay*. As you read each poem, look for other examples of these devices.

● READING SKILL: ANALYZE IMAGERY

Thomas wrote “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night,” which explores various ways to confront death, as a plea to his own dying father. “Fern Hill” recalls the idyllic childhood summers of his youth. In both poems, Thomas creates meaning and feeling in part through his use of **imagery**, words and phrases that recreate sensory experiences for the reader. As you read, note details that appeal to your senses. Jot down the thoughts and feelings engendered by each example of imagery you find.

Example of Imagery	Thoughts/Feelings Evoked
“Old age should burn . . .”	

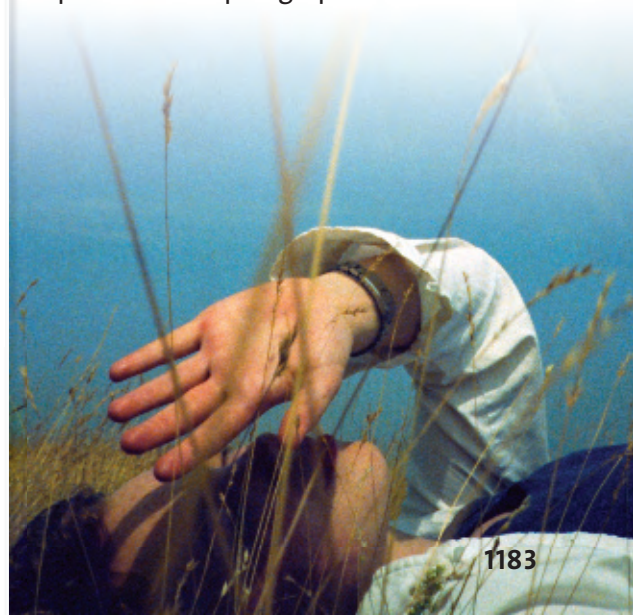


Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

When is LIFE most precious?

You wake up late and rush to get ready for school, cramming things into your backpack, hastily gulping down breakfast, and sprinting out the door. Your days are full of obligations—to your friends, family, teachers, sports team. When, in days already full to the brim, do you get a chance to ponder the precious, fleeting moments of life? The poems you are about to read will help you do just that.

QUICKWRITE “Fern Hill” captures the easy joy of childhood summers. “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” explores how we should face the very end of our lives. When, in your opinion, is life most precious? Do you think people consciously realize they’re happy when in a particularly satisfying period of their lives? Or is it only later that we know that period was a great one? Do you think life might seem more precious just as it’s about to end? Explore these questions in a paragraph or two.



Do Not Go Gentle into That GOOD NIGHT

Dylan Thomas

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
5 Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

10 Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night. **A**

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
15 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Analyze Visuals ►

What effect does the sketchy quality of this image have on you as a viewer?

Language Coach

Word Definitions *Forked lightning* is a scientific term for lightning broken into branches, like a fork. What kinds of words would “[fork] no lightning” (line 5)?

A VILLANELLE

Reread lines 1–12. In what way is the poem’s **rhyme scheme** built around the words that end the first two lines, *night* and *day*? What idea or feeling does this pattern help emphasize?

Literary Analysis

- 1. Draw Conclusions** How would you describe the speaker’s attitude toward death? Support your answer with textual evidence.
- 2. Interpret Figurative Language** Re-examine the poem, noting at least two examples of figurative language. Give your own interpretation of each example, explaining what feelings or ideas Thomas uses this language to convey.



FERN HILL

Dylan Thomas

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
 The night above the dingle starry,
 Time let me hail and climb
5 Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
And honored among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
 Trail with daisies and barley
 Down the rivers of the windfall light.

10 And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
 In the sun that is young once only,
 Time let me play and be
 Golden in the mercy of his means,
15 And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
 And the sabbath rang slowly
 In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
20 Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
 And playing, lovely and watery
 And fire green as grass. **B**
 And nightly under the simple stars
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
25 All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars
 Flying with the ricks, and the horses
 Flashing into the dark.

[Title] **Fern Hill**: the name of Dylan Thomas's aunt's farm, which he visited in childhood.

3 dingle: a wooded valley.

B ANALYZE IMAGERY

In lines 1–22, Thomas presents the reader with a series of images meant to convey a certain **mood**. What kinds of **details** does the poet present, and what mood do they evoke?

25 nightjars: birds with harsh calls, active in evening and early night.

26 ricks: haystacks.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white
 With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all
 30 Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
 The sky gathered again
 And the sun grew round that very day.
 So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
 In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm
 35 Out of the whinnying green stable
 On to the fields of praise. ©

And honored among foxes and pheasants by the gay house
 Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,
 In the sun born over and over,
 40 I ran my heedless ways,
 My wishes raced through the house high hay
 And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
 In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs
 Before the children green and golden
 45 Follow him out of grace,

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me
 Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,
 In the moon that is always rising,
 Nor that riding to sleep
 50 I should hear him fly with the high fields
 And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.
 Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
 Time held me green and dying
 Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

30 Adam and maiden: A reference to the biblical story of Adam and Eve. Thomas is comparing the farm to the paradise of Eden.

© CONSONANCE AND ASSONANCE

Find at least one example of consonance and one of assonance in the poem thus far. What effect do these **sound devices** have on this joyous description of childhood?

Language Coach

Synonyms Words with the same or nearly the same meaning are **synonyms**. The word *thronged* (line 47) is a synonym for *packed* or *crowded*. Why do you think Thomas chose *thronged* rather than *packed* in creating the image of a loft filled with swallows (a type of bird)?

Comprehension

1. **Recall** What is the setting of “Fern Hill”?
2. **Summarize** What kinds of experiences does the speaker of “Fern Hill” recount?

Literary Analysis

3. **Examine Diction** Turn again to “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night.” The intensity in this poem comes in part from words, particularly verbs, that themselves convey intensity. *Rage* is a good example. What other words in the poem have a similar effect? How do the connotations of the words you noted enrich the meaning of the poem?
4. **Understand Poetic Form** Review the characteristics of the **villanelle** form on page 1183. How closely does Thomas’s poem follow this form? How effective is the form in conveying ideas and emotions? Explain, citing evidence.
5. **Analyze Personification** Re-examine “Fern Hill,” identifying at least three examples of personification. Why do you think Thomas gives human attributes to animals, objects, and concepts in this poem? Describe the effect his use of this technique creates.
6. **Interpret Imagery** Review the chart you filled in as you read. In “Fern Hill,” the speaker presents a series of images that let the reader know how the farm looked, sounded, and felt to the speaker when he was young. Contrast this imagery with that presented in lines 51–54. How does this change allow Thomas to convey the feelings of an adult looking back on his lost childhood?
7. **Analyze Sound Devices** In the art of poetry, sound devices like **consonance** and **assonance** are important ingredients. Examine the functions of sound devices listed here. Then review both poems, finding an example of how Thomas achieves each through his use of consonance and assonance.
 - to emphasize particular words
 - to create a specific mood
 - to add a musical quality



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Literary Criticism

8. **Critical Interpretations** One contemporary critic of Thomas’s poetry has called it a “celebration of the wonder of growth and death.” Based on these two poems, would you agree? Explain why or why not.

*When is **LIFE** most precious?*

Do you believe young people get more out of life than adults? Why or why not? Explain whether youth or old age offers a better perspective for contemplating mortality.

Modernist Detachment

Fresh on the heels of the social and economic changes wrought by industrialism, a new phase of upheaval rocked Britain in the early decades of the 20th century. As the British Empire began to crumble and the class system started to give way, England found itself in the bloody trenches of World War I. Back home, the population suffered from the personal losses and economic deprivations of war. As villages shrank and big cities grew, people felt a loss of community. In addition, radical ideas from such thinkers as Einstein and Freud caused a shift in long-held beliefs about the world and human nature.

Disillusioned by the loss of physical, economic, and moral security, people did not know quite where to turn. Modernist writers reflected this disillusionment by developing a sense of ironic detachment from reality.

“There was a woman who was beautiful, who started with all the advantages, yet she had no luck. She married for love, and the love turned to dust. She had bonny children, yet she felt they had been thrust upon her, and she could not love them.”

—D. H. Lawrence, “The Rocking-Horse Winner”

Writing to Analyze

Review the stories and poems on pages 1118–1187 and choose one that conveys a strong sense of detachment. Analyze how the writer creates this sense of emotional distance and what ideas or values the piece seems to express.

Consider

- the tone, or attitude of the writer toward his or her subject
- the author’s use of verbal, situational, or dramatic irony
- the values embraced by the characters or expressed by the narrator or speaker
- the conflict described and its outcome



Extension

VIEWING & REPRESENTING In his poem “Musée des Beaux Arts,” W. H. Auden was inspired by the painting *The Fall of Icarus* by 16th-century artist Pieter Breughel (see page 1177). This Flemish master created bustling narrative panoramas. The broad chaos and sense of anonymity in these works have resonated greatly with modern viewers. Study this detail from Breughel’s *Children’s Games*. Use it as inspiration to write a brief narrative poem or story.



WRITING 15A Write an analytical essay.