

**DIRECTORATE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL**

**MASTER OF ARTS-ENGLISH  
SEMESTER -III**

**THE MODERNS II  
CORE 302  
BLOCK-2**

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## UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL

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## **FOREWORD**

The Self Learning Material (SLM) is written with the aim of providing simple and organized study content to all the learners. The SLMs are prepared on the framework of being mutually cohesive, internally consistent and structured as per the university's syllabi. It is a humble attempt to give glimpses of the various approaches and dimensions to the topic of study and to kindle the learner's interest to the subject

We have tried to put together information from various sources into this book that has been written in an engaging style with interesting and relevant examples. It introduces you to the insights of subject concepts and theories and presents them in a way that is easy to understand and comprehend.

We always believe in continuous improvement and would periodically update the content in the very interest of the learners. It may be added that despite enormous efforts and coordination, there is every possibility for some omission or inadequacy in few areas or topics, which would definitely be rectified in future.

We hope you enjoy learning from this book and the experience truly enrich your learning and help you to advance in your career and future endeavours.

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# THE MODERNS II

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## **BLOCK-2 THE MODERNS II**

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### **Introduction to the Block 2**

Unit 8 – Dylan Marlais Thomas’ Life and Career and analysis of characters.

Unit 9 – Summary and analysis of “The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” by Dylan Thomas.

Unit 10 - Summary and analysis of “Poem in October” and “Do Not Go into That Good Night” by Dylan Thomas.

Unit 11 Philip Larkin’s Life, Legacy and Creative Output.

Unit 12 - Summary and themes of “Church Going”, the summary and themes of “Explosion”; the title, theme and critical summary of “Wants” and the summary of “At Grass” by Philip Larkin.

Unit 13 About the life, career and work of Ted Hughes.

Unit 14 - The summary, analysis, themes and style of “Hawk Roosting”; “A Childish Prank” and the analysis of the “Jaguar” by Ted Hughes

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# **UNIT 8. DYLAN THOMAS – THE FORCE THAT THROUGH THE GREEN FUSE DRIVES THE FLOWER, POEM IN OCTOBER, DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT - 1**

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## **STRUCTURE**

8.0 Objectives

8.1 Introduction

8.2 DylanMarlais Thomas' Life and Career

8.3Let us sum up

8.4Keywords

8.5Questions for review

8.6Suggested readings and writings

8.7Answers to check your progress

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## **8.0 OBJECTIVES**

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Once you go through this unit, you should be able to learn about:

- Dylan Marlais Thomas' Life and Career and analysis of characters.

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## **8.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Dylan Marlais Thomas was a Welsh poet and writer whose works include the poems "Do not go gentle into that good night" and "And death shall have no dominion"; the 'play for voices' Under Milk Wood; and stories and radio broadcasts such as A Child's Christmas in Wales and Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog. He became widely popular in his lifetime and remained so after his premature death at the age of 39 in New York City. By then he had acquired a reputation, which he had encouraged, as a "roistering, drunken and doomed poet".

Thomas was born in Swansea, Wales, in 1914. An undistinguished pupil, he left school at 16 and became a journalist for a short time. Many of his works appeared in print while he was still a teenager, and the publication in 1934 of "Light breaks where no sun shines" caught the attention of the literary world. While living in London, Thomas met Caitlin Macnamara, whom he married in 1937. In 1938, they moved to the Welsh fishing village of Laugharne where from 1949 they settled permanently and brought up their three children.

Thomas came to be appreciated as a popular poet during his lifetime, though he found earning a living as a writer difficult. He began augmenting his income with reading tours and radio broadcasts. His radio recordings for the BBC during the late 1940s brought him to the public's attention, and he was frequently used by the BBC as an accessible voice of the literary scene.

Thomas first travelled to the United States in the 1950s. His readings there brought him a degree of fame, while his erratic behaviour and drinking worsened. His time in America cemented his legend, however, and he went on to record to vinyl such works as *A Child's Christmas in Wales*. During his fourth trip to New York in 1953, Thomas became gravely ill and fell into a coma, from which he never recovered. He died on 9 November 1953. His body was returned to Wales, where he was interred at the churchyard of St Martin's in Laugharne on 25 November 1953.

Although Thomas wrote exclusively in the English language, he has been acknowledged as one of the most important Welsh poets of the 20th century. He is noted for his original, rhythmic and ingenious use of words and imagery. His position as one of the great modern poets has been much discussed, and he remains popular with the public.

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## **8.2 DYLAN MARLAIS THOMAS' LIFE AND CAREER**

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### **Early life**

Dylan Thomas was born on 27 October 1914 in Swansea, the son of Florence Hannah (née Williams; 1882–1958), a seamstress, and David

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John Thomas (1876–1952), a teacher. His father had a first-class honours degree in English from University College, Aberystwyth and ambitions to rise above his position teaching English literature at the local grammar school.<sup>[4]</sup> Thomas had one sibling, Nancy Marles (1906–1953), who was eight years his senior.<sup>[5]</sup> The children spoke only English, though their parents were bilingual in English and Welsh, and David Thomas gave Welsh lessons at home. Thomas's father chose the name Dylan, which could be translated as "son of the sea", after Dylan ail Don, a character in *The Mabinogion*. His middle name, Marlais, was given in honour of his great-uncle, William Thomas, a Unitarian minister and poet whose bardic name was Gwilym Marles. Dylan, pronounced ' [ˈdələn] (Dull-an) in Welsh, caused his mother to worry that he might be teased as the "dull one".<sup>[8]</sup> When he broadcast on Welsh BBC, early in his career, he was introduced using this pronunciation. Thomas favoured the Anglicised pronunciation and gave instructions that it should be Dillan /ˈdɪlən/.

The red-brick semi-detached house at 5 Cwmdonkin Drive (in the respectable area of the Uplands), in which Thomas was born and lived until he was 23, had been bought by his parents a few months before his birth. His childhood featured regular summer trips to Llansteffan where his maternal relatives were the sixth generation to farm there.<sup>[10]</sup> His mother's family, the Williamses, lived in such farms as Waunfwlchan, Llwyngwyn, Maesgwyn and Penycoed. The memory of Fernhill, a dairy farm owned by his maternal aunt, Ann Jones, is evoked in the 1945 lyrical poem "Fern Hill". Thomas had bronchitis and asthma in childhood and struggled with these throughout his life. Thomas was indulged by his mother and enjoyed being mollycoddled, a trait he carried into adulthood, and he was skilful in gaining attention and sympathy. Thomas' formal education began at Mrs Hole's dame school, a private school on Mirador Crescent, a few streets away from his home.<sup>[15]</sup> He described his experience there in *Quite Early One Morning*:

Never was there such a dame school as ours, so firm and kind and smelling of galoshes, with the sweet and fumbled music of the piano lessons drifting down from upstairs to the lonely schoolroom, where only the sometimes tearful wicked sat over undone sums, or to repent a little

crime – the pulling of a girl's hair during geography, the sly shin kick under the table during English literature.

In October 1925, Thomas enrolled at Swansea Grammar School for boys, in Mount Pleasant, where his father taught English. He was an undistinguished pupil who shied away from school, preferring reading. In his first year one of his poems was published in the school's magazine, and before he left he became its editor. During his final school years he began writing poetry in notebooks; the first poem, dated 27 April (1930), is entitled "Osiris, come to Isis". In June 1928 Thomas won the school's mile race, held at St. Helen's Ground; he carried a newspaper photograph of his victory with him until his death. In 1931, when he was 16, Thomas left school to become a reporter for the South Wales Daily Post, only to leave under pressure 18 months later. Thomas continued to work as a freelance journalist for several years, during which time he remained at Cwmdonkin Drive and continued to add to his notebooks, amassing 200 poems in four books between 1930 and 1934. Of the 90 poems he published, half were written during these years.

In his free time, he joined the amateur dramatic group at the Little Theatre in Mumbles, visited the cinema in Uplands, took walks along Swansea Bay, and frequented Swansea's pubs, especially the Antelope and the Mermaid Hotels in Mumbles. In the Kardomah Café, close to the newspaper office in Castle Street, he met his creative contemporaries, including his friend the poet Vernon Watkins. The group of writers, musicians and artists became known as "The Kardomah Gang". In 1933, Thomas visited London for probably the first time.

### **1933–1939**

Thomas was a teenager when many of the poems for which he became famous were published: "And death shall have no dominion", "Before I Knocked" and "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower". "And death shall have no dominion" appeared in the New English Weekly in May 1933. When "Light breaks where no sun shines" appeared in The Listener in 1934, it caught the attention of three senior figures in literary London, T. S. Eliot, Geoffrey Grigson and Stephen Spender. They contacted Thomas and his first poetry volume, 18 Poems, was published in December 1934. 18 Poems was noted for its visionary

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qualities which led to critic Desmond Hawkins writing that the work was "the sort of bomb that bursts no more than once in three years". The volume was critically acclaimed and won a contest run by the Sunday Referee, netting him new admirers from the London poetry world, including Edith Sitwell and Edwin Muir. The anthology was published by Fortune Press, in part a vanity publisher that did not pay its writers and expected them to buy a certain number of copies themselves. A similar arrangement was used by other new authors including Philip Larkin. In September 1935, Thomas met Vernon Watkins, thus beginning a lifelong friendship. Thomas introduced Watkins, working at Lloyds Bank at the time, to his friends, now known as The Kardomah Gang. In those days, Thomas used to frequent the cinema on Mondays with Tom Warner who, like Watkins, had recently suffered a nervous breakdown. After these trips, Warner would bring Thomas back for supper with his aunt. On one occasion, when she served him a boiled egg, she had to cut its top off for him, as Thomas did not know how to do this. This was because his mother had done it for him all his life, an example of her coddling him. Years later, his wife Caitlin would still have to prepare his eggs for him. In December 1935 Thomas contributed the poem "The Hand That Signed the Paper" to Issue 18 of the bi-monthly New Verse. In 1936, his next collection *Twenty-five Poems*, published by J. M. Dent, also received much critical praise. In all, he wrote half his poems while living at Cwmdonkin Drive before moving to London. It was the time that Thomas's reputation for heavy drinking developed.

In early 1936, Thomas met Caitlin Macnamara (1913–94), a 22-year-old blonde-haired, blue-eyed dancer of Irish and French descent. She had run away from home, intent on making a career in dance, and aged 18 joined the chorus line at the London Palladium. Introduced by Augustus John, Caitlin's lover, they met in The Wheatsheaf pub on Rathbone Place in London's West End. Laying his head in her lap, a drunken Thomas proposed. Thomas liked to comment that he and Caitlin were in bed together ten minutes after they first met. Although Caitlin initially continued her relationship with John, she and Thomas began a correspondence, and in the second half of 1936 were courting. They married at the register office in Penzance, Cornwall, on 11 July 1937. In

early 1938 they moved to Wales, renting a cottage in the village of Laugharne, Carmarthenshire. Their first child, Llewelyn Edouard, was born on 30 January 1939.

By the late 1930s, Thomas was embraced as the "poetic herald" for a group of English poets, the New Apocalyptics. Thomas refused to align himself with them and declined to sign their manifesto. He later stated that he believed they were "intellectual muckpots leaning on a theory". Despite this, many of the group, including Henry Treece, modelled their work on Thomas.

During the politically charged atmosphere of the 1930s, Thomas's sympathies were very much with the radical left, to the point of holding close links with the communists, as well as decidedly pacifist and anti-fascist. He was a supporter of the left-wing No More War Movement and boasted about participating in demonstrations against the British Union of Fascists.

### **Wartime, 1939–1945**

In 1939, a collection of 16 poems and seven of the 20 short stories published by Thomas in magazines since 1934, appeared as *The Map of Love*. Ten stories in his next book, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940), were based less on lavish fantasy than those in *The Map of Love* and more on real-life romances featuring himself in Wales. Sales of both books were poor, resulting in Thomas living on meagre fees from writing and reviewing. At this time he borrowed heavily from friends and acquaintances. Hounded by creditors, Thomas and his family left Laugharne in July 1940 and moved to the home of critic John Davenport in Marshfield, Gloucestershire. There Thomas collaborated with Davenport on the satire *The Death of the King's Canary*, though due to fears of libel the work was not published until 1976.

At the outset of the Second World War, Thomas was worried about conscription, and referred to his ailment as "an unreliable lung". Coughing sometimes confined him to bed, and he had a history of bringing up blood and mucus. After initially seeking employment in a reserved occupation, he managed to be classified Grade III, which meant that he would be among the last to be called up for service. Saddened to see his friends going on active service, he continued drinking and struggled to support

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his family. He wrote begging letters to random literary figures asking for support, a plan he hoped would provide a long-term regular income.<sup>[5]</sup> Thomas supplemented his income by writing scripts for the BBC, which not only gave him additional earnings but also provided evidence that he was engaged in essential war work.

In February 1941, Swansea was bombed by the Luftwaffe in a "three nights' blitz". Castle Street was one of many streets that suffered badly; rows of shops, including the Kardomah Café, were destroyed. Thomas walked through the bombed-out shell of the town centre with his friend Bert Trick. Upset at the sight, he concluded: "Our Swansea is dead".<sup>[59]</sup> Soon after the bombing raids, Thomas wrote a radio play, *Return Journey Home*, which described the café as being "razed to the snow".<sup>[60]</sup> The play was first broadcast on 15 June 1947. The Kardomah Café reopened on Portland Street after the war.

In May 1941, Thomas and Caitlin left their son with his grandmother at Blashford and moved to London. Thomas hoped to find employment in the film industry and wrote to the director of the films division of the Ministry of Information (MOI). After being rebuffed, he found work with Strand Films, providing him with his first regular income since the *Daily Post*. Strand produced films for the MOI; Thomas scripted at least five films in 1942, *This Is Colour* (a history of the British dyeing industry) and *New Towns For Old* (on post-war reconstruction). *These Are The Men* (1943) was a more ambitious piece in which Thomas's verse accompanies Leni Riefenstahl's footage of an early Nuremberg Rally. *Conquest of a Germ* (1944) explored the use of early antibiotics in the fight against pneumonia and tuberculosis. *Our Country* (1945) was a romantic tour of Britain set to Thomas's poetry.

In early 1943, Thomas began a relationship with Pamela Glendower; one of several affairs he had during his marriage. The affairs either ran out of steam or were halted after Caitlin discovered his infidelity. In March 1943 Caitlin gave birth to a daughter, Aeronwy, in London. They lived in a run-down studio in Chelsea, made up of a single large room with a curtain to separate the kitchen.

In 1944, with the threat of German flying bombs on London, Thomas moved to the family cottage at Blaen Cwm near Llangain, where Thomas

resumed writing poetry, completing "Holy Spring" and "Vision and Prayer". In September Thomas and Caitlin moved to New Quay in Cardiganshire (Ceredigion), which inspired Thomas to pen the radio piece *Quite Early One Morning*, a sketch for his later work, *Under Milk Wood*. Of the poetry written at this time, of note is "Fern Hill", believed to have been started while living in New Quay, but completed at Blaen Cwm in mid-1945.

## Broadcasting years 1945–1949

Although Thomas had previously written for the BBC, it was a minor and intermittent source of income. In 1943 he wrote and recorded a 15-minute talk entitled "Reminiscences of Childhood" for the Welsh BBC. In December 1944 he recorded *Quite Early One Morning* (produced by Aneurin Talfan Davies, again for the Welsh BBC) but when Davies offered it for national broadcast BBC London turned it down. On 31 August 1945 the BBC Home Service broadcast *Quite Early One Morning*, and in the three years beginning October 1945, Thomas made over a hundred broadcasts for the corporation. Thomas was employed not only for his poetry readings, but for discussions and critiques.

By late September 1945 the Thomases had left Wales and were living with various friends in London. The publication of *Deaths and Entrances* in 1946 was a turning point for Thomas. Poet and critic Walter J. Turner commented in *The Spectator*, "This book alone, in my opinion, ranks him as a major poet".

In the second half of 1945 Thomas began reading for the BBC Radio programme, *Book of Verse*, broadcast weekly to the Far East.<sup>[78]</sup> This provided Thomas with a regular income and brought him into contact with Louis MacNeice, a congenial drinking companion whose advice Thomas cherished. On 29 September 1946, the BBC began transmitting the Third Programme, a high-culture network which provided opportunities for Thomas. He appeared in the play *Comus* for the Third Programme, the day after the network launched, and his rich, sonorous voice led to character parts, including the lead in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Satan in an adaptation of *Paradise Lost*. Thomas remained a popular guest on radio talk shows for the BBC,

who regarded him as "useful should a younger generation poet be needed". He had an uneasy relationship with BBC management and a staff job was never an option, with drinking cited as the problem. Despite this, Thomas became a familiar radio voice and within Britain was "in every sense a celebrity".

Thomas visited the home of historian A. J. P. Taylor in Disley. Although Taylor disliked him intensely, he stayed for a month, drinking "on a monumental scale", up to 15 or 20 pints of beer a day. In late 1946 Thomas turned up at the Taylors' again, this time homeless and with Caitlin. Margaret Taylor let them take up residence in the garden summerhouse.<sup>[85]</sup> After a three month holiday in Italy, Thomas and family moved, in September 1947, into the Manor House in South Leigh, just west of Oxford. He continued with his work for the BBC, completed a number of film scripts and worked further on his ideas for *Under Milk Wood*. In May 1949 Thomas and his family moved to his final home, the Boat House at Laugharne, purchased for him at a cost of £2,500 in April 1949 by Margaret Taylor. Thomas acquired a garage a hundred yards from the house on a cliff ledge which he turned into his writing shed, and where he wrote several of his most acclaimed poems.<sup>[87]</sup> Just before moving into there, Thomas rented "Pelican House" opposite his regular drinking den, Brown's Hotel, for his parents who lived there from 1949 until 1953. It was there that his father died and the funeral was held. Caitlin gave birth to their third child, a boy named Colm Garan Hart, on 25 July 1949.

### **American tours, 1950–1953**

Canadian poet John Brinnin invited Thomas to New York, where in 1950 they embarked on a lucrative three-month tour of arts centres and campuses. The tour, which began in front of an audience of a thousand at the Kaufmann Auditorium of the Poetry Centre in New York, took in about 40 venues. During the tour Thomas was invited to many parties and functions and on several occasions became drunk – going out of his way to shock people – and was a difficult guest. Thomas drank before some of his readings, though it is argued he may have pretended to be more affected by it than he actually was.<sup>[96]</sup> The writer Elizabeth Hardwick recalled how intoxicating a performer he was and how the

tension would build before a performance: "Would he arrive only to break down on the stage? Would some dismaying scene take place at the faculty party? Would he be offensive, violent, obscene?" Caitlin said in her memoir, "Nobody ever needed encouragement less, and he was drowned in it."

On returning to Britain Thomas began work on two further poems, "In the white giant's thigh", which he read on the Third Programme in September 1950, and the incomplete "In country heaven". 1950 is also believed to be the year that he began work on *Under Milk Wood*, under the working title 'The Town That Was Mad'. The task of seeing this work through to production was assigned to the BBC's Douglas Cleverdon, who had been responsible for casting Thomas in 'Paradise Lost'.<sup>[99]</sup> Despite Cleverdon's urges, the script slipped from Thomas's priorities and in early 1951 he took a trip to Iran to work on a film for the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The film was never made, with Thomas returning to Wales in February, though his time there allowed him to provide a few minutes of material for a BBC documentary entitled 'Persian Oil'. Early that year Thomas wrote two poems, which Thomas's principal biographer, Paul Ferris describes as "unusually blunt"; the ribald "Lament" and an ode, in the form of a villanelle, to his dying father "Do not go gentle into that good night".

Despite a range of wealthy patrons, including Margaret Taylor, Princess Marguerite Caetani and Marged Howard-Stepney, Thomas was still in financial difficulty, and he wrote several begging letters to notable literary figures including the likes of T. S. Eliot. Taylor was not keen on Thomas taking another trip to the United States, and thought that if Thomas had a permanent address in London he would be able to gain steady work there. She bought a property, 54 Delancey Street, in Camden Town, and in late 1951 Thomas and Caitlin lived in the basement flat. Thomas would describe the flat as his "London house of horror" and did not return there after his 1952 tour of America.

Thomas undertook a second tour of the United States in 1952, this time with Caitlin – after she had discovered he had been unfaithful on his earlier trip. They drank heavily, and Thomas began to suffer with gout and lung problems. The second tour was the most intensive of

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the four, taking in 46 engagements. The trip also resulted in Thomas recording his first poetry to vinyl, which Caedmon Records released in America later that year.<sup>[108]</sup> One of his works recorded during this time, *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, became his most popular prose work in America. The original 1952 recording of *A Child's Christmas in Wales* was a 2008 selection for the United States National Recording Registry, stating that it is "credited with launching the audiobook industry in the United States".

In April 1953 Thomas returned alone for a third tour of America. He performed a "work in progress" version of *Under Milk Wood*, solo, for the first time at Harvard University on 3 May. A week later the work was performed with a full cast at the Poetry Centre in New York. He met the deadline only after being locked in a room by Brinnin's assistant, Liz Reitell, and was still editing the script on the afternoon of the performance; its last lines were handed to the actors as they put on their makeup.

During this penultimate tour Thomas met the composer Igor Stravinsky who had become an admirer after having been introduced to his poetry by W. H. Auden. They had discussions about collaborating on a "musical theatrical work" for which Thomas would provide the libretto on the theme of "the rediscovery of love and language in what might be left after the world after the bomb." The shock of Thomas's death later in the year moved Stravinsky to compose his *In Memoriam Dylan Thomas* for tenor, string quartet, and four trombones. The first performance in Los Angeles in 1954 was introduced with a tribute to Thomas from Aldous Huxley.

Thomas spent the last nine or ten days of his third tour in New York mostly in the company of Reitell, with whom he had an affair.<sup>[115]</sup> During this time Thomas fractured his arm falling down a flight of stairs when drunk. Reitell's doctor, Milton Feltenstein, put his arm in plaster and treated him for gout and gastritis.

After returning home, Thomas worked on *Under Milk Wood* in Wales before sending the original manuscript to Douglas Cleverdon on 15 October 1953. It was copied and returned to Thomas, who lost it in a pub in London and required a duplicate to take to America. Thomas flew to

the States on 19 October 1953 for what would be his final tour. He died in New York before the BBC could record *Under Milk Wood*. Richard Burton starred in the first broadcast in 1954, and was joined by Elizabeth Taylor in a subsequent film. In 1954 the play won the Prix Italia for literary or dramatic programmes.

Thomas's last collection *Collected Poems, 1934–1952*, published when he was 38, won the Foyle poetry prize. Reviewing the volume, critic Philip Toynbee declared that "Thomas is the greatest living poet in the English language".<sup>[113]</sup> Thomas's father died from pneumonia just before Christmas 1952. In the first few months of 1953 his sister died from liver cancer, one of his patrons took an overdose of sleeping pills, three friends died at an early age and Caitlin had an abortion.

## Death

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 clean and the clean bones gone,  
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;  
Though they go mad they shall be sane,  
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again  
Though lovers be lost love shall not;  
And death shall have no dominion.

From "[And death shall have no dominion](#)"

*Twenty-five Poems* (1936)

Thomas arrived in New York on 20 October 1953 to undertake another tour of poetry-reading and talks, organised by John Brinnin. Although he complained of chest trouble and gout while still in Britain, there is no record that he received medical treatment for either condition. He was in a melancholy mood about the trip and his health was poor; he relied on an inhaler to aid his breathing and there were reports that he was suffering from blackouts. His visit to say goodbye to BBC producer Philip Burton, a few days before he left for New York, was interrupted by a blackout. On his last night in London he had another in the company of his fellow poet Louis MacNeice. The next day he visited a doctor for a smallpox vaccination certificate.

Plans called for a first appearance at a rehearsal of *Under Milk Wood* at the Poetry Centre. Brinnin, who was director of the Poetry Centre, did not

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travel to New York but remained in Boston to write. He handed responsibility to his assistant, Liz Reitell, who was keen to see Thomas for the first time since their three-week romance early in the year. She met Thomas at Idlewild Airport and was shocked at his appearance, as he looked "pale, delicate and shaky, not his usual robust self". Thomas told her he had had a terrible week, had missed her terribly and wanted to go to bed with her. Despite Reitell's previous misgivings about their relationship, they spent the rest of the day and night together. After being taken by Reitell to check in at the Chelsea Hotel, Thomas took the first rehearsal of *Under Milk Wood*. They then went to the White Horse Tavern in Greenwich Village, before returning to the Chelsea Hotel.

The next day Reitell invited him to her apartment, but he declined. They went sightseeing, but Thomas felt unwell and retired to his bed for the rest of the afternoon. Reitell gave him half a grain (32.4 milligrams) of phenobarbitone to help him sleep and spent the night at the hotel with him. Two days later, on 23 October, Herb Hannum, a friend from an earlier trip, noticed how sick Thomas looked and suggested an appointment with Feltenstein before the performances of *Under Milk Wood* that evening. Feltenstein administered injections and Thomas made it through the two performances, but collapsed immediately afterwards. Reitell later said that Feltenstein was "rather a wild doctor who thought injections would cure anything".

On the evening of 27 October Thomas attended his 39th birthday party but felt unwell and returned to his hotel after an hour. The next day he took part in *Poetry and the Film*, a recorded symposium at Cinema 16, with panellists Amos Vogel, Arthur Miller, Maya Deren, Parker Tyler, and Willard Maas.

A turning point came on 2 November. Air pollution in New York had risen significantly and exacerbated chest illnesses such as Thomas had. By the end of the month over 200 New Yorkers had died from the smog. On 3 November, Thomas spent most of the day in bed drinking. He went out in the evening to keep two drink appointments. After returning to the hotel he went out again for a drink at 2 am. After drinking at the White Horse, a pub he had found through Scottish poet Ruthven Todd, Thomas returned to the Hotel Chelsea, declaring, "I've had 18 straight

whiskies. I think that's the record!" The barman and the owner of the pub who served him later commented that Thomas could not have imbibed more than half that amount. Thomas had an appointment at a clam house in New Jersey with Todd on 4 November. When phoned at the Chelsea that morning, he said he was feeling ill and postponed the engagement. Later he went drinking with Reitell at the White Horse and, feeling sick again, returned to the hotel. Feltenstein came to see him three times that day, administering the cortisone secretant ACTH by injection and, on his third visit, half a grain (32.4 milligrams) of morphine sulphate, which affected his breathing. Reitell became increasingly concerned and telephoned Feltenstein for advice. He suggested she get male assistance, so she called upon the painter Jack Heliker, who arrived before 11 pm. At midnight on 5 November Thomas's breathing became more difficult and his face turned blue.<sup>[136]</sup> An ambulance was summoned.

Thomas was admitted to the emergency ward at St Vincent's Hospital at 1:58 am. He was comatose, and his medical notes state that "the impression upon admission was acute alcoholic encephalopathy damage to the brain by alcohol, for which the patient was treated without response". Caitlin flew to America the following day and was taken to the hospital, by which time a tracheotomy had been performed. Her reported first words were, "Is the bloody man dead yet?" She was allowed to see Thomas only for 40 minutes in the morning but returned in the afternoon and, in a drunken rage, threatened to kill John Brinnin. When she became uncontrollable, she was put in a straitjacket and committed, by Feltenstein, to the River Crest private psychiatric detox clinic on Long Island.

It is also now believed, however, that Thomas had been suffering from bronchitis and pneumonia, as well as emphysema, immediately before his death. In their 2004 book *Dylan Remembered 1935–1953, Volume 2*, David N. Thomas and Dr Simon Barton disclose that Thomas was found to have pneumonia when he was admitted to hospital in a coma. Doctors took three hours to restore his breathing, using artificial respiration and oxygen. Summarising their findings, they conclude: "The medical notes indicate that, on admission, Dylan's bronchial disease was found to be very extensive, affecting upper, mid and lower lung fields,

both left and right." Thomas died at noon on 9 November, having never recovered from his coma.

### Aftermath

Rumours circulated of a brain haemorrhage, followed by competing reports of a mugging or even that Thomas had drunk himself to death. Later, speculation arose about drugs and diabetes. At the post-mortem, the pathologist found three causes of death – pneumonia, brain swelling and a fatty liver. Despite the poet's heavy drinking, his liver showed no sign of cirrhosis.

The publication of John Brinnin's 1955 biography *Dylan Thomas in America* cemented Thomas's legacy as the "doomed poet"; Brinnin focuses on Thomas's last few years and paints a picture of him as a drunk and a philanderer. Later biographies have criticised Brinnin's view, especially his coverage of Thomas's death. David Thomas in *Fatal Neglect: Who Killed Dylan Thomas?* claims that Brinnin, along with Reitell and Feltenstein, were culpable. FitzGibbon's 1965 biography ignores Thomas's heavy drinking and skims over his death, giving just two pages in his detailed book to Thomas's demise. Ferris in his 1989 biography includes Thomas's heavy drinking, but is more critical of those around him in his final days and does not draw the conclusion that he drank himself to death. Many sources have criticised Feltenstein's role and actions, especially his incorrect diagnosis of delirium tremens and the high dose of morphine he administered. Dr C. G. de Gutierrez-Mahoney, the doctor who treated Thomas while at St. Vincents, concluded that Feltenstein's failure to see that Thomas was gravely ill and have him admitted to hospital sooner "was even more culpable than his use of morphine".

Caitlin Thomas's autobiographies, *Caitlin Thomas – Leftover Life to Kill* (1957) and *My Life with Dylan Thomas: Double Drink Story* (1997), describe the effects of alcohol on the poet and on their relationship. "Ours was not only a love story, it was a drink story, because without alcohol it would never had got on its rocking feet", she wrote, and "The bar was our altar." Biographer Andrew Lycett ascribed the decline in Thomas's health to an alcoholic co-dependent relationship with his wife, who deeply resented his extramarital affairs. In contrast, Dylan biographers Andrew

Sinclair and George Tremlett express the view that Thomas was not an alcoholic. Tremlett argues that many of Thomas's health issues stemmed from undiagnosed diabetes.

Thomas died intestate, with assets to the value of £100. His body was brought back to Wales for burial in the village churchyard at Laugharne. Thomas's funeral, which Brinnin did not attend, took place at St Martin's Church in Laugharne on 24 November. Six friends from the village carried Thomas's coffin. Caitlin, without her customary hat, walked behind the coffin, with his childhood friend Daniel Jones at her arm and her mother by her side. The procession to the church was filmed and the wake took place at Brown's Hotel. Thomas's fellow poet and long-time friend Vernon Watkins wrote *The Times* obituary.

Thomas's widow, Caitlin, died in 1994 and was buried alongside him. Thomas's father "DJ" died on 16 December 1952 and his mother Florence in August 1958. Thomas's elder son, Llewelyn, died in 2000, his daughter, Aeronwy in 2009 and his youngest son Colm in 2012.

**Check your progress – 1**

1. When was Dylan Thomas born?

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2. Where was Dylan Thomas born?

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3. What was the name of Dylan Thomas' mother?

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4. What was the name of Dylan Thomas' father?

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### 8.3 LET US SUM UP

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Dylan Marlais Thomas was born in the Welsh seaport of Swansea, Carmarthenshire, Wales, on October 27, 1914. His father, David John, was an English teacher and a would-be poet from whom Dylan inherited his intellectual and literary abilities. From his mother, Florence, a simple and religious woman, Dylan inherited his mood, temperament, and respect for his Celtic heritage. He had one older sister, Nancy. He attended the Swansea Grammar School, where he received all of his formal education. As a student he made contributions to the school magazine and was keenly interested in local folklore (stories passed down within a culture). He said that as a boy he was "small, thin, indecisively active, quick to get dirty, curly." During these early school years, Thomas befriended Daniel Jones, another local schoolboy. The two would write hundreds of poems together, and as adults Jones would edit a collection of Thomas's poetry.

After leaving school, Thomas supported himself as an actor, reporter, reviewer, scriptwriter, and with various odd jobs. When he was twenty-two years old, he married Caitlin Macnamara, by whom he had two sons, Llewelyn and Colm, and a daughter, Aeron. After his marriage, Thomas moved to the fishing village of Laugharne, Carmarthenshire.

To support his growing family, Thomas was forced to write radio scripts for the Ministry of Information (Great Britain's information services) and documentaries for the British government. He also served as an aircraft gunner during World War II (1939–45; a war fought between Germany, Japan, and Italy, the Axis powers; and England, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States, the Allies). After the war he became a commentator on poetry for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). In 1950 Thomas made the first of three lecture tours through the

United States—the others were in 1952 and 1953—in which he gave more than one hundred poetry readings. In these appearances he half recited, half sang the lines in his "Welsh singing" voice.

Thomas's poetic output was not large. He wrote only six poems in the last six years of his life. A gruelling lecture schedule greatly slowed his literary output in these years. His belief that he would die young led him to create "instant Dylan"—the persona of the wild young Welsh bard, damned by drink and women, that he believed his public wanted. When he was thirty-five years old, he described himself as "old, small, dark, intelligent, and darting-doting-dotting eyed ... balding and toothlessing."

During Thomas's visit to the United States in 1953, he was scheduled to read his own and other poetry in some forty university towns throughout the country. He also intended to work on the libretto (text) of an opera for Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971) in the latter's California home. Thomas celebrated his thirty-ninth birthday in New York City in a mood of gay exhilaration, following the extraordinary success of his just-published *Collected Poems*. The festivities ended in his collapse and illness. On November 9, 1953, he died in St. Vincent's Hospital in New York City. Some reports attribute his death to pneumonia brought on by alcoholism, others to encephalopathy, a brain disease. His body was returned to Laugharne, Wales, for burial.

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## 8.4 KEYWORDS

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- **Dumb:** unable or unwilling to speak
- **Wintry:** characteristic of winter; cold, bleak
- **Mouth:** to move the lips; to touch with the mouth

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## 8.5 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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- Write about Dylan Thomas' life.
- Write a note on Dylan Thomas' career.
- Write a note on Dylan Thomas' death and its aftermath

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## 8.6 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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1. "Oxford affairs". The Guardian. Retrieved 17 November 2014.
2. ^ Ferris (1989), p.239
3. ^ Jump up to:<sup>a</sup> <sup>b</sup> "The Writing Shed". dylanthomasboathouse.com. Retrieved 25 July 2012.
4. ^ Ferris (1989), p. 240
5. ^ "Laugharne". *BBC*. Retrieved 27 July 2012.

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## 8.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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1. DYLAN THOMAS WAS BORN ON 27 OCTOBER 1914.(ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS – 1 Q 1)
- 2.THOMAS WAS BORN IN SWANSEA, WALES. (ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS – 1 Q 2)
3. DYLAN THOMAS'S MOTHER'S NAME WAS FLORENCE HANNAH.(ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS – 1 Q 3)
4. DYLAN THOMAS' FATHER'S NAME WAS DAVID JOHN THOMAS. (ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS – 1 Q 4)

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# UNIT 9. DYLAN THOMAS – THE FORCE THAT THROUGH THE GREEN FUSE DRIVES THE FLOWER, POEM IN OCTOBER, DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT - 2

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## STRUCTURE

9.0 Objectives

9.1 Introduction

9.2 The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower

9.2.1 Summary

9.2.2 Analysis

9.3 Let us sum up

9.4 Keywords

9.5 Questions for Review

9.6 Suggested Readings and References

9.7 Answers to check your progress

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## 9.0 OBJECTIVES

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After the completion of this unit, you should be able to learn about:

- summary and analysis of **“The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower”** by Dylan Thomas.

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## 9.1 INTRODUCTION

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"The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" is a poem by Welsh poet Dylan Thomas—the poem that "made Thomas famous." Written in 1933 (when Thomas was nineteen), it was first published in his 1934 collection *18 Poems*.

Like the other poems in *18 Poems*, which belong to what has been called Thomas's "womb-tomb period", it deals with "creation, both physical and poetic, and the temporal process of birth, death, and rebirth".

### Check your progress -1

1. Who wrote "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower"?

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2. When was "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" first published?

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3. How many poems does "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" have?

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## 9.2 THE FORCE THAT THROUGH THE GREEN FUSE DRIVES THE FLOWER

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### 9.2.1 Summary

#### Summary Of Stanza 1

**Get out the microscope, because we're going through this poem line-by-line.**

#### Lines 1-3

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower  
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees  
Is my destroyer.

- This poem definitely starts off with a bang, not a whimper.
- You might not have a clear idea of what the heck this speaker is talking about, but we certainly get the sense of an intensity, some urgency, in the speaker.
- This is some pretty powerful stuff the speaker is feeling, and he doesn't mind sharing. (We're just assuming the speaker's a he at this point.) So, what's he feeling so intense about?
- We're glad you asked.

- First things first: let's deal with "the force."
- A good place to start with the force is to figure out if we are talking Jedi or Dark Side here—is this force positive or negative?
- Fact: the force moves "through the green fuse," and "drives the flower." Umm, what? Okay don't panic, this isn't as bad as it seems.
- The "flower" is... well, a flower. So that "green fuse" must be... anyone, anyone? Yup, the flower's stem. So, "the force" goes through the stem and "drives" the flower.
- The use of the word "fuse" makes the image of the flower very active. The word brings to mind the fuse on an explosive device or fireworks. As a result of those associations, the flower's bloom becomes much more vigorous and exciting. It's not just blooming; it's exploding.
- "Drives" in this context means "fuels," or "powers." So, what goes through a plant's stem that would fuel a blooming flower? Water? Okay, that sounds reasonable—for now. This "force" sounds like a good thing to us. It's making flowers bloom. That can't be bad, right?
- In addition to fueling the flower, the force also "drives [the speaker's] green age."
- We started off talking about plants, so with that in mind what does the color green usually indicate? Yup, that plant's alive and healthy. Green also can indicate that the plant is new or young. For example, we say something is "green" if it isn't ripe yet.
- If we take this idea of green and apply it to the speaker, what happens? If you said the speaker turns into a giant green apple, you have a great imagination. Good for you. Unfortunately, you're a little off base on this one.
- When talking about people, we might say they are "green" if they are young or inexperienced. In the poem, "green age" becomes of metaphor for youth.
- So, the force is also fueling the speaker's youth, his vitality. The word "green" shows up twice in the poem's first two lines.
- Thomas definitely wants us to take notice.
- "The force" could certainly still be referring to water—we need it to live after all. But we're starting to get a bigger sense of this force.

## Notes

- This life-giving force is, perhaps, more metaphysical in nature—a more spiritual or cosmic kind of life force.
- But wait; there's more. The force is also responsible for "blast[ing] the roots of trees." Hey—that doesn't sound very nice.
- The verb "blast" is pretty aggressive, and it has mostly negative associations. When we see and hear the word "blast," we usually think *destruction*.
- And, as it turns out, the force is the speaker's "destroyer." Coincidence? We think not.
- It seems like this force has both some Jedi and some Dark Side qualities. It's bringing flowers to bloom and fueling the vigor of youth, but it's also blasting roots and destroying the speaker.
- Before we move on, let's take a closer look at some of Thomas's word choices in Stanza 1. Words like "force," "fuse," "drives," "blasts," and "destroyer" all have an active, aggressive, powerful quality. Whatever this force is, and whatever our speaker is feeling, it's on steroids.
- Now for one last thing: there seems to be a connection developing between how the force acts upon nature and how it acts upon our speaker.
- It seems like the speaker and the natural world are tied together in some way: "green fuse" (nature) / "green age" (speaker).
- They've certainly got that repeated "green" in common. Let's keep an eye on this connection as the poem continues.

### Lines 4-5

And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose  
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

- The speaker says he's "dumb" to tell the flower that what ages ("bends") him is the same "wintry fever" that has made the rose "crooked."
- It's not that the speaker has super-low self-esteem and is calling himself stupid here. In this context, the word "dumb" refers to being temporarily unable speak or unable to clearly express oneself, as in "When she saw the Bigfoot holding a chainsaw, she was struck dumb with fear."
- So, the speaker is unable to tell the rose that what ages it is the same thing that's aging *him*.

- What do you suppose that "wintry fever" is? The force, perhaps? Good guess. but what *is* the force? (Here's one explanation. Okay, this isn't quite what Thomas had in mind—but it's still good to know.)
- The force definitely seems to be pretty powerful and inescapable. "Time" is certainly one force that would fit the bill. Take your... um, time and think about it.
- Time can be seen as a positive and a negative force. Time is equally responsible for life and death. This might account for our speaker's conflicted feelings on the subject: Time is making the flower bloom; it is also moving the flower and the speaker closer to old age and death. Bummer.
- So, "the force," "the destroyer," and even that "wintry fever" are all names for time. In fact, they are all metaphors for time.
- Okay, so the force *is* time. But what's making the speaker unable to speak? Why can't he just say, "Hey rose, we all grow old and die, like it or not"?
- Well, it could be fear. It's no fun thinking or talking about death. It could also be the fact that, even if he does tell the rose what's up, it doesn't really matter. It doesn't change anything. Maybe the speaker is just going with the old adage "if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."
- It could also be that the speaker feels unable to accurately describe what it is he is feeling about time's dual powers: of creation and of destruction. It is, after all, some pretty deep stuff—not too easy to wrap your mind around.
- We also get the sense that the speaker is seeing and feeling everything at once. Things that would take lots of time to happen are all squeezed into one 5-line stanza. The flower blooms and withers in the space of just a few lines.
- This sense of compressed time adds to the feelings of intensity we get from this speaker and the poem. Everything is happening at once.
- Thomas also hits us with a little light personification in stanza 1. That flower doesn't talk or dance a jig, but it is implied that, if the *speaker* were able to talk, the rose would be able to hear him.

## Notes

- The use of personification further develops the interconnectedness between man and the natural world, the sense that we (people, animals, plants, rocks) are all in the same boat when it comes to the effects of time.
- So, here at the end of stanza one, that force seems equally capable of creating and destroying beauty, vitality, and life. Beware the force—but also celebrate it.
- One last note before we head off to stanza 2: we're *sensing* The use of slant rhyme ("flower," "destroyer," "fever" and "trees," "rose") and iambic meter here, though it's subtle. For more on that good stuff, head on over to "Form and Meter."

### Summary of Stanza 2

**Get out the microscope, because we're going through this poem line-by-line.**

#### Lines 6-8

The force that drives the water through the rocks  
Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams  
Turns mine to wax.

- Stanza 2 begins with another mention of "the force." This time, instead of a flower image, we have the image of water moving through the rocks—like water in a rocky, swift moving river.
- The force *drives* the water through the river. It seems to be responsible for creating the river current itself.
- Water is a powerful life symbol, so we should pay particular attention to what happens to all things watery as we move forward.
- The force also seems to be responsible for the speaker's pulse; it "drives" the blood coursing through his veins.
- Both of these images, the river current and the pulse, feel positive. They feel like two more examples of the force as a life-giving, positive kind of energy. But things take a negative turn, much like they did in stanza 1.
- The force also "dries" the "streams." That doesn't sound good. And it turns the speaker's streams (his blood flowing through his veins) to "wax." That's *definitely* not good. That sounds like, well, death. So much for the whole life-giving thing: the force giveth, the force taketh away.

- Something else that we start to notice is the mirroring of natural imagery with body imagery.
- Check it out: Thomas gives us the image of water coursing through a river bed, right next to a line that implies blood coursing through human veins.
- We begin to see the natural world and the human body as reflections of one another. The way the force acts on one is the same as it acts on the other. The movement and imagery of nature is there in the movement and imagery of the human body, and vice-versa.
- What about that description of the "mouthing streams"? It seems a little strange, right? It's as if the stream were trying to speak, "mouthing" words as the force dries it up into nothing.
- This is another case of Thomas using personification. It heightens that connection between the natural imagery and the body imagery. Nature has qualities of the body and the body has qualities of nature. Neat trick.

### Lines 9-10

And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins

How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

- Anything sound familiar here? It should. That "And I am dumb" bit is repeated from stanza 1. It looks like this phrase might act as a kind of refrain, so let's keep an eye out for it moving forward.
- This time, the speaker is unable to tell his poor veins that the mouth—wait a minute. Which mouth is sucking and which mouth is "mouthing"? Things are getting all jumbled up here.
- Perhaps our boy Dylan just got a little confused? Or maybe, just maybe, he wanted us to *feel* like things were all jumbled up and confused. But why?
- Once again, we're glad you asked. Remember how we said that the force seemed to be positive and negative at the same time—equally as capable of creation and destruction? Well, all this "mouth" confusion mirrors the force's (time's) duality.
- Let us put it another way: We have the personified "mouthing stream," unable to speak as the force dries it up. We have the speaker, unable to "mouth" (to tell) his veins what's going on. And last, but not least, we have the "mouth" that "sucks" at "the mountain spring." So, whose mouth is that last one?

## Notes

- If we go back to the stanza's first line, we find our answer. Remember, we're talking about the force. It's right there in the first lines of stanzas 1 and 2, for heaven's sake. So, this last "mouth" refers to the force.
- The stream, the speaker, and the force are all connected by this mouth imagery.
- This is important. The mouth has traditionally been used as a positive and as a negative symbol (sound familiar?). According to *The Herder Dictionary of Symbols*, since the mouth allows us to speak and to breathe, it symbolizes life and "the power of the spirit and of creativity" (135). Unfortunately, it also represents destruction and the act of devouring—think about phrases like "the jaws of hell," or the gnashing teeth from *Where the Wild Things Are*.
- Here's the thing: Thomas would have known all about the mouth's dual symbolism and he wanted us to take note. The word "mouth" is used three times in a five-line stanza. We can't miss it.
- In fact, Thomas even alters the refrain to include the word "mouth." It's the only time in the whole poem that the refrain gets changed from, "And I am dumb to tell." This change draws even more attention to the word "mouth" and its associated symbolism.
- Now, he wasn't repeating "mouth" because he was lazy; he wanted us to notice that duality and to apply that duality to the force. Like the mouth, the force can be an agent of life and creativity *or* death and destruction.
- Still having trouble? Here's another example of how the mouth is simultaneously creative and destructive:
- When you eat, the food is destroyed, devoured by your mouth (yes, we've seen you in the cafeteria—it isn't a pretty sight).
- But that food you devour is going to give you energy and life. The mouth is destroying and creating at the same time, right?
- That's basically the kind of force our speaker is dealing with and why he chose to make us focus so much on mouth imagery in stanza 2.
- Everybody good? Okay, let's move on.
- That "mountain spring" sounds nice, right? A spring can represent vitality and youth. But if that's the case here, and if the "mouth" in line 10 belongs to the force, then we might have a problem.

- If it's the force "sucking" at the mountain spring then maybe it's going to drain it the way it did the stream. That would be bad.
- If you drain the symbol of life and vitality what have you got left? Yup, old age and death.
- So, just like in stanza 1, the force in stanza 2 is described as something that can fuel, "drive" life (the mountain stream, the speaker's pulse) and as something that can drain life (it dries the stream and drinks up the mountain spring).
- We talked about that refrain—"And I am dumb"—that pops up in stanza 2. Does anything else carry over from stanza 1 to 2?
- You probably noticed that the stanzas kind of look the same. They are "quintains," which is just a fancy name for five-line stanzas. As well, the lines follow a 5,5,2,5,5 metrical pattern (of mostly iambs—check out "Form and Meter" for more on that).
- There are also some similar-sounding end words: "flower," "destroyer," and "fever," "rocks," "wax," "sucks." There is a kind of loose rhyme scheme developing, only the words don't really rhyme.
- Thomas is using half, or slant, rhyme as well as alliteration to connect the word sounds in more subtle, more mysterious way than the more obvious connection of full or perfect rhyme.
- This more mysterious, more complex, sound connection mirrors the connection we talked about before between the human and the natural realms and, perhaps, between the natural and the metaphysical as well. (Check out "Sound Check" for more on this stuff.)
- Okay, that should do it for stanza 2. Take a deep breath. Ingest some caffeine and hold on tight. Things are only going to get more complex from here.

### Summary of Stanza 3

**Get out the microscope, because we're going through this poem line-by-line.**

#### Lines 11-13

The hand that whirls the water in the pool  
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind  
Hauls my shroud sail.

## Notes

- Man, we're starting to get some positive-negative whiplash here. The third stanza continues that back and forth, positive-negative pattern set up in the previous two stanzas. But there is something different about line 11.
- In the first line of stanza 3, the force is personified. Now we have "the hand." The force seems a little less mysterious now that it has a hand, right? What else has hands? Tic-Tock? Remember, the force is an extended metaphor for time. The hand is also a time metaphor.
- The hand whirling the water in the pool sounds nice. Stirring quicksand? Not so nice.
- So, the hand that moves life-sustaining water also "stirs" deadly quicksand. It's the all-powerful force again, capable of controlling life and death. And if that's not enough, that same hand is also capable of "roping," (controlling, capturing) the wind. Impressive, right?
- The next line mixes the positive and the negative.
- Actually, it's a little more (okay, a lot more) complex than that.
- The line provides us with one image that can actually be understood as both positive and negative, simultaneously. What's that? Impossible you say? Well let us just break it down for you.
- A "shroud" is a piece of rigging that helps hold a ship's mast in place—that's a good thing (you need a mast to hold the sail up).
- A shroud is also the cloth used to wrap a dead body for burial. Yeah, that would be a bad thing.
- So, the hand (the force) that pulls ("hauls") on the ship's rigging, that fills the sail and moves the ship through the water (the journey and adventure of life), is also pulling on the speaker's death shroud, making it flap like a sail in the breeze. Spooky.
- Perhaps the force is driving the dead to the afterlife like it drives the ship to its destination.
- That little four-word line simultaneously gives us the image of the wind filling the sails of a ship, moving it to its destination, and a death shroud flapping in the breeze. Those four words are doing a lot of work, mixing life and death. That's poetry for you—lots of overworked, underpaid words.
- Before you get all broken up about it, the speaker isn't dead. He's just imagining his death. It's another example how the speaker is kind of

seeing and experiencing everything all at once. This intensified way of seeing mirrors the poem's intense tone.

- The fact that Thomas chose to have this line encompass both aspects of the force in one image feels important. Let's ponder...
- Perhaps Thomas wants to suggest that this force isn't positive or negative in the sense of good and bad. Rather it's in the more yin and yang sense of opposite, complimentary, equally necessary forces. One can't exist without the other. This seems to be at the core of what the speaker is feeling and grappling with.
- Hey, what's that? Is that what we think it is? Why, yes it is. It's a developing theme. Can you see it? We better go ahead and put out a theme alert:
- Be on the lookout for aspects relating to the interconnectedness of life and death.

#### **Lines 14-15**

And I am dumb to tell the hanging man

How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.

- Line fourteen is a return to the by now familiar refrain, "And I am dumb to tell."
- This time, the speaker is unable to tell "the hanging man" that the lime the executioner (the hangman) is going to throw on his dead body is made up of the speaker's own "clay." What?
- To clear this up, we have to know a couple things: first, "lime" here is not some garnish for your iced drink; it's that white powdery stuff mobsters are always throwing on dead bodies after they toss them into shallow graves. It speeds up decay and keeps things from getting, well, super-stinky.
- Second, that "clay" isn't the stuff you used to make your folks a coffee cup in elementary school. Thomas is using "clay" in the literary-poetic sense of *the body*.
- So, lime is the stuff that's tossed on dead bodies, and "clay" is the material that makes up the body.
- Now, let's take another look. The speaker can't tell the dying man, the one swinging from the rope (that rope in line 12 suddenly seems more ominous), that he is, in a sense, part of the process.

## Notes

- This seems a little random, but let's consider it in terms of that developing theme we mentioned in the last section: the interconnectedness of life and death.
- When we consider these lines through this lens of interconnectedness, things get a little clearer. The elements in the speaker's living body have something in common with that lime that will cover the condemned man in death.
- Basically, Thomas is showing us that elements of death are present even in life. In a sense, by simply being alive we are participating in death.
- Not convinced? Check this out. Take a look at the end of the lines. We have "hanging man" and "hangman."
- Notice anything? The words are nearly identical. "Hangman" is actually part of "hanging man"—you can't spell one without the other, right? The words look similar and sound similar, yet one person is alive and one is dead. This is another example of life and death's interconnectedness, how one is contained in the other.
- Man, we're getting depressed—time for a cupcake break.

### **Summary of Stanza 4**

**Get out the microscope, because we're going through this poem line-by-line.**

#### **Lines 16-18**

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;  
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood  
Shall calm her sores.

- As stanza 4 begins the mysterious force is personified again, this time with "lips." Yes, now the force has hands and lips. But this time, there's more. The mysterious force is named. We were right: it's "time."
- This stanza gets a little tricky. To start with, "time" is sucking at the fountain head like a leech. Gross. The mention of leeches makes us think of blood. This is no accident since blood shows up in the very next line.
- If we imagine time drinking from a fountain and doing kind of a sloppy job of it, some water is going to be dripping down and pooling on the ground. But instead of water, it is love that drips and gathers. And then it turns to blood. Lost? You should be.
- Let's look at this another way.

- Water is a life-giving element. Fountains usually supply water. But this fountain is supplying love. Love is another life-giving element. It energizes, it inspires, it leads to life through procreation. Blood is a life-sustaining element, too. So water, love, and blood are all connected in a way. They are all essential elements to life. The force—time—is sucking them up, drying them up.
- Remember that stream the force dried up back in stanza 2 and the mountain spring that the force was sucking from? Those images represented youth and vitality, life, being drained by the force of time. The fountain head in stanza 4 also represents vitality and life (fountain of youth, fountain of life) and time is sucking it dry.
- The rhyme between "fountain" in stanza 4 and "mountain" in stanza 2 makes the connection between these two stanzas (and thus stanza 4's connection to youth and vitality) even stronger.
- The "her" in line 18 likely refers to time. It seems like time needs the blood, the love, the water to sooth her "sores." "Sores" echoes the time metaphor "wintry fever" from stanza 1. Someone might have sores if they were sick.
- It seems like time relies on youth and vitality to feel better. Time must devour, drink up, dry up youth and vitality in order to feel well.

### Lines 19-20

And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind

How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.

- Refrain. Refrain. Refrain. Now, the speaker can't tell the wind about time's ultimate power.
- Thomas uses more personification, giving the wind the ability to hear. Shmoop doesn't imagine the wind is a very good listener, but that doesn't keep the speaker from wanting to explain how time is responsible for the universe.
- The description "ticked a heaven round the stars" seems a little odd. "Ticked" makes sense, like a ticking watch. We are talking about time, after all. What better sound or word than "tick"? But Thomas goes out of his way to draw our attention to the empty space *around* the stars rather than the stars themselves. Why?

## Notes

- It could be because stars are concrete, tangible, knowable objects. Time, the force, is like that abstract, incomprehensible space *between* the stars. That's the real mystery—the universe that has no beginning and no ending. What else has no beginning and no ending? Time's up. The answer is time.
- It seems that Thomas wants to equate time with the incomprehensible universe.

### Summary of Stanza 5

**Get out the microscope, because we're going through this poem line-by-line.**

#### Lines 21-22

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb

How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

- The poem ends with a two-line stanza known in the wonderful world of poetry as a couplet.
- The concluding couplet begins with that refrain which, by now, is kind of ringing in our ears. That's probably what Thomas wanted—for the refrain to be as persistent (in every stanza) and regular (always in the same place in each stanza) as a ticking clock.
- In the poem's concluding couplet, the speaker is unable to tell "the lover's tomb" that... well, this is going to get complicated.
- First of all, the speaker is talking to a "tomb." Since tombs can't talk (or listen) this is another case of personification.
- And this isn't any old tomb. It's the "lover's tomb." In the previous stanza, love was one of those life sustaining, life-affirming elements (along with water and blood). Love represents life.
- In the final couplet, since it is "the lover's tomb," it looks like love is dead. It's another example of the force's (time's) ability to conquer all.
- But what exactly is the speaker unable to tell the lover's tomb? Good question. Let's explore.
- It's hard not to picture that death shroud from line 13 when we read "sheet." Sure, "sheet" sounds more bed-like and bed sheets are nice (we love us a good nap). But the fact that a "tomb" is a final *resting* place

turns any other bed-sleep imagery into a death metaphor. A tomb is a bed; death is sleep. (That sheet doesn't seem as cozy now, does it?)

- Also: worms live underground. Bodies are *buried* underground. Ever heard the expression "worm food"? Well, it comes to mind here. The speaker is going to end up worm food just like the lover. The worms will "go at" (eat, bore into) the sheet wrapped around the speaker's dead body, just as they will the lover's and everyone else's.
- "Crooked worm" echoes "crooked rose" from stanza 1. Coincidence? We think not.
- The rose—beautiful, vibrant, and existing above ground—is made "crooked," eaten away in a sense, by age and time.
- The worm is underground and also "crooked."
- The identical descriptions suggest the worm, despite being an agent of decay and destruction, is also susceptible, a victim of time. This reinforces the idea that the force (time) conquers all. But wait, there's more.
- This is gross, but the worm is eating the death to live. How's that for the interconnectedness of life and death?
- For this speaker, everywhere in life there is death, and in death there is life. Time, the force, ensures the continuation of the cycle and thus the interconnectedness of all things.
- The flower or the worm, sickness or health, love or loneliness, life or death, the heavens and the earth—it's all the same. By juxtaposing all these different elements, Thomas explores how they are all connected as part of one great terrifying, exhilarating, beautiful, ugly experience.

## Analysis

### SYMBOLISM, IMAGERY, ALLEGORY

#### Time

After reading "The Force..." a time or two, it becomes pretty clear that the *force* is an extended metaphor for time. It's just one of many ways Thomas expresses the notion of time in the poem. Time is also personified throughout the poem in various ways. In fact, once you know what to look for, time pops up everywhere in this one.

## Notes

- Lines 1, 6: Let's talk about the force: A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away—sorry. We can't help it. Every time we hear "force" we think *that* force. Thomas, on the other hand, uses force to refer to time. Actually, describing time as "the force" makes a ton of sense. It's powerful, kind of mysterious, and it touches everybody and everything. Hey, that sounds kind of like the other force, too.
- Line 3, 5: Time is described in lots of different ways in this poem. The "destroyer" and the "wintry fever" that make the rose crooked and steal the speaker's youth are—you guessed it—time metaphors. By describing time as "wintry," it gives us all the cold, barren associations that go along with winter—a time when everything's dead. "Fever" gives us the sense of time as a kind of illness. Unfortunately, there is no cure for this one.
- Line 10: Surprise, surprise—here's another time metaphor (with personification thrown in for good measure). That "sucking mouth" at the end of stanza two is our old pal, time. You're probably asking yourself, "What's the deal, Dylan? Why so many time metaphors?" Well, by using so many time metaphors, Thomas creates the impression that time is everywhere—in the seasons (wintry fever) and in the human form (sucking mouth). These metaphors help the reader get a clear sense of the complex and far-reaching power of the force-time.
- Line 11: "The hand" doing all that whirling and stirring is also a time metaphor. This continues the personification of time that began in the second stanza with that sucking mouth. By giving time a body, it makes the force somehow more accessible. We have something to picture instead of just this mysterious force. It makes the force more personal and more relatable.

This personification also allows for a more spiritual-religious reading of the poem. We've all heard phrases like "the hand of God" referring to God's power and ability to touch and control every aspect of the natural and the metaphysical realms. God's power and the power of the force-time have lots in common. The personification emphasizes that connection.

- Lines 16, 20: In the fourth stanza, Thomas finally just calls time "time." No more "whirling hands" or "sucking mouths" as stand-ins. But our boy Dylan can't seem to let go of the personification. The "lips of time" are what drain away youth and vitality in this stanza. Here again, by using

personification Thomas makes time's power and impact easier for the reader to see and experience. It also makes the descriptions far more dramatic. We'd probably stop reading if Thomas just said, "Time is, like, super-powerful and responsible for life and death," over and over again. Thank goodness for figurative language. The metaphors and the personification are part of what make this a surprising, interesting, and exciting poem to read. Right?

### **Youth and Vitality**

"The Force..." isn't all gloom and doom. Remember, it has a positive side. There's plenty of vibrant imagery that reflects youthful vitality throughout the poem. Sure, things usually take a turn for the worse by the end of the stanza (lots of withering and death, plus a worm), but let's focus on the positive for now, shall we?

- Lines 1-2: The poem kicks off with lots of active, youthful imagery. We've got the color green right there in the first line, and there's also a flower. The color green is often associated with youth and vitality and flowers are almost always positive images of fertility and beauty. In line 2, the speaker refers to his youth with a metaphor: "my green age." By describing his youth in the same terms (with the same color) as the flower's stem, there is a strong connection established between man and nature. This connection is something that Thomas builds on throughout the poem.
- Lines 6-7, 10, 11, 16: Water imagery runs (get it?) through the entire poem. Water is almost universally considered a symbol of fertility and life. The poem has images of rocky rivers, streams, springs, pools, and fountains. Is that enough water for you? Thomas uses the watery imagery in two distinct ways. First, he uses it to represent vitality and life: "water through the rocks," "water in the pool." Then, he uses it to show how the force-time destroys vitality and life: "dries the [...] streams," "leech [...] the fountain head." Thomas definitely gets a lot of symbolic and imagistic bang for his poetry buck out of water in this one.

### **Old Age, Death, And Destruction**

## Notes

Well, you knew this was coming. In addition to the power to create and sustain life, the force has some pretty wicked destructive powers. Some of the death and destruction imagery is pretty direct. At other times it's subtler. (Er, can destruction be subtle?) Either way, it's there and it takes many different, sometimes surprising forms.

- Lines 1-3: The first line of this one sounds pretty upbeat and energetic, right? Well, yes. But there's some underlying destruction imagery that lets us know this isn't just going to be a poem about flowers.

It's that "fuse" in line 1. Most people are going to associate the word "fuse" with some kind of detonation or explosive device. Thomas wanted to give us a hint of the destruction to come. And just in case you missed the whole "fuse" thing, Thomas throws in "blast" and "destroyer" to drive the destruction point home.

- Lines 4-5, 22: Imagine yourself old. Not 40—that's not old. We mean *really* old, like 90. How do you look? You've probably got some wrinkles, depending on how you feel about "elective surgery," and you are probably not standing as tall as you are now. Old age tends to make people bend and stoop. Thomas uses words like "crooked" and "bent" to reinforce the sense of aging in the poem. It helps us to visualize the impact of time on things like the flower and the speaker. "Crooked" is even the very last descriptive word in the poem. Thomas really wanted to leave us contemplating the ravages of old age and death. Gee thanks, Dylan.
- Lines 5, 12, 19: Seasons have traditionally had, for pretty obvious reasons, their own life cycle associations. Things bud and bloom in the springtime (life, youth, fertility) and the landscape becomes pretty barren in the winter (death). Basically, warm = life and cold = death. It comes as no surprise that Thomas uses some winter imagery in this poem: "wintry fever," "blowing wind," "weather's wind"—you get the picture: brrrrrr. By incorporating some winter imagery, Thomas adds another layer (it's always a good idea to layer) of contrast for those more spring-y images and symbols (flowers, green, mountain streams) to play against.
- Lines 7-8, 10, 16: Throughout the poem, lots of stuff dries up. Sometimes dry is good, but most of the time it's bad: dry skin, dry toast—you get the

idea. In "The Force...", wetness tends to symbolize life and dry is usually equated with death. Let's take a look at some examples:

- The force dries up a stream. Water and rivers are usually strong, life and vitality symbols. The force is destroying and drying up vitality.
- Blood is liquid and certainly necessary for life. In the poem, the force dries that up, too ("Turns mine to wax")—not good.
- A mountain spring is a nice, vital image. Too bad "time" is there sucking it dry. What happens when vitality is all dried up? You're dead.
- A fountain, much like the mountain spring is a watery, vital image. Here again, that greedy force (time) is leeching it dry.
- That's a lot of info, so let us sum it up: Wet = life: dry = death. Got it? Good. Now, go hydrate.

### FORM AND METER

This poem is pretty form-y in lots of the usual ways. The stanzas all have the same number of lines (well, except for that last one, but we'll get to that later), and the lines are, for the most part, iambic. But the poem also uses form in some more subtle ways, too.

First things first: those five-line stanzas are what's called in the poetry biz "quintains." These particular quintains happen to be iambic, which means that they have a rhythmic pattern of unstressed, then stressed, syllables. An iamb is just a two-syllable combination where the first syllable is unstressed and the second is stressed: daDUM. Check out an example:

*The **force** that **drives** the **water** **through** the **rocks**.* (6)

Hear that daDUM pattern of unstressed syllables followed by stressed syllables? That's our pal the iamb in action.

Most of the lines are in fact in iambic pentameter, but the third line of each quintain breaks the pattern and has only 2 metrical feet. So, why the change? Good question. Poets break metrical patterns for lots of different reasons, but two of the most common are to mirror the content (what is being described in the line or stanza) and for emphasis (to make certain words or phrases stand out). We can see examples of both these variations in the poem. What's that? You want proof? You got it.

In line 2, we would expect the first syllable to be unstressed to follow the iambic pattern:

Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees.

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But Thomas gives us the stressed word "drive." The idea of the force powering, fueling, *driving* the flower and the speaker is important. Thomas wants that driving action to be emphasized. Not only is the word repeated in stanza 1, it's also stressed in a place where we would expect to find an unstressed syllable. That makes it hit our ear in a harder way than it would if it didn't break the pattern. You know how it is when the beat changes in a song—you notice.

Line 3 is another good example of breaking a pattern for emphasis:

*Is my destroyer.*

The poem begins with two lines of iambic pentameter. Just as we are settling in to the 5-foot rhythm, line 3 comes along and upsets our groove. What gives, Thomas? Well, take a look at that word dangling there at the end of the line: "destroyer." That word has a lot to do with the poem's themes regarding time's destructive power. So, by cutting the line short (in essence destroying the pattern established in the previous lines), the poet is able to create emphasis on the words and ideas that he wants to resonate throughout the poem. Neat trick, right?

Now, a word about end words: notice anything about those words, like "destroyer," dangling off the end of each line? Well, there are a couple things you might have noticed. First of all, they are all vivid, imagistic words. They are words and images that Thomas wanted to emphasize. Take a look at this list: "flower," "tree," "rose," "rock," "stream," "veins," "wind," "man," "head," "blood."

There's certainly a lot of nature and body imagery in this list, and that's no accident. When we consider what Thomas is saying about the force's (time's) ability to create and destroy individuals, the natural world, and beyond, it makes sense that these are the words and images emphasized as end words. But wait, there's more.

Did you get the sense that there was something else going on with these end words, but you just couldn't quite put your poetry-finger on it? Well, your hunch was right. The end words follow a loose (very loose) rhyme scheme: ABABA, where each letter stands for that line's end rhyme. Check it out:

*flower* A

*trees* B

*destroyer* A

*rose* B

*fever* A

Yes, yes, yes—we know. These words don't rhyme in any greeting-card kind of way. But the words do sound similar enough to qualify as slant rhyme.

Now you're probably asking yourself, "Why didn't Thomas just take the time to come up with some good old-fashioned perfect rhymes?" Well, by using these shadowy slant rhymes instead of crystal-clear, perfect rhymes, the poem's rhyme scheme mirrors that shadowy, mysterious *force* that the speaker keeps going on about. Remember—the force is difficult for the speaker to grasp. He's "dumb [unable] to tell" us about it in concrete terms. This force is far too slippery to be discussed with something as *obvious* as perfect rhyme. Good call on the half rhyme, D.

That loose rhyme scheme is super-tough to see in stanza 4. Know why? It's because it isn't there. Yup, even the rhyme scheme is destroyed by the end of the poem. Check it out:

*head* A

*blood* A

*sores* B

*wind* A

*stars* B

Once again, by deviating from the established pattern, Thomas mirrors the poem's content with the form. The rhyme scheme is subject to the same destructive force that the poem explores.

Hang in there. We're almost finished with form. Let's end with... the end. You probably noticed that the poem doesn't end with a full quintain stanza. Instead, there's an ending couplet. The quintain pattern is destroyed, just like the rhyme scheme, in the poem's concluding lines. Let's all say it together this time: "The form is mirroring the content." The destruction of the poem's stanza pattern reflects time's destructive power. Now, we know what you're thinking. "But wait, time (the force) is supposed to be simultaneously a destructive *and* creative force, right? Where's this creativity mirrored in the form?" Good question, Shmoopers. If we step back and look at the big picture for a second, we can see that

## Notes

the force's creative, positive power *is* there as well. Despite the fact that the form breaks down in many ways, something is still created: the poem itself. Out of destruction there is creation. Just like the life cycle the poem explores. And we think that's pretty cool.

### 3. SPEAKER

There's lots we don't know about the speaker in "The Force...", but this much we *do* know: he's worked up. This speaker is feeling pretty passionate about the whole force thing, and his excitement is coming through loud and clear. Part of what makes the speaker seem so energetic is how the poem sounds (for more on this, check out the "Sound Check" section).

We also figure this guy is pretty young. After all, he's got all that aforementioned energy and passion. Plus, he refers to his "green age." With all the youthful, vital associations that go along with the color green, it's hard to imagine the speaker any other way. (Dying to know more about the color green? Check out our "Detailed Summary" section.)

Now, you might be thinking, "Thomas was young when he wrote this, and he seems like a pretty passionate guy. The speaker *must* be Thomas." Well, that may well be the case. There isn't anything in the poem to suggest otherwise. But remember, it's usually a good idea to separate the speaker from the poet. They aren't always one and the same. Suffice it to say that our speaker is filled with intense reflection, working through his thoughts about that all-powerful force in the universe: time.

### SETTING

The setting ranges far and wide in "The Force..." It's kind of like the poem is happening everywhere at once: it's springtime, it's winter, we're in the garden, at sea, in the mountains, at a hanging (gross), and in a graveyard. This revolving setting helps to give the poem its whirlwind, dramatic, universal feel.

That most of the imagery in "The Force..." is outdoors-y also reinforces the poem's focus on the connections between time's effects on nature and time's effects on human life. Under the awesome power of time,

everything is charged and everything dies out. In fact: "in time" may be the broadest, but also the more appropriate, way to describe our setting.

### SOUND CHECK

"The Force..." is full of contradictions: creation-destruction, life-death, wet-dry. This idea of opposites, of contradictions, is reflected in the poem's sound. None of the poem's lines, in terms of content, seem very hopeful or joyous (even that nice flower in the beginning is attached to a "fuse"), but the lines are filled with energy and passion. Thomas's word choice has a great deal to do with this sound. Strong, active, single syllable words like "drive," "blast," "suck," and "whirl" run all through the poem. Even though the poem is talking mostly about the inevitability of death, it feels and sounds very alive.

Another thing that makes this poem sound so alive is the use of repetition. The repetition of phrases like "the force," "I am dumb to tell," and even the single word "how" repeated in identical spots in stanzas 2, 3, 4, and 5 gives this poem the lively feeling of a song or a some holy incantation.

There's also some alliteration at work in this one, particularly in the first line. The sound of this line sets the rhythmic, vibrant, and connected tone for the poem. Check out those repeated F and T sounds:

*The force that through the green fuse drives the flower.*

You can't dance to it, but the alliteration definitely helps to create a very lively sound, filled with bouncing energy. That vitality and passion in this poem's sound offers a nice contrast to the overall bleakness of the content—thank goodness.

### WHAT'S UP WITH THE TITLE?

You probably noticed that this poem's title and the first line are identical.

If you didn't, well, you really need to work on your close-reading skills.

Thomas didn't title this poem (and quite a few others as well). It is a convention to use a poem's first line as the title when the poet doesn't include one. We need to call it *something*, right? If we just said, "you know, that poem by Dylan Thomas about death," that could lead to lots of confusion.

At the same time, that first line makes an appropriate title because it does a good job of introducing the major ideas to follow. First up, we're

## Notes

introduced to "the force" (time), which of course is the major preoccupation of the poem's speaker. Secondly, we get "that through the green fuse drives," which underscores the driving energy and vitality of life that is also a big component of the poem. And finally, we finish with "the flower," a pretty stock symbol of the natural world that the poem also focuses on in the lines to come. To sum up: we get time, energy, and nature right from the jump—ideas that will continue to be focal points throughout the poem. As a first line, we'd say this makes a pretty effective title, right?

### 1. CALLING CARD

Dylan Thomas's sound is certainly full of life, but his poems more often contemplate death and destruction. His poems are rarely understated or subtle and his imagery can be downright jarring, though always powerful. In addition to the interconnectedness of life and death, many of Thomas's poems reflect on time's power and inescapability. "The Force..." is a good example of Thomas being Thomas, but if you want to see even more, check out these little ditties: "Twenty-Four Years," "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," and "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London." Enjoy?

### TOUGH-O-METER

It's going to take some preparation to really enjoy everything this trek has to offer. But if you pack light and watch out for falling metaphors, you'll be happy you made the trip.

### TRIVIA

The "force" finally caught up with Dylan Thomas and he died in 1953. Check out a picture of the gravesite he shares with his wife, Caitlin Thomas.

(Source.)

Bob Dylan, Dylan Thomas: is there a connection? You bet there is. Some say the singer took his stage name from the poet. Check out paragraph 9 for the whole story. (Source.)

Rumor has it that some of Thomas's last words were, "I have had 18 straight whiskies. I think that's the record."

### STEAMINESS RATING

**PG**

If one was so inclined, they might be able to find a sexual subtext in this one. Things like "flowers," "fevers," "leeching lips" and the like may lend themselves to certain, well, interpretations. But the driving *force* in this poem is in big-picture issues like creation and destruction, life and death—sorry to disappoint.

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## 9.3 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we went through the summary and analysis of “The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” by Dylan Thomas.

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## 9.4 KEYWORDS

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- **Whirl:** to cause to move rapidly around
- **Rope:** to catch or secure with rope
- **Lime:** here, a caustic substance used to dissolve a corpse, which can also be made out of human bones

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## 9.6 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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- Write the summary of stanza 3 of “The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” by Dylan Thomas.
- Write the analysis of “The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” by Dylan Thomas.
- Summarize stanza 2 of “The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” by Dylan Thomas.
- Give the summary of stanza 4 of “The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” by Dylan Thomas.

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## 9.5 SUGGESTED READINGS

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- "Did hard-living or medical neglect kill Dylan Thomas?". BBC. 8 November 2013. Retrieved 20 April 2014.

## Notes

- ^ "Dylan Thomas". Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved 11 January 2008.
- ^ Jump up to:a b c d Davies, John; Jenkins, Nigel; Menna, Baines; Lynch, Peredur I., eds. (2008). The Welsh Academy Encyclopaedia of Wales. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. pp. 861–862. ISBN 978-0-7083-1953-6.
- ^ FitzGibbon (1965), p. 10–11.
- ^ Jump up to:a b c d e f g h i Ferris, Paul (2004). "Thomas, Dylan Marlais (1914–1953) (subscription needed)". Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, online edition. Oxford University Press. Retrieved 29 August 2017.
- ^ Ferris (1989), p. 22.

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## 9.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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1. Dylan Thomas wrote "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower".**(answer for check your progress- 1 Q.1)**
- 2."The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" was first published in 1934.**(answer for check your progress- 1 Q.2)**
- 3."The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" has a collection of 18 Poems.**(answer for check your progress- 1 Q.3)**

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# **UNIT 10. DYLAN THOMAS – THE FORCE THAT THROUGH THE GREEN FUSE DRIVES THE FLOWER, POEM IN OCTOBER, DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT - 3**

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## **STRUCTURE**

10.0 Objectives

10.1 Introduction

10.2 Poem in October

10.2.1 Summary

10.2.2 Analysis

10.3 Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night

10.3.1 Summary

10.3.2 Analysis

10.3.3 Themes

10.4 Let us sum up

10.5 Keywords

10.6 Questions for Review

10.7 Suggested Readings and References

10.8 Answers to check your progress

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## **10.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After the completion of this unit you should be able to learn about:

- summary and analysis of “Poem in October” and “Do Not Go into That Good Night” by Dylan Thomas.

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## **10.1 INTRODUCTION**

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‘Poem in October’ by Dylan Thomas is a seven stanza poem that is separated into sets of ten lines. As was his custom, Thomas chose not to use one particular rhyme scheme. But there are a few moments in which end sounds are unified through the use of half rhyme. There is a

## Notes

consonant rhyme in stanza three with the words “rolling” and “whistling.” The same kind of rhyme occurs in stanza five with the end words “summer” and “mother.” These words depend on their consonants to rhyme, there are also moments of assonance, or rhymes that depend on vowel sounds. One such example is with the words “heron” and “beckon” in the first stanza.

While the poem’s stanzas are not unified by a rhyme or rhythm scheme, the lines are undeniably similar in length and indentation. This is a feature that clearly stands out when one observes the lines on the page. There are three longer lines, then two very short ones. These are followed by two more long lines, two more short, and one final long line in each stanza. They force the reader’s eye to move back and forth over the page, perhaps mimicking the rise and fall of waves, the “wringing” of rain, or the speaker’s climb up the hill.

Dylan Thomas's most famous poem, known by its first line "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," is also the most famous example of the poetic form known as the villanelle. (See "Rhyme, Form, and Meter" for an explanation of the villanelle.) Yet, the poem's true importance lies not in its fame, but in the raw power of the emotions underlying it. Thomas uses the poem to address his dying father, lamenting his father's loss of health and strength, and encouraging him to cling to life. The urgency of the speaker's tone has kept the poem among the world's most-read works in English for more than half a century.

Dylan Thomas was an introverted, passionate, lyrical writer (lyrical = a kind of poem or work that expresses personal feelings) who felt disconnected from the major literary movement of his day – the high modernism of T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. Thomas was born in Wales in the year that World War I began, 1914, and his reactions to the events of the two World Wars strongly influenced his writing. His first book of poetry made him instantly famous at the age of twenty. Thomas embraced fame in much the same way that another passionate poet, Lord Byron, had done two hundred years earlier – by adopting wild rock-star behavior and intense displays of feeling, especially in his public poetry readings.

Thomas was also known to be a heavy drinker. Sadly, only two years after writing "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" about his father's approaching death, Thomas himself died, probably from alcohol poisoning and abuse, although the exact details of his death are controversial. His premature death at the age of 39 is reminiscent of the early death of another Romantic poet, John Keats. Like Keats, Thomas died before he fully expressed his literary potential; but, also like Keats, he left behind a few enduring works that promise to last through the ages.

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## 10.2 POEM IN OCTOBER

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### 10.2.1 Summary

'*Poem in October*' by Dylan Thomas tells of a speaker's journey out of autumn and up a hill to reclaim childhood joy, the summer season and his spirituality.

The poem begins with the speaker stating that he was thirty years old when he wrote this. It was his birthday and he chose to go on a walk. He left his home, traveled alongside the water's edge, listened to the seabirds and the woods.

The speaker left the town behind and began a climb up a nearby hill. As he rose the town shrank. At the same time the season began to change. Autumn, and its cool air, faded away and the summer returned. The rain continued as he climbed, as did the presence of birds. These two images are crucial to the speaker's understanding of happiness and childhood.

When he finally got to the top of the hill it was like he had reached heaven. He was far above the coolness of autumn and he became absorbed with memories of his childhood. The speaker recalled coming to his place with his mother and what it meant to him then. He hoped while on the hill that the joy he experienced will last throughout the year. Perhaps he will return to reclaim it when he turns thirty-one.

### Check your progress – 1

1. Who wrote "Poem in October"?
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. 2.How many stanzas does a “Poem in October” have?

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### 10.2.2 Analysis

#### Stanza One

In the first stanza of *Poem in October* the speaker begins by stating that he was thirty years old. He describes his age in years of progress towards death, or heaven. Now that he’s thirty, he’s thirty years closer to death than he was when he was born. The next lines are perfect examples of the creative way that Thomas utilized nouns and adjectives. He described the shore as being “Priested” by herons. They are everywhere, lording over a land that is given a spiritual quality through Thomas’ choice to use “Priested” rather than another word such as “ruled.”

This is one of the many sights and sounds that Thomas’ speaker woke up to on this particular morning. There was also the harbour to hear and the “neighbour wood.” From there he might hear the sounds of the leaves rustling, or small animals running and walking.

These sounds are pleasing to the speaker’s ear. They “beckon” or call him from his bed out into the world. Just like the morning, the water is personified in the next lines. It is said to be “praying.” The waves dip and rise, as if kneeling in prayer. The scene, like many of those to follow, is overwhelming. There are sights and sounds, all of which the speaker wants to take in. These include the sounds of seabirds calling and the sound of boats knocking against the “webbed wall” of the dock.

It is at the end of these lines that the speaker declares he “set foot” in that “moment.” The town was “still sleeping” but as has been made abundantly clear, the rest of the world is not. What one is not sure of at this point is where the speaker is going.

## Stanza Two

The speaker reminds the reader that it was his birthday. He turned thirty years old and he is going on a kind of celebratory walk. He takes note of the “water-/Birds” again and those which fly into and around the trees. They all seem to be centred around him, “flying” his “name” around the surrounding “farms and the white horses.” It is interesting that the speaker chose to introduce the farmland and the horses at this point. The setting is somewhat jumbled, as if the speaker is actually recalling a number of landscapes and weaving them together. Alternatively, the “white horses” could refer to the waves themselves.

The speaker is ready to pursue this walk for a while longer and rises in the “rainy autumn” to “walk...abroad.” He also explains how his movements impact the world around him. Just as he is getting up the waves crash and the heron “dived” into the sea.

In the final lines of this section the speaker leaves behind the town. He speaks of a “border” he has to cross and “gates” he has to open. Whether these are real or not, they were previously an impediment to his leaving the enclosed area. Now they are not. Just his place in the town closes behind him, the town begins to wake up.

## Stanza Three

A number of other images follow in ‘*Poem in October*.’ The season is rich, and although it is autumn he sees,

A springful of larked in a rolling  
Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with whistling  
Blackbirds

The area is completely alive and more like summer of spring than autumn. He expands this idea by referring to the “sun of October” as “Summery,” or like summer. It sits on the “hill’s shoulder,” another instance of personification. Now that one has progressed this far into the piece the reasoning behind Thomas’ constant use of personification makes sense. He wanted to make the entire world seem alive and relatable to the reader.

He describes the area as playing host to “fond climates and sweet singers.” The speaker mentions the birds again in these lines, as well as

## Notes

the “rain.” These are two of the main images of the poem which crop up again and again. The birds, just as they have in the previous stanzas, “Come in the morning.” They turn up in the same area the speaker walked in and wandered in. He takes note of the wind that wrings the rain and blows “cold / In the wood faraway” underneath him.

The use of the word “faraway” is interesting in these lines. The wind and rain are present, under him, but are also far from him. This can be understood in an alternative, more ephemeral way. The rain is far, in that it is “dreamlike” or mentally distant. This is more suitable to Thomas’ language and the setting he has created.

### Stanza Four

In the next set of ten lines the speaker returns again to the rain. It is now described as “Pale” and hanging over the “dwindling harbour.” He continues his progress up the hill. He gets farther and farther from the boats and dock where he began. The next lines are a pleasing jumble of images that are characteristic of Dylan Thomas. He speaks of,

[...] the sea wet church the size of a snail

With its horns through mist and the castle

Brown as owls

He is far beyond the boundaries of the town now and has stepped into his own nature inspired dream. It is a place in which he can “marvel” over the gardens of spring and summer. They are blooming “in the tall tales.” This gives the reader a hint about the reality of this word the speaker is describing. It is a “tall tale,” or a lie, not a real place he can actually explore.

The last lines of stanza five speak on how on the hill he could “marvel” at the “weather” but, as soon as he got up there it began to move off.

### Stanza Five

The rain moved away “from the blithe,” or unworried country. The sky is clearing up,

[...] and the blue altered sky

Streamed again a wonder of summer

Here again is another reference in *Poem in October* to the autumn turning into the summer. The speaker is consumed by the joy of the day, which is only enhanced by the beauty of the landscape. When he looks around him he can see all the wonders of summer. He remembers all the times he's been here before, as a child. His memories are coming back to him of a time when the world was made of color. There are "red currants" and "green chapels." Everything was vivid and pure.

He remembers the mornings he came to the same hill with his "mother." The speaker walked "through parables." These are stories that have an underlying moral or spiritual lesson. They appear throughout the Bible and connected immediate to the "green chapels" in line ten. It is not clear why the speaker remembers the chapel as being green, perhaps because of the green landscape they were situated in.

## Stanza Six

As the poem nears its end, the speaker dives deeper into his memories. He sees himself as being so different from the boy that they are separate people. He remembers the "his tears burned [his] cheeks." The speaker feels the young boy's heart as distant from his own. Through these lines the speaker is making clear that although he has returned to this place and is again experiencing joy, it is nothing compared to the "truth of...joy" he knew during the "Summertime" of his youth.

The "dead" of his past, the days of summer he can no longer reach, remind him of what his life used to be and the relationship he had with the world. He knew so well the,

[...] trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.

And the mystery

The world sang with "the mystery." This is a kind of spiritual connection that the speaker stopped valuing as he aged. He remembers it now and sees it being contained specifically within the "water and singingbirds." While meditating on the changes that have come over the man since his youth, the lines are not at all depressing in tone. They are as uplifting and celebratory as all those which preceded them.

### Stanza Seven

The last ten lines of *Poem in October* depict how the “joy” of his childhood returned to him on this thirtieth birthday and what that meant to the speaker. He was able on his birthday to go to this place. As it did previously, the weather turns around. He is under the sun and experiencing how the,

Joy of the long dead child sang burning

In the sun.

He addresses the fact that this was again his “thirtieth / Year to heaven.” He has risen as close to heaven as he’s going to get at this point in his life. The speaker has left behind the autumn weather that surrounds and contains the “town below” and for his birthday has gone elsewhere, to a dreamland of warmth, joy and childhood. He asks in the last lines that his happiness remain on the hill, and be sung “in a year’s turning.”

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## 10.3 DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT

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### 10.3.1 Summary

#### Stanza One

##### Lines 1-3

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.

- The speaker addresses an unknown listener, telling him not to "go gentle into that good night."
- At first this is a puzzling metaphor but, by the end of line 3, we realize that the speaker is using night as a metaphor for death: the span of one day could represent a man's lifetime, which makes the sunset his approaching demise.
- "That good night" is renamed at the end of line 2 as the "close of day," and at the end of line 3 as "the dying of the light." It's probably not an accident that the metaphor for *death* keeps getting repeated at the *end* of

the lines, either. Or that the two rhyming words that begin the poem are "night" and "day."

- So what does the speaker want to tell us about death? Well, he thinks that old men shouldn't die peacefully or just slip easily away from this life. Instead, they should "burn and rave," struggling with a fiery intensity.
- The word "rave" in line 2 connects with the repeated "rage" at the beginning of line 3, uniting anger, power, madness, and frustration in a whirlwind of emotion. Oh, yeah, it's going to be one of *those* poems. Get ready to *feel*.

## Stanza Two

### Lines 4-6

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

- These lines are potentially quite confusing, so let's start by untangling the syntax of Thomas's sentence here: even though smart people know death is inevitable (line 4), they don't just accept it and let themselves fade away (line 6), because they may not have achieved everything they were capable of yet (line 5).
- The metaphor of night as death continues here, with death figured as the "dark." The speaker admits that sensible, smart people realize death – traveling into "the dark" – is inevitable and appropriate. After all, we're all going to die, and it's a totally natural process.
- But even though clever people know they're going to die, they don't simply accept it. They don't take the news lying down.
- Why not? The speaker tells us that it's because "their words had forked no lightning" (line 5). This image is puzzling and open to several interpretations.
- Here's ours: the "words" represent the actions, the speech, or maybe the artistic creation of intelligent people. You know, the way this poem consists of Dylan Thomas's own "words."

## Notes

- These words don't fork lightning, which means they *don't* split and divert the massive electrical shock of the lightning bolt, which draws it toward themselves like a lightning rod instead. Even though the "wise men" have put everything they can into their "words," those words weren't attractive enough to make the lightning split.
- Basically, they haven't really made much of a mark on the world.
- The bright electric current of the lightning bolt adds a new twist to the light/dark and day/night metaphors, suggesting that really living life is more like getting zapped by an electric shock than like feeling the gentle radiation of the sun.
- This stanza also begins to conflate – or collapse together – people in general, such as the person the speaker is addressing with poets and artists like the speaker himself.
- As the poem continues, we'll see more and more connections between great men and great artists. These connections imply that artistic expression is a more concentrated version of life in a broader sense. You know, the way a can of lemonade concentrate tastes *way* more lemon-y than the lemonade itself once you add water.

### Stanza Three

#### Lines 7-9

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.

- Once again, the best way to understand how all these poetic images work together is to untangle Thomas's sentences, which are all twisted up so that they fit the meter and form of the villanelle.
- The basic parts of this sentence are the subject, "Good men" (line 7), and the verb, "Rage" (line 9). In the speaker's opinion, true goodness consists of fighting the inevitability of death with all your might: "Good men [...] Rage, rage against the dying of the light."
- Next, Thomas adds an image of the ocean waves; the most recent generation of good men, the "last wave by" (line 7), are about to crash against the shore, or die.
- As they approach death, these men shout out how great their actions could've been if they'd been allowed to live longer.

- Or, to use the metaphor in the poem, as their wave crashes against the rocks, the men shout how beautifully that wave could have danced in the bay if it could've stayed out at sea instead of rolling onto the beach.
- So this generation is like a wave, death is like the breaking of the wave on the shore, the sea is like life, and the dancing waters in the ocean are like beautiful actions.
- The bay is "green" because the sea is really brimming with life – plants, seaweed, algae, you name it.
- In this image, being out at sea is like life and coming back to the barren shore is death –the opposite of the metaphor you might expect, in which drifting out to sea would be like death.
- Notice that Thomas describes the good men's potential future actions – the things they won't be able to do because they have to die – as "frail deeds." It's not clear whether the men or the actions are weakened by age; perhaps both.

#### **Stanza Four**

##### **Lines 10-12**

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.

- The speaker describes another kind of men – those who don't allow themselves to fade quietly away into death, "Wild men" (line 10).
- What sort of men are we talking about? The kind who captured the world around them in their imagination and celebrated it – "who caught and sang the sun in flight" (line 11) – only to discover that the world they celebrated was slowly dissolving around them as comrades age and die.
- Here the sun represents the beauty that exists in the mortal world, and its "flight" across the sky represents the lifespan of people living in this world.
- "Flight" also suggests that it moves rapidly – our lives are just the blink of an eye.
- So just when you think you're partying to celebrate birth and life, symbolized by the sunrise, you find out that you're actually mourning death, symbolized by the sunset.

### Stanza Five

#### Lines 13-15

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight

Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

- The speaker describes the way that "Grave men" fight their impending death.
- Notice the pun on "grave," which could either mean that the men are very serious, or that they are dying.
- These serious dying guys realize that, even though they are weak and losing their faculty of sight, they can still use what strength they have to rage against death.
- So, even though their eyes are going blind, these men can "see," metaphorically speaking, with an overwhelming certainty or "blinding sight," that they still have a lot of power over the *way* they die, even if not the timing.
- Instead of getting snuffed like candles, they can "blaze like meteors" (line 14). They're planning to go out with a bang.

### Stanza Six

#### Lines 16-19

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.

- In the last lines of the poem, the speaker turns to addressing his father. His father is on the verge of death, which the speaker describes as a "sad height."
- We think this is probably an allusion to looking down into the Biblical valley of death; the metaphorical mountain where the father stands is the edge of the mortal world.
- The speaker begs his father to cry passionately, which will be both a blessing and a curse. After all, the father's death is heartbreaking. But if he battles against the odds, it might also be heroic.

- The speaker ends with the two lines that are repeated throughout the poem, asking or instructing his father not to submit to death – instead, he should rant and rave and fight it every step of the way.

### 10.3.2 Analysis

#### SYMBOLISM, IMAGERY, ALLEGORY

##### Sunrise and Sunset

This poem begins with a reference to "that good night," and we spend most of the poem watching one sunset after another, one nightfall after another. When the sun does appear, it speeds across the sky and out of sight pretty quickly. It's the darkness, not the light, that preoccupies our speaker.

- Line 1: Beginning with this line, we have an **extended metaphor** in which day represents life, night represents the afterlife or a void, and sunset represents the moment of death. Throughout the poem, entering into the dark, noticing night fall, and the last lingering light of the evening will remind us of how easily – and how inevitably – life slips away from us. The first line is also a **refrain** in the poem, repeated a total of four times. As if that weren't enough to make you notice it, it's got quite a bit of obvious **alliteration** of *n* sounds at the beginning of "not" and "night" and hard *g* sounds at the beginning of "go" and "good." (Even though "gentle" begins with *g*, it doesn't count as alliteration here because it's a soft *g* instead of a hard one.) There are also other *n* sounds buried in the line, in the middle of "gentle" and "into." All this sound play ties the line together into a tidy package, making the words go together, even though they're full of harsh, hard sounds.
- Lines 1-3: These lines are an **apostrophe** to the person the speaker is addressing. (We don't find out who it is until the last stanza.)
- Line 3: The **repetition** of the first word of this line, "rage," emphasizes it with an uncanny doubling. The end of the line is united by the similar vowel sounds in the middle of "dying" and "light," a technique called **assonance**.
- Lines 10-11: Here the sun's rapid flight across the sky is still part of the **extended metaphor** in which day represents a life cycle, but the sun also becomes a **symbol** of all that's beautiful, wonderful, or amazing in

the world. The sun stands in for all the amazing things in the world that artists and poets might want to celebrate in their work.

### Lightning, Meteors, And Other Things That Fall From The Sky

Bolts of lightning, blazing meteors, and other images of light and fire captivate our attention in this poem about living with intensity. Life is no "brief candle" here; it's a blazing bonfire, a towering inferno, a firecracker. Sometimes people say they want to "go out with a bang," and Dylan Thomas would definitely have approved of that attitude.

- Lines 4-6: The poem relies on intense and puzzling **imagery**, a lightning bolt that isn't forked or split by the words of wise men. (For our opinion of what this image means, see the "Line-by-Line Summary.")
- Lines 13-14: The poem presents us with a **paradox**: the dying men who have gone blind can still "see," at least in a metaphorical sense. The paradox and the images surrounding it are emphasized by more over-the-top **alliteration**: "blinding," "blind," "blaze," and "be." Three of these four words repeat a *bl* consonant pair in addition to the initial *b* sound, making the alliteration even more noticeable.

### The Best of Men

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" begins with an address to an unknown listener and ends by revealing that this listener is the speaker's father. In between these direct addresses, however, the speaker describes the valiant and praiseworthy behavior of many different kinds of exemplary men – "wise men," "good men," "wild men," and "grave men." The speaker hopes that his father will be all these things.

- Lines 7-15: The poem uses **parallelism** as the actions of the different types of men are listed. Each of these three stanzas begins by listing the type of men in question, then describing something amazing that that group of men have done. The speaker ends each by reminding the reader that these men won't let themselves die without a struggle.
- Line 17: The speaker creates an **oxymoron** by asking his father to "Curse" but also to "bless" him. The juxtaposition of these two words together, separated but also joined by a comma, implies that they can be thought of

as opposites, but also as, in some strange way, the same thing. This line is also one of the only soft-sounding lines in the poem, due to the **sibilance**, or repeated *s* sounds, throughout – in the words "Curse" and "bless," but also, less obviously, in "fierce" and "tears." This makes the line sound extremely different, softer and gentler than the rest of the poem. Hmm, maybe the father is going to pass away in a "gentle" manner.

## FORM AND METER

### Villanelle

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is written in a very specific form, the villanelle. Now follow us closely here, because we're going to hit you with more numbers than a baseball stats chart at the end of a great season.

Villanelles have nineteen lines divided into five three-line stanzas and a sixth stanza with four lines. In English, villanelles tend to be written in the common metrical pattern called iambic pentameter, which means ten syllables per line, with every other syllable stressed, starting with the second syllable. So the lines will sound like this: da-DUM da-DUMda-DUMda-DUMda-DUM.

For example, the second line of this poem is, more or less:

Old *age* should *burn* and *rave* at *close* of *day*

The meter, however, isn't required in order to make it a villanelle – we just thought we'd mention it. What villanelles *are* required to have is an intricate rhyme scheme and two lines that are refrains – like refrains in songs, they get repeated over and over (Beyonce anyone? "To the left, to the left, everything you own in a box to the left"). The rhyme scheme is ABA ABAABAABAABA ABAA, so there are only two rhymes that end all the lines. In addition, the first line and third line, the refrains, are repeated four times each – the first line appears at the end of stanzas 2 and 4 and as the second-to-last line in stanza 6. The poem's third line appears again at the end of stanzas 3, 5, and 6. So if we call the first line A and the

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third line A', and any line that rhymes with them a, then the rhyme scheme is:

AbA' abAabA' abAabA' abAA'.

Looks almost like math, doesn't it? That's because villanelles have to have a mathematical precision when they're written in English. The villanelle form wasn't designed for the English language, which has fewer rhyming words than many other European languages. Villanelles were originally a French type of poetry, and they only became popular in English as a late-19th-century and early-20th-century import. Dylan Thomas's ability to follow this strict and complicated form, which actually works against the language he's using, and still create such an emotional poem with an urgent feel, is truly impressive.

### **SPEAKER**

Usually we're super-strict about keeping the speaker of a poem separate from the author of a poem. After all, poets often create fictional personas who they imagine to be speaking their work – not everything they write down is what they personally believe. But in the case of "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," it's nearly impossible to separate the speaker of the poem, who is urging his father to struggle mightily with death, from the author Dylan Thomas, who was really upset about his own father's declining health and impending death. Maybe the best way to think of it is this: Thomas is using the speaker of his poem to say things to an imaginary father that might have been too difficult to say face-to-face to his own father, or that his father (who was dying at the time) wouldn't have had the energy to hear or understand. The speaker is Thomas's alter ego, composed of autobiographical elements, but still not quite the same as the man himself.

It's also interesting to notice that we don't know the speaker is using the first person until nearly the end of the poem, when he uses "me" and "I" in line 17. We have to shift our opinion of the speaker and his perspective once we're blindsided with the first-person stuff in the last stanza.

**SETTING****The Deathbed and Beyond**

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" doesn't just have one setting – it has many. Over the course of the poem's compact nineteen lines, Thomas takes us from a lingering sunset to a bolt of lightning, from a green bay extending out from the seashore to a shooting star blazing across the sky, and finally to the top of a mountain. Of course, all of these places are metaphorical descriptions of life, death, and struggle, but we're starting to notice that they're all grand aspects of nature. This poem literally goes from the depths of the ocean, the "green bay," to the tallest peak, that "sad height," and everywhere in-between. Of course, the whole time we're traveling through nature, the speaker is really at the bedside of his dying father.

**SOUND CHECK**

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is harsh but lyrical, jarring but hypnotic. It's halfway between listening to monks chanting in Latin and listening to officers shouting orders at their troops. The repeated lines, called refrains, and the use of only two rhyming words give the poem a singsong quality. But Thomas also uses harsh consonant sounds, often alliterated, to give the poem an explosive feel. He also omits soft endings on words wherever he can – notice that his choice of "gentle" in the first line, instead of the more grammatically correct "gently," makes the word end on the strangling consonant "l" instead of the sweeter long "e" sound. The poem also has as few linking words and conjunctions as possible; connections happen through commas instead, as in "Rage, rage" and "Curse, bless." This means there are more stressed words in the poem, which adds to the feeling of a strong, intense rhythm.

**WHAT'S UP WITH THE TITLE?**

There isn't one – that's what's up with the title! This famous villanelle, the poem for which Dylan Thomas is best known, was left untitled by the poet. Like most untitled poems, it's usually referred to by its first line in quotation marks. For some of our theories on what the first line means

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and how it's put together, see the "Detailed Summary" and the "Quotes and Thoughts."

### CALLING CARD

When Dylan Thomas was writing, a lot of people thought he was going to start a new Romantic movement. You know, the obsession with feeling, nature, and the individual that ties together poetry by William Wordsworth (check out "Tintern Abbey"), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (take a gander at "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"), Lord Byron (coming soon... "She Walks in Beauty"), John Keats (consider "Ode on a Grecian Urn"), and others.

Thomas certainly is a passionate poet, and his intense feelings come close to overwhelming the reader in this poem. But he's also a very organized poet. He chooses a poetic form with a lot of complicated rules to follow – the villanelle – and then he shapes his passion to fit this form. The amazing thing about the poem is that this highly structured form doesn't stifle any of the feeling in his message. When you read poetry that has overwhelming emotion but also a complicated paradigm, or structure, then you know you're reading Dylan Thomas. (Well, it's more than likely, anyway.)

### TOUGH-O-METER

Dylan Thomas likes to fool around with his syntax and extend his metaphors, but the villanelle form creates constant repetition of his message and helps us follow along. One read-through of the poem is probably enough for most of us to get his basic message – after all, he repeats it no fewer than four times – and you can pay attention to the details of his imagery the second time through. (Yes, you need to read poems more than once to really "get" them, but at least this one is only nineteen lines long!)

### BRAIN SNACKS

Do you know someone named "Dylan"? Chances are he was probably named (indirectly) after Dylan Thomas! Thomas's father named him after a Celtic sea god, and when the younger Thomas became famous, "Dylan" became a popular name in Britain and the U.S.

In 1940, Dylan Thomas published a semi-autobiographical collection of short stories titled *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* – the title, of course, is a parody of James Joyce's modernist classic *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. (Source)

When Dylan Thomas was four years old, he was already able to recite poetry by Shakespeare.

Dylan Thomas was a colourful character; his boorish, drunken behaviour and self-destructive ways were legendary. For example, some sources claim that, while driving drunk on his way to meet Charlie Chaplin, he crashed his car into Chaplin's tennis court. It's hard to sort out fact from fiction, but if he were alive today, he'd be tabloid material right up there with Tom Cruise, Paris Hilton, and Britney Spears.

## SEX RATING

There's definitely no sex in "Do Not Go Gentle" – it gets all of its charge from talking about death.

## 10.3.3 Themes

### MORTALITY

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" laments the necessity and inevitability of death, encouraging the aged to rebel against their fate. The poem suggests that (to use an old cliché) we should leave this world the way we came in – kicking and screaming, holding on to life for all we're worth.

### Questions About Mortality

1. What metaphors does the poem use to characterize death? What are the implications of these metaphors – how do they change your pre-conceived ideas about how death works and what it means?
2. Is death an inevitability in this poem? Is there any way to effectively resist death?

## Notes

3. In the speaker's opinion, is it useful to struggle against certain death? Why or why not? What do you think?
4. Are there any clues in the poem that the speaker might be concerned about the possibility of his own death?

### Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Although "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" depicts death as inevitable, the speaker suggests that people can redeem themselves by bravely fighting against the odds, resisting death to the last.

The speaker's decision to use sunset as a metaphor for death implies that there is a redemption or reawakening after death, since every sunset must be followed eventually by a sunrise.

### OLD AGE

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is the speaker's exploration of what it means to age closer and closer to an inevitable death, especially if the aging person becomes frail and starts to lose his or her faculties. In order to restore power and dignity, the speaker urges the dying to fight their fate and cling tenaciously onto life.

### Questions About Old Age

1. What's the relationship between age and strength in this poem? What kinds of strength do old men (and women!) have? What kinds of strength do they lack?
2. The speaker of the poem tells us "Old age should burn and rave at close of day" (line 2). What does it mean to "burn and rave"? What kind of behavior do you think the speaker is describing with this abstract image?
3. In four of the stanzas of this poem, the speaker uses a different adjective to describe the old "men" he is addressing: "wise men" (line 4), "Good men" (line 7), "Wild men" (line 10), and "Grave men" (line 13). Are these just different descriptions of the same men, or are these distinct types of men? Do they all apply to the father mentioned at the end of the poem, or

not? How does the changing adjective paired with the "men" change your ideas about "old age"?

**Chew on This**

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" argues that wild, reckless, and passionate behaviour, even in the extremes of old age, is wiser than calm acceptance to fate.

In this poem, aging is an inevitable and tragic fate, but this tragedy can be escaped by living as intensely and passionately as possible.

**TRANSIENCE**

Transience in "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" causes the speaker a lot of anxiety. It worries him that there are things people might have been able to do in the world if only they had been here longer. It bothers him that the sun travels so quickly across the sky and that people live such a short time. But even though transience is disturbing, it also creates opportunities for beauty.

**Questions About Transience**

1. Many different types of things pass away in this poem – daylight, meteors, and lightning strikes, but also men, their words, and their deeds. Given the way the speaker presents the world, is there anything that persists, lasts, or can't be destroyed? If so, what is it?
2. Why are lightning and meteors used as metaphors for the words and deeds of men?
3. In line 4, the speaker tells us that "wise men at their end know dark is right." Does this mean that passing away is the proper thing to do, the natural order of things? Or does it simply mean that death and change have triumphed over life and stability?

**Chew on This**

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

## Notes

The tragedy of "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is that nothing can last – neither nature, with her sunrise and sunset, nor man, with his "frail deeds," can ever create anything permanent.

Even though most of the things described in the poem are subject to the ravages of time, there is one thing that lasts – the power of man's words, which persist even after the speaker is gone.

### **WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE**

We often think of wise people as calm, cool, and collected, but in "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," wisdom means a determination to struggle. Even if the struggle isn't pretty, even if it means ranting, raving, crying, screaming, and pounding your fists on the floor, the speaker believes that is more dignified than simply lying down and giving in to fate.

### **Questions About Wisdom and Knowledge**

1. When the speaker first refers to "wise men," he tells us "their words had forked no lightning" (line 5). What kind of "words" do you think the speaker is describing?
2. In the fourth stanza, the speaker describes the chagrin of the "wild men" who thought they were celebrating the sun's "flight," not realizing how quickly it would set. Why does their knowledge of the rapid nature of the "sunset," or their impending death, change the way they celebrate the "sun," or life? In other words, why does the knowledge of death change how we feel about life?
3. Why does the speaker think his father should "curse" and "bless" his son, as the elder is dying?

### **Chew on This**

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

The knowledge of life's brevity makes the speaker of "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" feel a tragic sense of loss, even as he's beholding the beautiful aspects of the world.

## FAMILY

Spoken by a son to his dying father, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" suggests the intensity and power of familial bonds. It also works through a reversal of roles – the son, not the father, is giving advice, and the father, not the son, is weak and in need of encouragement and help.

### Questions About Family

1. How would this poem be different if there was no reference to the speaker's father in the last stanza, so that it was entirely about "old age" in general? Alternatively, what if the reference were to a son instead of a father?
2. Did you guess, before the last stanza, that the speaker was thinking about a member of his family or someone close to him? What clues can you find in the first five stanzas that might lead to this guess, even if you didn't make it?
3. Why does the speaker of this poem advise his father to "Rage, rage against the dying of the light"? Who is helped by this advice – the father or the son? Both? Neither?

### Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Although the speaker of this poem is addressing his father, his tone and attitude suggest that he is actually switching roles, making his father into a dependent "son" even as the speaker experiences a son's grief.

### Check your progress – 2

1. Who wrote "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night"?

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2. "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," is the example of which poetic

form? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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### 10.4 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we went through the summary, analysis and themes of “Poem in October” and “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” by Dylan Thomas.

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### 10.5 KEYWORDS

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- Hulk: an old ship used for storage
- Bait: something used to lure something else
- Shoal: a group of fish
- Buoys: a guide in the sea to indicate hazards
- Bellowed: to shout
- Squall: loud cry
- Anemone: plant with bright flowers

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### 10.6 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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- Write the summary “Poem in October” by Dylan Thomas.
- Write the analysis of “Poem in October” by Dylan Thomas.
- Write the summary “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” by Dylan Thomas.
- Write the analysis of “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” by Dylan Thomas

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### 10.7 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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1. "Dylan Thomas". *Academy of American Poets*. He took his family to Italy, and while in Florence, he wrote *In Country Sleep, And Other Poems* (Dent, 1952), which includes his most famous poem, "Do not go gentle into that good night."

2. ^ Ferris, Paul (1989). *Dylan Thomas, A Biography*. New York: Paragon House. p. 283. ISBN 1-55778-215-6.
3. ^ "Dylan Thomas: Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night". *BBC Wales*. 6 November 2008. Archived from the original on 27 November 2012. Retrieved 18 December 2010.
4. ^ \* Thomas, David N. (2008). *Fatal Neglect: Who Killed Dylan Thomas?*. Seren. p. 19. ISBN 978-1-85411-480-8.
5. ^ "Do not go gentle into that good night | Academy of American Poets". *Poets.org*. Retrieved 1 September 2015.
6. ^ Jump up to:<sup>a</sup> <sup>b</sup> Strand et al. 2001 p. 7

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## 10.8 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- “Poem in October” was written by Dylan Thomas. (**answer to check your progress- 1 Q1**)
- “Poem in October” by Dylan Thomas has seven stanzas. (**answer to check your progress- 1 Q2**)
- “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” was written by Dylan Thomas. (**answer to check your progress- 2 Q1**)
- "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," is the example of poetic form known as the villanelle. (**answer to check your progress- 2 Q2**)

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# UNIT 11. LARKIN – CHURCH GOING, THE EXPLOSION, WANTS, AT GRASS - 1

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## STRUCTURE

- 11.0 Objectives
- 11.1 Introduction
- 11.2 Life
- 11.3 Creative Output
- 11.4 Legacy
- 11.5 Let us Sum Up
- 11.6 Keywords
- 11.7 Questions for Review
- 11.8 Suggested Readings and References
- 11.9 Answers to Check your Progress

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## 11.0 OBJECTIVES

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Once you go through this unit, you would know about:

- Philip Larkin's life, legacy and creative output.

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## 11.1 INTRODUCTION

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Philip Arthur Larkin was an English poet, novelist, and librarian. His first book of poetry, *The North Ship*, was published in 1945, followed by two novels, *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947), and he came to prominence in 1955 with the publication of his second collection of poems, *The Less Deceived*, followed by *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). He contributed to *The Daily Telegraph* as its jazz critic from 1961 to 1971, articles gathered in *All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961–71* (1985), and he edited *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973).<sup>[1]</sup> His many honors include the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. He was offered, but declined, the

position of Poet Laureate in 1984, following the death of Sir John Betjeman.

After graduating from Oxford in 1943 with a first in English language and literature, Larkin became a librarian. It was during the thirty years he worked with distinction as university librarian at the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull that he produced the greater part of his published work. His poems are marked by what Andrew Motion calls "a very English, glum accuracy" about emotions, places, and relationships, and what Donald Davie described as "lowered sights and diminished expectations". Eric Homberger (echoing Randall Jarrell) called him "the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket"—Larkin himself said that deprivation for him was "what daffodils were for Wordsworth". Influenced by W. H. Auden, W. B. Yeats, and Thomas Hardy, his poems are highly structured but flexible verse forms. They were described by Jean Hartley, the ex-wife of Larkin's publisher George Hartley (the Marvell Press), as a "piquant mixture of lyricism and discontent", though anthologist Keith Tuma writes that there is more to Larkin's work than its reputation for dour pessimism suggests.

Larkin's public persona was that of the no-nonsense, solitary Englishman who disliked fame and had no patience for the trappings of the public literary life. The posthumous publication by Anthony Thwaite in 1992 of his letters triggered controversy about his personal life and political views, described by John Banville as hair-raising, but also in places hilarious. Lisa Jardine called him a "casual, habitual racist, and an easy misogynist", but the academic John Osborne argued in 2008 that "the worst that anyone has discovered about Larkin are some crass letters and a taste for porn softer than what passes for mainstream entertainment". Despite the controversy Larkin was chosen in a 2003 Poetry Book Society survey, almost two decades after his death, as Britain's best-loved poet of the previous 50 years, and in 2008 The Times named him Britain's greatest post-war writer.

In 1973 a Coventry Evening Telegraph reviewer referred to Larkin as "the bard of Coventry", but in 2010, 25 years after his death, it was Larkin's adopted home city, Kingston upon Hull, that commemorated him with the Larkin 25 Festival which culminated in the unveiling of a statue of

Larkin by Martin Jennings on 2 December 2010, the 25th anniversary of his death. On 2 December 2016, the 31st anniversary of his death, a floor stone memorial for Larkin was unveiled at Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.

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## 11.2 LIFE

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### Early life and education

'You look as if you wished the place in Hell,'  
My friend said, 'judging from your face.' 'Oh well,  
I suppose it's not the place's fault,' I said.  
'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.'  
*from "I Remember, I Remember" (1954),*  
The Less Deceived

Philip Larkin was born on 9 August 1922 at 2, Poultny Road, Radford, Coventry, the only son and younger child of Sydney Larkin (1884–1948), who came from Lichfield, and his wife, Eva Emily Day (1886–1977) of Epping. The family lived in the district of Radford, Coventry, until Larkin was five years old, before moving to a large three-storey middle-class house complete with servants quarters near Coventry railway station and King Henry VIII School, in Manor Road. Having survived the bombings of the Second World War their former house in Manor Road was demolished in the 1960s to make way for a road modernisation programme, the construction of an inner ring road. His sister Catherine, known as Kitty, was 10 years older than he was. His father, a self-made man who had risen to be Coventry City Treasurer, was a singular individual, 'nihilistically disillusioned in middle age', who combined a love of literature with an enthusiasm for Nazism, and had attended two Nuremberg rallies during the mid-'30s. He introduced his son to the works of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and above all D. H. Lawrence. His mother was a nervous and passive woman, "a kind of defective mechanism...Her ideal is 'to collapse' and to be taken care of", dominated by her husband.

Larkin's early childhood was in some respects unusual: he was educated at home until the age of eight by his mother and sister, neither friends nor relatives ever visited the family home, and he developed a stammer. Nonetheless, when he joined Coventry's King Henry VIII Junior School he fitted in immediately and made close, long-standing friendships, such as those with James "Jim" Sutton, Colin Gunner and Noel "Josh" Hughes. Although home life was relatively cold, Larkin enjoyed support from his parents. For example, his deep passion for jazz was supported by the purchase of a drum kit and a saxophone, supplemented by a subscription to *Down Beat*. From the junior school he progressed to King Henry VIII Senior School. He fared quite poorly when he sat his School Certificate exam at the age of 16. Despite his results, he was allowed to stay on at school; two years later he earned distinctions in English and History, and passed the entrance exams for St John's College, Oxford, to read English.

Larkin began at Oxford University in October 1940, a year after the outbreak of Second World War. The old upper class traditions of university life had, at least for the time being, faded, and most of the male students were studying for highly truncated degrees. Due to his poor eyesight, Larkin failed his military medical examination and was able to study for the usual three years. Through his tutorial partner, Norman Iles, he met Kingsley Amis, who encouraged his taste for ridicule and irreverence and who remained a close friend throughout Larkin's life. Amis, Larkin and other university friends formed a group they dubbed "The Seven", meeting to discuss each other's poetry, listen to jazz, and drink enthusiastically. During this time he had his first real social interaction with the opposite sex, but made no romantic headway. In 1943 he sat his finals, and, having dedicated much of his time to his own writing, was greatly surprised at being awarded a first-class honours degree.

### **Early career and relationships**

## Notes

Why should I let the toad *work*

Squat on my life?

Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork

And drive the brute off?

*from "Toads" (1954), The Less Deceived*

In 1943 Larkin was appointed librarian of the public library in Wellington, Shropshire. It was while working there that in early 1944 he met his first girlfriend, Ruth Bowman, an academically ambitious 16-year-old schoolgirl. In 1945, Ruth went to continue her studies at King's College London; during one of his visits their friendship developed into a sexual relationship. By June 1946, Larkin was halfway through qualifying for membership of the Library Association and was appointed assistant librarian at University College, Leicester. It was visiting Larkin in Leicester and witnessing the university's Senior Common Room that gave Kingsley Amis the inspiration to write *Lucky Jim* (1954), the novel that made Amis famous and to whose long gestation Larkin contributed considerably. Six weeks after his father's death from cancer in March 1948, Larkin proposed to Ruth, and that summer the couple spent their annual holiday touring Hardy country.

In June 1950 Larkin was appointed sub-librarian at The Queen's University of Belfast, a post he took up that September. Before his departure he and Ruth split up. At some stage between the appointment to the position at Queen's and the end of the engagement to Ruth, Larkin's friendship with Monica Jones, a lecturer in English at Leicester, also developed into a sexual relationship. He spent five years in Belfast, which appear to have been the most contented of his life. While his relationship with Jones developed, he also had "the most satisfyingly erotic [experience] of his life" with Patsy Strang, who at the time was in an open marriage with one of his colleagues.<sup>[34]</sup> At one stage she offered to leave her husband to marry Larkin. From 1951 onwards Larkin holidayed with Jones in various locations around the British Isles. While in Belfast he also had a significant though sexually undeveloped friendship with Winifred Arnott, the subject of "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album", which came to an end when she married in 1954.

This was the period in which he gave Kingsley Amis extensive advice on the writing of *Lucky Jim*. Amis repaid the debt by dedicating the finished book to Larkin.

In 1955 Larkin became University Librarian at the University of Hull, a post he held until his death.<sup>[36]</sup> Professor R. L. Brett, who was chairman of the library committee that appointed him and a friend, wrote, "At first I was impressed with the time he spent in his office, arriving early and leaving late. It was only later that I realised that his office was also his study where he spent hours on his private writing as well as the work of the library. Then he would return home and on a good many evenings start writing again."For his first year he lodged in bedsits. In 1956, at the age of 34, he rented a self-contained flat on the top-floor of 32 Pearson Park, a three-storey red-brick house overlooking the park, previously the American Consulate. This, it seems, was the vantage point later commemorated in the poem *High Windows*. Of the city itself Larkin commented: "I never thought about Hull until I was here. Having got here, it suits me in many ways. It is a little on the edge of things, I think even its natives would say that. I rather like being on the edge of things. One doesn't really go anywhere by design, you know, you put in for jobs and move about, you know, I've lived in other places."<sup>[40]</sup> In the post-war years, Hull University underwent significant expansion, as was typical of British universities during that period. When Larkin took up his appointment there, the plans for a new university library were already far advanced. He made a great effort in just a few months to familiarize himself with them before they were placed before the University Grants Committee; he suggested a number of emendations, some major and structural, all of which were adopted. It was built in two stages, and in 1967 it was named the Brynmor Jones Library after Sir Brynmor Jones, the university's vice-chancellor.

One of Larkin's colleagues at Hull said he became a great figure in post-war British librarianship. Ten years after the new library's completion, Larkin computerized records for the entire library stock, making it the first library in Europe to install a GEAC system, an automated online

## Notes

circulation system. Richard Goodman wrote that Larkin excelled as an administrator, committee man and arbitrator. "He treated his staff decently, and he motivated them", Goodman said. "He did this with a combination of efficiency, high standards, humour and compassion." From 1957 until his death, Larkin's secretary was Betty Mackereth. All access to him by his colleagues was through her, and she came to know as much about Larkin's compartmentalized life as anyone. During his 30 years there, the library's stock sextupled, and the budget expanded from £4,500 to £448,500, in real terms a twelvefold increase.

### Later life

Dockery, now:  
Only nineteen, he must have taken stock  
Of what he wanted, and been capable  
Of . . . No, that's not the difference: rather how  
Convinced he was he should be added to!  
Why did he think adding meant increase?  
To me it was dilution.  
*from "Dockery and Son" (1963),*  
The Whitsun Weddings

In February 1961 Larkin's friendship with his colleague Maeve Brennan became romantic, despite her strong Roman Catholic beliefs. In early 1963 Brennan persuaded him to go with her to a dance for university staff, despite his preference for smaller gatherings. This seems to have been a pivotal moment in their relationship, and he memorialized it in his longest (and unfinished) poem "The Dance". Around this time, also at her prompting, Larkin learnt to drive and bought a car – his first, a Singer Gazelle. Meanwhile, Monica Jones, whose parents had died in 1959, bought a holiday cottage in Haydon Bridge, near Hexham, which she and Larkin visited regularly. His poem "Show Saturday" is a description of the 1973 Bellingham show in the North Tyne valley.

In 1964, in the wake of the publication of *The Whitsun Weddings*, Larkin was the subject of an episode of the arts programme *Monitor*, directed by Patrick Garland. The programme, which shows him being interviewed by fellow poet John Betjeman in a series of locations in and around Hull, allowed Larkin to play a significant part in the creation of his own public persona; one he would prefer his readers to imagine.

In 1968, Larkin was offered the OBE, which he declined. Later in life he accepted the offer of being made a Companion of Honour.

Larkin's role in the creation of Hull University's new Brynmor Jones Library had been important and demanding. Soon after the completion of the second and larger phase of construction in 1969, he was able to redirect his energies. In October 1970 he started work on compiling a new anthology, *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973). He was awarded a Visiting Fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, for two academic terms, allowing him to consult Oxford's Bodleian Library, a copyright library. While he was in Oxford he passed responsibility for the Library to his deputy, Brenda Moon. Larkin was a major contributor to the re-evaluation of the poetry of Thomas Hardy, which, in comparison to his novels, had been overlooked; in Larkin's "idiosyncratic" and "controversial" anthology, Hardy was the poet most generously represented. There were twenty-seven poems by Hardy, compared with only nine by T. S. Eliot (however, Eliot is most famous for long poems); the other poets most extensively represented were W. B. Yeats, W. H. Auden and Rudyard Kipling. Larkin included six of his own poems—the same number as for Rupert Brooke. In the process of compiling the volume he had been disappointed not to find more and better poems as evidence that the clamor over the Modernists had stifled the voices of traditionalists. The most favourable responses to the anthology were those of Auden and John Betjeman, while the most hostile was that of Donald Davie, who accused Larkin of "positive cynicism" and of encouraging "the perverse triumph of philistinism, the cult of the amateur ... [and] the weakest kind of Englishry". After an initial period of anxiety about the anthology's reception, Larkin enjoyed the clamor.

In 1971 Larkin regained contact with his schoolfriend Colin Gunner, who had led a picaresque life. Their subsequent correspondence has gained notoriety as in these letters, Larkin expressed right-wing views and used racist language.<sup>[59]</sup> In the period from 1973 to 1974 Larkin became an Honorary Fellow of St John's College, Oxford, and was awarded honorary degrees by Warwick, St Andrews and Sussex universities. In January 1974 Hull University informed Larkin that they were going to dispose of the building on Pearson Park in which he lived. Shortly afterwards he bought a detached two-storey 1950s house in Newland Park which was described by his university colleague John Kenyon as "an entirely middle-class backwater". Larkin, who moved into the house in June, thought the four-bedroom property "utterly undistinguished" and reflected, "I can't say it's the kind of dwelling that is eloquent of the nobility of the human spirit".

Shortly after splitting up with Maeve Brennan in August 1973, Larkin attended W. H. Auden's memorial service at Christ Church, Oxford, with Monica Jones as his official partner.<sup>[61]</sup> In March 1975 the relationship with Brennan restarted, and three weeks after this he initiated a secret affair with Betty Mackereth, who served as his secretary for 28 years, writing the long-undiscovered poem "We met at the end of the party" for her. Despite the logistical difficulties of having three relationships simultaneously, the situation continued until March 1978. From then on he and Jones were a monogamous couple.

In 1976 Larkin was the guest of Roy Plomley on BBC's Desert Island Discs. His choice of music included "Dallas Blues" by Louis Armstrong, Spem in alium by Thomas Tallis and the Symphony No. 1 in A flat major by Edward Elgar. His favourite piece was "I'm Down in the Dumps" by Bessie Smith.

In December 2010, as part of the commemorations of the 25th anniversary of Larkin's death, the BBC broadcast a programme entitled *Philip Larkin and the Third Woman* focusing on his affair with

Mackereth in which she spoke for the first time about their relationship. It included a reading of a newly discovered secret poem, *Dear Jake* and revealed that Mackereth was one of the inspirations for his writings.

### Final years and death

Being brave

Lets no one off the grave.

Death is no different whined at than withstood.

*from "Aubade" (1977)*

In 1982 Larkin turned sixty. This was marked most significantly by a collection of essays entitled *Larkin at Sixty*, edited by Anthony Thwaite and published by Faber and Faber. There were also two television programmes: an episode of *The South Bank Show* presented by Melvyn Bragg in which Larkin made off-camera contributions, and a half-hour special on the BBC that was devised and presented by the Labour Shadow Cabinet Minister Roy Hattersley.

In 1983 Jones was hospitalised with shingles. The severity of her symptoms, including its effects on her eyes, distressed Larkin. As her health declined, regular care became necessary: within a month she moved into his Newland Park home and remained there for the rest of her life.

Headstone marking Larkin's grave at Cottingham municipal cemetery, Cottingham, East Riding of Yorkshire

At the memorial service for John Betjeman, who died in July 1984, Larkin was asked if he would accept the post of Poet Laureate. He declined, not least because he felt he had long since ceased to be a writer of poetry in a meaningful sense. The following year Larkin began to suffer from oesophageal cancer. On 11 June 1985 he underwent surgery, but his cancer was found to have spread and was inoperable. On 28 November he collapsed and was readmitted to hospital. He died four days later, on 2 December 1985, at the age of 63, and was buried at the Cottingham municipal cemetery near Hull. His grave can be found on

## Notes

the left hand side of the cemetery, close to the entrance. Its plain white headstone reads "Philip Larkin 1922–1985 Writer".

Larkin had asked on his deathbed that his diaries be destroyed. The request was granted by Jones, the main beneficiary of his will, and Betty Mackereth; the latter shredded the unread diaries page by page, then had them burned. His will was found to be contradictory regarding his other private papers and unpublished work; legal advice left the issue to the discretion of his literary executors, who decided the material should not be destroyed. When she died on 15 February 2001, Jones, in turn, left one million pounds to St Paul's Cathedral, Hexham Abbey and Durham Cathedral.

### Check your progress – 1

1. When was Philip Larkin born?

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2. Who was Philip Larkin?

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3. When was Philip Larkin appointed as the librarian of the public library in Wellington, Shropshire?

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## 11.3 CREATIVE OUTPUT

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### Juvenilia and early works

And kneel upon the stone,  
 For we have tried  
 All courages on these despairs,  
 And are required lastly to give up pride,  
 And the last difficult pride in being humble.

*from "Come then to prayers" (1946)*

From his mid-teens Larkin "wrote ceaselessly", producing both poetry, initially modelled on Eliot and W. H. Auden, and fiction: he wrote five full-length novels, each of which he destroyed shortly after completion.<sup>[75]</sup> While he was at Oxford University he had a poem published for the first time: "Ultimatum" in *The Listener*. Around this time he developed a pseudonymous alter ego for his prose, Brunette Coleman. Under this name he wrote two novellas, *Trouble at Willow Gables* and *Michaelmas Term at St Brides* (2002), as well as a supposed autobiography and an equally fictitious creative manifesto called "What we are writing for". Richard Bradford has written that these curious works show "three registers: cautious indifference, archly overwritten symbolism with a hint of Lawrence and prose that appears to disclose its writer's involuntary feelings of sexual excitement".

After these works Larkin started his first published novel *Jill* (1946). This was published by Reginald A. Caton, a publisher of barely legal pornography, who also issued serious fiction as a cover for his core activities. Around the time that *Jill* was being prepared for publication, Caton inquired of Larkin if he also wrote poetry. This resulted in the publication, three months before *Jill*, of *The North Ship* (1945), a collection of poems written between 1942 and 1944 which showed the increasing influence of Yeats. Immediately after completing *Jill*, Larkin started work on the novel *A Girl in Winter* (1947), completing it in 1945. This was published by Faber and Faber and was well received, *The Sunday Times* calling it "an exquisite performance and nearly faultless". Subsequently, he made at least three concerted attempts at writing a third novel, but none went further than a solid start.

### Mature works

It was during Larkin's five years in Belfast that he reached maturity as a poet. The bulk of his next published collection of poems *The Less Deceived* (1955) was written there, though eight of the twenty-nine poems included were from the late 1940s. This period also saw Larkin make his final attempts at writing prose fiction, and he gave extensive help to Kingsley Amis with *Lucky Jim*, which was Amis's first published novel. In October 1954 an article in *The Spectator* made the first use of the title *The Movement* to describe the dominant trend in British post-war literature.<sup>[81]</sup> Various poems by Larkin were included in a 1953 PEN Anthology that also included poems by Amis and Robert Conquest, and Larkin was seen to be a part of this grouping. In 1951 Larkin compiled a collection called *XX Poems* which he had privately printed in a run of just 100 copies. Many of the poems in it subsequently appeared in his next published volume.

In November 1955 *The Less Deceived* was published by the Marvell Press, an independent company in Hessle near Hull (dated October). At first the volume attracted little attention, but in December it was included in *The Times*' list of *Books of the Year*.<sup>[83]</sup> From this point the book's reputation spread and sales blossomed throughout 1956 and 1957. During his first five years in Hull the pressures of work slowed Larkin's output to an average of just two-and-a-half poems a year, but this period saw the writing of some of his best-known poems, such as "An Arundel Tomb", "The Whitsun Weddings" and "Here".

In 1963 Faber and Faber reissued *Jill*, with the addition of a long introduction by Larkin that included much information about his time at Oxford University and his friendship with Kingsley Amis. This acted as a prelude to the release the following year of *The Whitsun Weddings*, the volume which cemented his reputation; almost immediately after its publication he was granted a Fellowship of the Royal Society of Literature. In the years that followed Larkin wrote several of his most famous poems, followed in the 1970s by a series of longer and more sober poems, including "The Building" and "The Old Fools". All of these appeared in Larkin's final collection, *High Windows*, which was published in June 1974. Its more direct use of language meant that it did

not meet with uniform praise; nonetheless it sold over twenty thousand copies in its first year alone. For some critics it represents a falling-off from his previous two books, yet it contains a number of his much-loved pieces, including "This Be The Verse" and "The Explosion", as well as the title poem. "Annus Mirabilis" (Year of Wonder), also from that volume, contains the frequently quoted observation that sexual intercourse began in 1963, which the narrator claims was "rather late for me": this despite Larkin having started his own sexual career in 1945. Bradford, prompted by comments in Maeve Brennan's memoir, suggests that the poem commemorates Larkin's relationship with Brennan moving from the romantic to the sexual.

Later in 1974 he started work on his final major published poem, "Aubade". It was completed in 1977 and published in 23 December issue of The Times Literary Supplement. After "Aubade" Larkin wrote only one poem that has attracted close critical attention, the posthumously published and intensely personal "Love Again".<sup>[89]</sup>

### Poetic style

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.  
 Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.  
 In time the curtain-edges will grow light.  
 Till then I see what's really always there:  
 Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,  
 Making all thought impossible but how  
 And where and when I shall myself die.

*from "Aubade" (1977)*

Larkin's poetry has been characterized as combining "an ordinary, colloquial style", "clarity", a "quiet, reflective tone", "ironic understatement" and a "direct" engagement with "commonplace experiences", while Jean Hartley summed his style up as a "piquant mixture of lyricism and discontent".

Larkin's earliest work showed the influence of Eliot, Auden and Yeats, and the development of his mature poetic identity in the early 1950s coincided with the growing influence on him of Thomas Hardy. The "mature" Larkin style, first evident in *The Less Deceived*, is "that of the detached, sometimes lugubrious, sometimes tender observer", who, in

## Notes

Hartley's phrase, looks at "ordinary people doing ordinary things". He disparaged poems that relied on "shared classical and literary allusions - what he called *the myth-kitty*, and the poems are never cluttered with elaborate imagery." Larkin's mature poetic persona is notable for its "plainness and scepticism". Other recurrent features of his mature work are sudden openings and "highly-structured but flexible verse forms".

The poetry of Thomas Hardy was the influence that helped Larkin reach his mature style.

Terence Hawkes has argued that while most of the poems in *The North Ship* are "metaphoric in nature, heavily indebted to Yeats's symbolist lyrics", the subsequent development of Larkin's mature style is "not ... a movement from Yeats to Hardy, but rather a surrounding of the Yeatsian moment (the metaphor) within a Hardyesque frame". In Hawkes's view, "Larkin's poetry ... revolves around two losses": the "loss of modernism", which manifests itself as "the desire to find a moment of epiphany", and "the loss of England, or rather the loss of the British Empire, which requires England to define itself in its own terms when previously it could define 'Englishness' in opposition to something else."

In 1972 Larkin wrote the oft-quoted "Going, Going", a poem which expresses a romantic fatalism in its view of England that was typical of his later years. In it he prophesies a complete destruction of the countryside, and expresses an idealised sense of national togetherness and identity: "And that will be England gone ... it will linger on in galleries; but all that remains for us will be concrete and tyres". The poem ends with the blunt statement, "I just think it will happen, soon."

Larkin's style is bound up with his recurring themes and subjects, which include death and fatalism, as in his final major poem "Aubade". Poet Andrew Motion observes of Larkin's poems that "their rage or contempt is always checked by the ... energy of their language and the satisfactions of their articulate formal control", and contrasts two aspects of his poetic personality—on the one hand an enthusiasm for "symbolist moments" and "freely imaginative narratives", and on the other a "remorseless factuality" and "crudity of language". Motion defines this as a "life-enhancing struggle between opposites", and concludes that his poetry is typically "ambivalent": "His three mature collections have

developed attitudes and styles of ... imaginative daring: in their prolonged debates with despair, they testify to wide sympathies, contain passages of frequently transcendent beauty, and demonstrate a poetic inclusiveness which is of immense consequence for his literary heirs."

### Prose non-fiction

Larkin was a notable critic of modernism in contemporary art and literature. His skepticism is at its most nuanced and illuminating in *Required Writing*, a collection of his book reviews and essays, and at its most inflamed and polemical in his introduction to his collected jazz reviews, *All What Jazz*, drawn from the 126 record-review columns he wrote for *The Daily Telegraph* between 1961 and 1971, which contains an attack on modern jazz that widens into a wholesale critique of modernism in the arts. Despite the reputation Larkin not unwillingly acquired as an enemy of modernism, recent critical assessments of Larkin's writings have identified them as possessing some modernist characteristics.

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## 11.4 LEGACY

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### Reception history

Life is an immobile, locked,  
 Three-handed struggle between  
 Your wants, the world's for you, and (worse)  
 The unbeatable slow machine  
 That brings what you'll get.

from "The Life with a Hole in it" (1974)

When first published in 1945, *The North Ship* received just one review, in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, which concluded "Mr Larkin has an inner vision that must be sought for with care. His recondite imagery is couched in phrases that make up in a kind of wistful hinted beauty what they lack in lucidity. Mr Larkin's readers must at present be confined to a small circle. Perhaps his work will gain wider appeal as his genius becomes more mature?" A few years later, though, the poet and critic Charles Madge came across the book and wrote to Larkin with his

compliments. When the collection was reissued in 1966 it was presented as a work of juvenilia, and the reviews were gentle and respectful; the most forthright praise came from Elizabeth Jennings in *The Spectator*: "few will question the intrinsic value of *The North Ship* or the importance of its being reprinted now. It is good to know that Larkin could write so well when still so young."

*The Less Deceived* was first noticed by *The Times*, who included it in its *List of Books of 1955*. In its wake many other reviews followed; "most of them concentrated ... on the book's emotional impact and its sophisticated, witty language." *The Spectator* felt the collection was "in the running for the best published in this country since the war"; G. S. Fraser, referring to Larkin's perceived association with The Movement felt that Larkin exemplified "everything that is good in this 'new movement' and none of its faults". The *TLS* called him "a poet of quite exceptional importance", and in June 1956 the *Times Educational Supplement* was fulsome: "As native as a Whitstable oyster, as sharp an expression of contemporary thought and experience as anything written in our time, as immediate in its appeal as the lyric poetry of an earlier day, it may well be regarded by posterity as a poetic monument that marks the triumph over the formless mystifications of the last twenty years. With Larkin poetry is on its way back to the middlebrow public." Reviewing the book in America the poet Robert Lowell wrote, "No post-war poetry has so caught the moment, and caught it without straining after its ephemera. It's a hesitant, groping mumble, resolutely experienced, resolutely perfect in its artistic methods."

In time, there was a counter-reaction: David Wright wrote in *Encounter* that *The Less Deceived* suffered from the "palsy of playing safe"; in April 1957 Charles Tomlinson wrote a piece for the journal *Essays in Criticism*, "The Middlebrow Muse", attacking The Movement's poets for their "middle-cum-lowbrowism", "suburban mental ratio" and "parochialism"—Larkin had a "tenderly nursed sense of defeat". In 1962 A. Alvarez, the compiler of an anthology entitled *The New Poetry*, famously accused Larkin of "gentility, neo-Georgian pastoralism, and a failure to deal with the violent extremes of contemporary life".

When *The Whitsun Weddings* was released Alvarez continued his attacks in a review in *The Observer*, complaining of the "drab circumspection" of Larkin's "commonplace" subject-matter. Praise outweighed criticism; John Betjeman felt Larkin had "closed the gap between poetry and the public which the experiments and obscurity of the last fifty years have done so much to widen." In *The New York Review of Books* Christopher Ricks wrote of the "refinement of self-consciousness, usually flawless in its execution" and Larkin's summoning up of "the world of all of us, the place where, in the end, we find our happiness, or not at all." He felt Larkin to be "the best poet England now has."

In his biography Richard Bradford writes that the reviews for *High Windows* showed "genuine admiration" but notes that they typically encountered problems describing "the individual genius at work" in poems such as "Annus Mirabilis", "The Explosion" and "The Building" while also explaining why each were "so radically different" from one another. Robert Nye in *The Times* overcame this problem "by treating the differences as ineffective masks for a consistently nasty presence".

In *Larkin at Sixty*, amongst the portraits by friends and colleagues such as Kingsley Amis, Noel Hughes and Charles Monteith and dedicatory poems by John Betjeman, Peter Porter and Gavin Ewart, the various strands of Larkin's output were analysed by critics and fellow poets: Andrew Motion, Christopher Ricks and Seamus Heaney looked at the poems, Alan Brownjohn wrote on the novels, and Donald Mitchell and Clive James looked at his jazz criticism.<sup>[66]</sup>

## Critical opinion

Isolate rather this element

That spreads through other lives like a tree

And sways them on in a sort of sense

And say why it never worked for me

from "Love Again" (1974), posthumously published

In 1980 Neil Powell could write that "It is probably fair to say that Philip Larkin is less highly regarded in academic circles than either Thom Gunn or Donald Davie". But more recently Larkin's standing has

increased. "Philip Larkin is an excellent example of the plain style in modern times", writes TijanaStojkovic. Robert Sheppard asserts that "It is by general consent that the work of Philip Larkin is taken to be exemplary". "Larkin is the most widely celebrated and arguably the finest poet of the Movement", states Keith Tuma, and his poetry is "more various than its reputation for dour pessimism and anecdotes of a disappointed middle class suggests".

Stephen Cooper's *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer* and John Osborne's "Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence" suggest the changing temper of Larkin studies, the latter attacking eminent critics such as James Booth and Anthony Thwaite for their readiness to reduce to poems to works of biography, and stressing instead the genius of Larkin's universality and deconstructionism. Cooper argues that "The interplay of signs and motifs in the early work orchestrates a subversion of conventional attitudes towards class, gender, authority and sexual relations". Cooper identifies Larkin as a progressive writer, and perceives in the letters a "plea for alternative constructs of masculinity, femininity and social and political organisation". Cooper draws on the entire canon of Larkin's works, as well as on unpublished correspondence, to counter the image of Larkin as merely a racist, misogynist reactionary. Instead he identifies in Larkin what he calls a "subversive imagination". He highlights in particular "Larkin's objections to the hypocrisies of conventional sexual politics that hamper the lives of both sexes in equal measure".

In similar vein to Cooper, Stephen Regan notes in an essay entitled "Philip Larkin: a late modern poet" that Larkin frequently embraces devices associated with the experimental practices of Modernism, such as "linguistic strangeness, self-conscious literariness, radical self-questioning, sudden shifts of voice and register, complex viewpoints and perspectives, and symbolist intensity".

A further indication of a new direction in the critical valuation of Larkin is S. K. Chatterjee's statement that "Larkin is no longer just a name but an institution, a modern British national cultural monument".

Chatterjee's view of Larkin is grounded in a detailed analysis of his poetic style. He notes a development from Larkin's early works to his later ones, which sees his style change from "verbal opulence through a recognition

of the self-ironising and self-negating potentiality of language to a linguistic domain where the conventionally held conceptual incompatibles – which are traditional binary oppositions between absolutes and relatives, between abstracts and concretes, between fallings and risings and between singleness and multiplicity – are found to be the last stumbling-block for an artist aspiring to rise above the impasse of worldliness". This contrasts with an older view that Larkin's style barely changed over the course of his poetic career. Chatterjee identifies this view as being typified by Bernard Bergonzi's comment that "Larkin's poetry did not ... develop between 1955 and 1974". For Chatterjee, Larkin's poetry responds strongly to changing "economic, socio-political, literary and cultural factors".

Chatterjee argues that "It is under the defeatist veneer of his poetry that the positive side of Larkin's vision of life is hidden". This positivity, suggests Chatterjee, is most apparent in his later works. Over the course of Larkin's poetic career, "The most notable attitudinal development lay in the zone of his view of life, which from being almost irredeemably bleak and pessimistic in *The North Ship*, became more and more positive with the passage of time".

The view that Larkin is not a nihilist or pessimist, but actually displays optimism in his works, is certainly not universally endorsed, but Chatterjee's lengthy study suggests the degree to which old stereotypes of Larkin are now being transcended. Representative of these stereotypes is Bryan Appleyard's judgement (quoted by Maeve Brennan) that of the writers who "have adopted a personal pose of extreme pessimism and loathing of the world ... none has done so with quite such a grinding focus on littleness and triviality as Larkin the man". Recent criticism of Larkin demonstrates a more complex set of values at work in his poetry and across the totality of his writings.

The debate about Larkin is summed up by Matthew Johnson, who observes that in most evaluations of Larkin "one is not really discussing the man, but actually reading a coded and implicit discussion of the supposed values of 'Englishness' that he is held to represent". Changing attitudes to Englishness are reflected in changing attitudes to Larkin, and the more sustained intellectual interest in the English national character,

as embodied in the works of Peter Mandler for instance, pinpoint one key reason why there is an increased scholarly interest in Larkin.

A summative view similar to those of Johnson and Regan is that of Robert Crawford, who argues that "In various ways, Larkin's work depends on, and develops from, Modernism." Furthermore, he "demonstrates just how slippery the word 'English' is".

Despite these recent developments, Larkin and his circle are nonetheless still firmly rejected by modernist critics and poets. For example, the poet Andrew Duncan, writing of The Movement on his pinko.org website, notes that "there now seems to be a very wide consensus that it was a bad thing, and that Movement poems are tedious, shallow, smug, sententious, emotionally dead, etc. Their successors in the mainstream retain most of these characteristics. Wolfgang Gortschacher's book on Little Magazine Profiles ... shows ... that there was a terrific dearth of magazines during the 50s—an impoverishment of openings which correlates with rigid and conservative poetry, and with the hegemony of a few people determined to exclude dissidents." Peter Riley, a key player in the British Poetry Revival, which was a reaction against The Movement's poets, has also criticised Larkin for his uncritical and ideologically narrow position: "What after all were Larkin and The Movement but a denial of the effusive ethics of poetry from 1795 onwards, in favour of 'This is what life is really like' as if anyone thought for a second of representing observable 'life'. W.S. Graham and Dylan Thomas knew perfectly well that 'life' was like that, if you nominated it thus, which is why they went elsewhere."

### Posthumous reputation

Larkin's posthumous reputation was deeply affected by the publication in 1992 of Anthony Thwaite's edition of his letters and, the following year, his official biography, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* by Andrew Motion. These revealed his obsession with pornography, his racism, his increasing shift to the political right wing,<sup>[132]</sup> and his habitual expressions of venom and spleen. In 1990, even before the publication of these two books, Tom Paulin wrote that Larkin's "obscenity is informed by prejudices that are not by any means as ordinary, commonplace, or

acceptable as the poetic language in which they are so plainly spelled out." The letters and Motion's biography fuelled further assessments of this kind, such as Lisa Jardine's comment in *The Guardian* that "The Britishness of Larkin's poetry carries a baggage of attitudes which the *Selected Letters* now make explicit". On the other hand, the revelations were dismissed by the novelist Martin Amis in *The War Against Cliché*, arguing that the letters in particular show nothing more than a tendency for Larkin to tailor his words according to the recipient. A similar argument was made by Richard Bradford in his biography on Larkin from 2005. Commenting on *Letters to Monica* (2010) Graeme Richardson states that the collection went "some way towards the restoration of Larkin's tarnished image...reveal(ing) Larkin as not quite the sinister, black-hearted near-rapist everyone thought it was OK to abuse in the 90s."

Trying to resolve Larkin's contradictory opinions on race in his book *Such Deliberate Disguises: The Art of Philip Larkin*, the writer Richard Palmer quotes a letter Larkin wrote to Betjeman, as if it exposes "all the post-Motion and post-Letters furore about Larkin's 'racism' as the nonsense it is":

The American Negro is trying to take a step forward that can be compared only to the ending of slavery in the nineteenth century. And despite the dogs, the hosepipes and the burnings, advances have already been made towards giving the Negro his civil rights that would have been inconceivable when Louis Armstrong was a young man. These advances will doubtless continue. They will end only when the Negro is as well-housed, educated and medically cared for as the white man.

Reviewing Palmer's book, John G. Rodwan, Jr. proposes that:

a less forgiving reader could counter by asking if this does not qualify as the thought of a "true racist":

I find the state of the nation quite terrifying. In 10 years' time we shall all be cowering under our beds as hordes of blacks steal anything they can lay their hands on.

Or this:

We don't go to cricket Test matches now, too many fucking niggers about.

## Notes

Despite controversy about his personal life and opinions, Larkin remains one of Britain's most popular poets. In 2003, almost two decades after his death, Larkin was chosen as "the nation's best-loved poet" in a survey by the Poetry Book Society, and in 2008 *The Times* named Larkin as the greatest British post-war writer. Three of his poems, "This Be The Verse", "The Whitsun Weddings" and "An Arundel Tomb", featured in the *Nation's Top 100 Poems* as voted for by viewers of the BBC's *Bookworm* in 1995. Media interest in Larkin has increased in the twenty-first century. Larkin's collection *The Whitsun Weddings* is one of the available poetry texts in the AQA English Literature A Level syllabus, while *High Windows* is offered by the OCR board. Buses in Hull displayed extracts from his poems in 2010.

### Recordings

In everyone there sleeps  
A sense of life lived according to love.  
To some it means the difference they could make  
By loving others, but across most it sweeps  
As all they might have done had they been loved.

from "Faith Healing" (1960), [The Whitsun Weddings](#)

In 1959, the Marvell Press published *Listen presents Philip Larkin reading The Less Deceived* (Listen LPV1), an LP record on which Larkin recites all the poems from *The Less Deceived* in the order they appear in the printed volume. This was followed, in 1965, by *Philip Larkin reads and comments on The Whitsun Weddings* (Listen LPV6), again on the Marvell Press's record label (though the printed volume was published by Faber and Faber). Once again the poems are read in the order in which they appear in the printed volume, but with Larkin including introductory remarks to many of the poems. A recording of Larkin reading the poems from his final collection, *High Windows*, was published in 1975 as *British poets of our time. Philip Larkin; High Windows: poems read by the author* (edited by Peter Orr) on the Argo record label (Argo PLP 1202). As with the two previous recordings, the sequencing of the poems is the same as in the printed volume.

Larkin also appears on several audio poetry anthologies: *The Jupiter Anthology of 20th Century English Poetry – Part III* (JUR 00A8), issued in 1963 and featuring "An Arundel Tomb" and "Mr Bleaney" (this same recording was issued in the United States in 1967 on the Folkways record label as *Anthology of 20th Century English Poetry – Part III* (FL9870)); *The Poet Speaks* record 8 (Argo PLP 1088), issued in 1967 and featuring "Wants", "Coming", "Nothing to be Said", "Days" and "Dockery and Son"; *On Record* (YA3), issued in 1974 by Yorkshire Arts Association and featuring "Here", "Days", "Next, Please", "Wedding-Wind", "The Whitsun Weddings", "XXX", "XIII" (these last two poems from *The North Ship*); and *Douglas Dunn and Philip Larkin*, issued in 1984 by Faber and Faber (A Faber Poetry cassette), featuring Larkin reading 13 poems including, for the first time on a recording, "Aubade".

Despite the fact that Larkin made audio recordings (in studio conditions) of each of his three mature collections, and separate recordings of groups of poems for a number of audio anthologies, he somehow gained a reputation as a poet who was reluctant to make recordings in which he read his own work. While Larkin did express a dislike of the sound of his own voice ("I come from Coventry, between the sloppiness of Leicester and the whine of Birmingham, you know—and sometimes it comes out"), the evidence indicates that this influenced more his preference not to give public readings of his own work, than his willingness to make audio recordings of his poems.

In 1980, Larkin was invited by the Poets' Audio Center, Washington, to record a selection of poems from the full range of his poetic output for publication on a Watershed Foundation cassette tape. The recording was made in February 1980<sup>[149]</sup> (at Larkin's own expense) by John Weeks, a sound engineer colleague from the University of Hull. Although negotiations between Larkin, his publishers and the Watershed Foundation collapsed, the recording (of Larkin reading 26 poems selected from his four canonical volumes of poetry) was sold – by Larkin – to Harvard University's Poetry Room in 1981. In 2004, a copy of this recording was uncovered in the Hornsea garage studio of the engineer who had made the recording for Larkin. (Subsequently, Larkin's own copy of the recording was found in the Larkin Archive at the University

of Hull) News of the “newly discovered” recording made the headlines in 2006, with extracts being broadcast in a Sky News report. A programme examining the discovery in more depth, *The Larkin Tapes*, was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in March 2008. The recordings were issued on CD by Faber and Faber in January 2009 as *The Sunday Sessions*.

In contrast to the number of audio recordings of Larkin reading his own work, there are very few appearances by Larkin on television. The only programme in which he agreed to be filmed taking part is *Down Cemetery Road* (1964), from the BBC *Monitor* series, in which Larkin was interviewed by John Betjeman. The filming took place in and around Hull (with some filming in North Lincolnshire), and showed Larkin in his natural surroundings: his flat in Pearson Park, the Brynmor Jones Library; and visiting churches and cemeteries. The film was more recently broadcast on BBC Four. In 1981, Larkin was part of a group of poets who surprised John Betjeman on his seventy-fifth birthday by turning up on his doorstep with gifts and greetings. This scene was filmed by Jonathan Stedall and later featured in the third episode of his 1983 series for BBC2, *Time With Betjeman*. In 1982, as part of the celebrations for his sixtieth birthday, Larkin was the subject of *The South Bank Show*. Although Larkin declined the invitation to appear in the programme, he recorded (on audio tape) “a lot of poems” specifically for it. Melvyn Bragg commented, in his introduction to the programme, that the poet had given his full cooperation. The programme, broadcast on 30 May, featured contributions from Kingsley Amis, Andrew Motion and Alan Bennett. Bennett was also filmed reading several Larkin poems a few years later, in an edition of *Poetry in Motion*, broadcast by Channel 4 in 1990.

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## 11.5 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we learned about the life, creative output and legacy of Philip Larkin.

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## 11.6 KEYWORDS

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- **Nnate:** Something that is naturally within; inherent
- **Dazzling:** Blindingly bright
- **Assume:** To believe without knowing the truth

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## 11.7 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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- Write a note on life of Philip Larkin.
- Write a note on legacy of Philip Larkin.
- Write a note on creative output of Philip Larkin.

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## 11.8 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## 11.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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## Notes

- Philip Larkin was born on 9 August 1922. (**answers to check your progress – 1 Q1**)
- Philip Arthur Larkin was an English poet, novelist, and librarian. (**answers to check your progress – 1 Q2**)
- In 1943 Philip Larkin was appointed as the librarian of the public library in Wellington, Shropshire. (**answers to check your progress – 1 Q3**)

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# UNIT 12. LARKIN – CHURCH GOING, THE EXPLOSION, WANTS, AT GRASS - 2

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## STRUCTURE

12.0 Objectives

12.1 Introduction

12.2 Church Going

12.2.1 Summary

12.2.2 Themes

12.3 The Explosion

12.3.1 Summary

12.3.2 Themes

12.4 Wants

12.4.1 Title

12.4.2 Theme

12.4.3 Critical Summary

12.5 At Grass

12.5.1 Summary

12.6 Let us Sum Up

12.7 Keywords

12.8 Questions for Review

12.9 Suggested Readings and References

12.10 Answers to Check your Progress

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## 12.0 OBJECTIVES

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Once you go through this unit, you would know about:

- the summary and themes of Church Going by Philip Larkin;
- the summary and themes of Explosion by Philip Larkin;
- the title, theme and critical summary of Wants by Philip Larkin;
- the summary of At Grass by Philip Larkin.

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## 12.1 INTRODUCTION

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If you ever ask a poetry nerd, "Hey, what's the deal with Philip Larkin?" you'll probably get the answer, "Well, he's really, really *British*." What this actually means is that Larkin is well known for his witty and dour approach to serious subjects, which is something you can definitely find in "**Church Going**." He probably honed this sort of tone after becoming close chums with Kingsley Amis (who wrote in a very similar voice) at fancy-pants Oxford University in the 1940s. Being the good buddy he was, Larkin actually helped Amis finish his first novel, *Lucky Jim*, which brought Amis a ton of fame and success. But Larkin went on to do pretty well for himself too, you know. In 2003, a Poetry Book Society survey actually named him England's most loved poet of the last 50 years. Not bad for a guy who often felt that no one liked him.

And "Church Going" is one of his best-known, most admired poems. It first appeared in an anthology called *New Lines*. Larkin and his pals put the collection together. Together, they were known as the Movement, which sounds like some ultra-sinister group of super villains, but is really just a group of poets who wanted to make their work relevant and accessible to everyday readers. (Thanks, guys!)

Apart from his association with the Movement, Larkin is also often referred to as a "Postwar poet," meaning that his writing grapples with many of the big questions that people were forced to ask after living through the death and destruction of World War II. How could civilization be a good thing if it had led to such a terrible event? What higher purpose could people still believe in when the world seemed so horrible? This widespread questioning provided Larkin with a great opportunity to express his atheist beliefs and to ask really tough questions of traditional religion.

He wasn't the first to do this, of course, and definitely won't be the last. But what makes many of Larkin's poems (and especially "Church Going") so enduring is the way he's willing to give religion its fair due, even as he criticizes it. Not to mention: he's a whole lot easier to understand than the generation of poets that came just before him, which included T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Need we say more?

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## 12.2 CHURCH GOING

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### 12.2.1 Summary

#### STANZA 1

##### Lines 1-2

Once I am sure there's nothing going on

I step inside, letting the door thud shut.

- Right away, you find out that the poem has a first-person speaker. The guy (at least we're assuming that he's a guy, for now anyway) enters the church only after making sure that "there's nothing going on," which suggests to us that he's not very comfortable being there during mass, a pancake breakfast, or any other churchy activities.
- Once inside, he lets the door "thud shut" behind him. "Thud" is a great onomatopoeia, and seems to suggest a dull, lifeless sound.
- Know what else? "Thud shut" is what they call in the poetry biz a spondee. Larkin's use of the spondee really helps us hear the sound of that door closing behind the guy, contributing to the creepy atmosphere of being alone inside a huge building.

##### Lines 3-6

Another church; matting, seats, and stone,

And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut

For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff

Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;

- When the speaker refers to the building as just "another church," he shows that he thinks that all are the same, since they all contain the same stuff, like "matting, seats, and stone/ And little books" (3-4).
- Referring to the groups of flowers as random "sprawlings" also robs the church of the sense of orderliness and discipline that it's supposed to reflect. At the end of line 4, Larkin hits you with a really hard enjambment with the word "cut" left hanging off the end of the line. In one sense, this refers to the flowers, which have obviously been cut for presenting. The use of "cut," though, as opposed to "picked" or "plucked"—followed up with a description of the flowers as "brownish,"

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or wilting—introduces some sense of harshness, and decay, into the poem.

- In general, the speaker continues this trend of carelessly glancing at the sacred objects of the church by referring to them as "some brass and stuff" (5) and calling the altar "the holy end" (6) of the building. Basically, the guy is both ignorant of the "stuff" he's looking at and indifferent to it. Nothing here seems to strike him as meaningful, although he knows enough to realize that it's supposed to be.

### Lines 7-9

And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,  
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off  
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

- Line 7 brings our attention back to the vastness and silence of the church, which the speaker describes as musty. This could mean that he finds the church to be an outdated and boring thing, like a dusty book on a shelf.
- But when the speaker says that this same silence is "unignorable," you really start to get a sense of the conflicting emotions Larkin explores throughout this poem. The speaker is bored, yet can't ignore the silence that looms over the church he's standing in.
- The phrase "Brewed God know how long" refers to this silence (it's the silence that has been "brewed," not God—in case you're wondering), and suggests that the speaker has no clue how long it has taken for the church to develop the aura it has. He does know, though, that this aura is definitely there.
- On a humorous note, the speaker's use of the phrase "God knows how long" also shows us that, even though the guy might not believe in God, the language of religion has gained such common usage that he can't help but use an expression like "God knows how long."
- The final two lines of this stanza continue in this humorous tone, as the speaker, who isn't wearing a hat, wants to show his respect by taking off a piece of clothing. So he takes off his "cycle-clips," which are accessories worn to keep you pants from getting stuck in a bicycle chain. Handy! This gesture on the speaker's part could show his growing belief in the importance of religion, or it could actually be satirizing religion by

showing how empty and ridiculous a custom like taking off your hat in church actually is.

- When we reach the end of stanza 1, we discover that Larkin's poem follows a strict meter. What might that be? Well, technically speaking it's in iambic pentameter, with a rhyme scheme of ABABCADCD. For more on all that stuff, click on over to "Form and Meter." For our purposes here, just note that, in a very clever way, Larkin places the speaker's conversational tone in a tightly ordered poetic structure, which actually parallels the way that the speaker's casual ignorance toward religion plays out inside the tightly ordered structure of the church. And yes, folks. Larkin did mean to do that. Any minds blown yet?

## STANZA 2

### Line 10

Move forward, run my hand around the font.

- The first stanza flows seamlessly into the second, as the words "Move forward" actually continue the thought begun in line 8. The speaker steps farther into the church and "run[s] [his] hand around the font" as he goes (10). The "font" he's referring to here is the stone basin that priests use to baptize people. He runs his hand over it, almost in a kind of caress.

### Lines 11-12

From where I stand, the roof looks almost new—

Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don't.

- Glancing up, the speaker notes that the roof of the church looks almost new. He's not sure if the thing has been cleaned or restored. These lines again demonstrate that the speaker (at least at this moment) is more interested in the everyday details about the church's construction than its spiritual significance.
- He figures that someone would know if the roof's been cleaned or restored, but he doesn't. This kind of statement has a meaning beyond just wondering about the roof. It's the exact same attitude that this speaker takes toward religion in general. In the same way, he realizes that *someone* knows why the inside of this church is so important, but he doesn't.

### Lines 13-15

Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few

Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce

'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.

- Lines 13-15 show the speaker really making himself at home in the empty church. He walks right up to the lectern and starts reading some of the passages from mass that are laid out on it. The verses are written in really large letters, which might suggest that many of the people giving the readings at mass are growing older.
- The speaker decides to read the words "Here endeth" alone, and ends up speaking them much more loudly than he meant to. By that token, this idea of ending rings loudly in the church. Again, this isn't a coincidence! Our man Larkin is loudly putting forth the thought of ending—both in the church and in the reader's mind.

### Lines 16-18

The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door

I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence.

Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

- The "sniggering," or laughing, echoes of line 16 might suggest the senselessness of the Bible verse that the speaker has just read out loud. Or they might be laughing at the notion of ending in the church, which the speaker has just mentioned out loud. We think that both of these readings are available here. How about you?
- After this, the speaker decides to go back to the door he came in through, and donates an "Irish sixpence" into the collection box. Readers of Larkin's time would've known that an Irish sixpence was, as a piece of currency, worthless in England. So, this is a very careless and jerky thing to do. After all, would you go into a church and donate an expired coupon for Shake n' Bake? (Mmm, Shake n' Bake...)
- In any case, Larkin closes the stanza by having his speaker reflect that "the place was not worth stopping for" (18). At this point in the poem, the speaker has definitely taken a pretty hard shot at religion, and has proclaimed that it's all pretty much worthless after visiting the church.

### STANZA 3

**Lines 19-20**

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,

And always end much at a loss like this,

- After the speaker ends stanza 2 with a comment about the church's worthlessness, he opens stanza 3 with a sudden reversal, insisting that no matter what he might think, he has to own up to the fact that he *did* stop to look inside the church, and that he has also done this on numerous occasions in the past. In other words, the speaker realizes that it's not good enough for him to simply say that church is stupid, because whether he likes it or not, he needs to account for why he keeps coming back to it.
- Further, he suggests that the outcome of these explorations is not a belief that the church is meaningless, but only that he feels "much at a loss" (20) when he goes inside a church. He's not coming to any great revelations. The question of the importance of the church is something that he can't satisfactorily answer for himself.

**Lines 21-23**

Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,

When churches fall completely out of use

What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep

- These lines add to the speaker's questions. (In technical terms, the speaker finishes stanza 2 on a note of atheism, and begins stanza on a note of agnosticism.
- What's the difference, you ask? Well, atheism means that you are *certain* that there is no God, while agnosticism means that you believe that a person can never know one way or the other if God exists.) Instead of being convinced of the silliness of church going, the speaker can't help but wonder what he's looking for when he comes back to the church.
- He wonders further about what'll happen to churches when there are no religious people left in the world. What will the buildings themselves become?

**Lines 24-25**

A few cathedrals chronically on show,

Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,

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- Will we turn them into museums to help us remember what primitive people *used* to believe? The speaker here imagines churches as just buildings that display the artifacts of religious belief.
- What kind of things might be on display? Well, there might be parchment (old-timey paper) bearing religious writing, maybe a plate (upon which communion wafers would be served), and a pyx (a decorative tin that holds the wafers).
- Religion note: "communion" generally refers to the eating of bread (or often, little cracker-like wafers) to symbolize the spiritual nourishment of God. In this case, though, all that stuff would be under lock and key. No need for the rituals anymore, folks. Just take your photos and move along.

### Lines 26-27

And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.

Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

- Maybe we'll just open up all the old church doors and let nature have its way, as symbolized by the "rain and sheep" of line 26. (Hey, the sheep can't complain about the rain if we don't charge rent, right? "Lent" in this case means lease, or rent.)
- Finally, the speaker wonders if we'll avoid churches as unlucky places, meaning that even if we're no longer religious, we might still be superstitious.

## STANZA 4

### Lines 28-31

Or, after dark, will dubious women come

To make their children touch a particular stone;

Pick simples for a cancer; or on some

Advised night see walking a dead one?

- Right away, stanza 4 carries on from the thought introduced in line 27, where the speaker wonders if churches will be thought of superstitiously in the future, the same way we might think of getting bad luck from breaking a mirror. The speaker paints a vivid picture of how people might act in this future world, with "dubious" (of a questionable, or doubtful nature) women bringing their children to touch a certain part of the church just for good luck.

- (In this case, Larkin highlights a difference between religion and superstition. Superstition usually has to do with good or bad luck, or with wanting good things to happen to you. True, some religious people might pray for good things to happen too, but what makes religion different from superstition is the larger sense of significance that religion tries to give to people's lives. Here, though, the speaker is suggesting that future-churches will remain ground zero for superstitious behavior.)
- On this same note, the speaker wonders if people might come and "Pick simples for a cancer," meaning that they might pick herbs growing out of the church in order to heal someone. Treating the church this way represents the decay of all the specific morals and meanings the church once stood for.
- The speaker muses humorously on the thought of zombies walking around the church, which turns the church from something solemn and dignified into the setting for a monster movie. Or perhaps he means to suggest that, on a given ("advised") night, ghosts might appear.
- Either way, these future churches seem to be no better than haunted houses (no offense, to haunted houses, you understand).

### Lines 32-33

Power of some sort or other will go on

In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;

- These lines really sum up the speaker's discussion of religion giving way to superstition, suggesting that, even if religion completely does go away, people will continue to invest in the idea of supernatural power, even if it's just in "in games, in riddles, [and] seemingly at random" (33).
- Again, the speaker sketches the difference between superstition and religion. Superstitious powers usually work "seemingly at random" (33), while the church is supposed to do just the opposite, giving a sense of consistency, order, and permanence to the world. In the future, though, religious order will give way to superstitious randomness. That, and riddles.

### Lines 34-36

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But superstition, like belief must die,  
And what remains when disbelief has gone?  
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

- But eventually, Larkin's speaker suggests that even superstition will eventually have to die away, too.
- Not only that, but *disbelief* will have to die with it. It might not be clear at first, but Larkin uses the word disbelief here because he's actually talking about the skeptics and doubters who think religion and superstition are dumb.
- The thing is, though, that once these people get their way and religion disappears, there'll be nothing left for them to disbelieve. *They'll* disappear from the Earth, too.
- And what happens then? There'll be nothing of the church building left to contemplate except "Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky" (36). In other words, the natural world will be all that remains, without any higher sense of purpose (or even a sense of doubt) for humans. It'll just be one big... nothing.

### STANZA 5

#### Lines 37-38

A shape less recognizable each week,  
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who

- The opening of stanza five gives a tentative response to the question asked in line 35, and suggests that, after disbelief has gone, the significance of the church will fade in people's thoughts over time, and become "A shape less recognizable each week" as its purpose becomes "more obscure" (38).
- By "shape," he's referring both to the physical building of the church itself, as well as to the figurative space that religion occupies in people's minds.

#### Lines 39-44

Will be the last, the very last, to seek  
This place for what it was; one of the crew  
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?  
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,

Or Christmas addict, counting on a whiff

Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?

- The speaker then wonders who will be "the very last" person to seek out the church "for what it was," its traditional religious meaning.
- Will it be someone from a construction background who is interested in the architecture of churches? (Only one of those folks, really, would likely know what a "rood-loft" is.)
- Or will it be someone whose interest is aroused by old junk? That's the best we can do with "ruin-bibber." A "bibber" is actually a term for an alcoholic, so a "ruin-bibber" would be somebody who's addicted to ruins. While that sounds healthier than alcoholism, we get the sneaking suspicion that this is not a compliment here.
- Being "randy," too, suggests a kind of sexual attraction. However, we can guess that, again, this is a bit of derogatory term, used to look down on the folks who might, some day in the distant future, come digging around the ruins of a church with a lustful gleam in their eye.
- Or, maybe it'll be someone who's addicted to the idea of Christmas, just wanting a whiff of the smells that come from a church during that time of year—even if those smells happen to come from priests' clothing, organ pipes, or that spice that one of the three wise men brought to Jesus when he was a baby. Interesting smell combo!
- The significance of lines 40 to 44 lies in the fact that these "religious" folks—the architects, antique-ers, and sniffers—all have really superficial relationships to the church, and do not actually appreciate the deep spiritual questions that the church tries to provide answers for.

#### Line 45

Or will he be my representative,

- Aha! Here we have a turn from these superficial folks to something a bit more meaningful.
- The speaker wonders if the person who might visit a future-church might be just... like... him.
- Now, there are two ways to think about that line (thanks for making it complicated, Phil). One is that the speaker's future-representative (the person who, by definition, represents the speaker) is as superficial as the

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rest of the organ-sniffers he talks about. Therefore, the speaker *himself* is a bit silly in coming to the church in the first place.

- Perhaps, though, this is a different kind of option for our speaker. In other words, maybe his future-rep. is more serious than these others, and so the speaker is more serious, too.
- Looks like we'll have to keep reading to find out.
- Luckily, there's more to read! As with every other stanza, the final thought of stanza 5 sets up the subject of the following stanza...

### STANZA 6

#### Line 46

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt

- The speaker now envisions himself (or at least, his "representative") as living in a world where the last of religious faith has died away and the church has been deserted.
- The speaker admits that future-him would be bored by the church, and would be generally uninformed about what it's supposed to stand for.
- (By the by, we hope that you're picking up here that the speaker is really describing himself when he talks about his representative. Since he's wondering about the future, he just needs to add this wrinkle to, you know, cover his time-travel plot tracks. These descriptions, though, should be seen as personal reflections.)
- The speaker knows something about "ghostly silt." Should we be impressed? Well, that depends on what he means. Silt is a kind of dirt really. More specifically, it usually means dirt that has been left behind by a river or flood. For a personal representative, wandering around run-down buildings in the far-off future, the concept of being left behind seems pretty appropriate here.
- More than that, this left-behind dirt is "ghostly." With that description, the speaker plays on the double meaning of the word ghost, which can mean either the presence of something dead, or the living "Holy Ghost" that forms part of the Christian Trinity (along with God and Jesus). The duality of the word "ghostly" actually sums up the entire emotion of this poem, since we can't be sure if it falls on the belief side of religion (Holy Ghost) or the disbelief side (i.e., "For cryin' out loud. There's no such

thing as ghosts and even if there were, they're just the pale imitation of living beings").

### Lines 47-48

Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground

Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt

- We learn more about this ground, the literal dirt that the speaker's future representative has come to. It looks like it has dispersed over time. So long, silt. We hardly knew ye.
- Still, that doesn't seem to bother our future-speaker. What's he up to? Why, he's "tending"—caring for, or paying attention to—the ground.
- It's not just any old ground, either, but a "cross of ground." The speaker's rep. seems drawn to the religious importance of the place on which he stands.
- We know he likes this place because he has to reach it through "suburb scrub" (48). That sounds like it could cause a rash.
- More specifically, the mention of the suburbs here (where all the houses are alike, neatly organized in a place that is usually far-removed from the diversity—and energy—of the city) puts us in a world of typically predictable isolation. The suburbs often symbolize a lack of emotional connection between people, who decide to move out of the cities in order to avoid being in close contact with one another. However you might feel about the 'burbs, the "scrub" (weeds and such) that the speaker mentions seem to indicate that he's not a fan.
- So what's he doing there? What's so great about an old, forgotten chunk of dirt, anyway? Well, we learn that "it held unspilt." Even though the soil is scattered now, it seems that there was a time when this religious ground was bound together. In this way, the speaker's appreciation indicates the symbolic nature of the ground itself. It's not just a bunch of dirt he's tending to. He's dealing with the church itself—both as a physical building and as a spiritual concept.

### Lines 49-50

So long and equably what since is found

Only in separation—marriage, and birth,

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- The speaker goes on to say that he looks after the ground because it (read: religion) has managed to hold together certain things that, in the modern world, are only known by separation. Marriage, for example, is an institution of the church, but in the increasingly secular modern world, divorce rates are much higher than ever before (fun fact: Larkin at one point carried on a committed relationship with three women at once).
- By the same token, birth once meant a person was brought into a community of religious worship. Now though, it doesn't even necessarily mean that a person is brought into a coherent family unit.

### Lines 51-52

And death, and thoughts of these—for which was built  
This special shell? For, though I've no idea

- Also, the church is able to make sense of life and death, giving significance to this event—as it does to birth and marriage—by talking about the immortal human soul and its eventual journey into heaven. This experience is what is contained in the "special shell" of the church that the speaker mentions.
- Now, though, Larkin's speaker gets only a sense of separation in death (as with birth and marriage). Importantly, this separation is also the result of "thoughts of these" things, too. Not only do these major life events not mean anything in this church-less future, but the very act of *thinking* about them is likewise fruitless, producing only separation. Sheesh. Somebody pass the happy pills, please.
- Now, let's talk about that question mark, shall we? If you scroll up, you'll find the start to that question, way back in line 45. That line ("Or will he be my representative") is essentially the whole question in a nutshell. Since then, remember, we've been getting details on what that future representative is up to: being bored but tending the cross of ground. Good times.

### Lines 53-54

What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,  
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

- In the final lines of stanza 6, the speaker is having some real estate issues. How much is a "frowsty barn" worth? Search us. If we had to guess,

though, a barn filled with Frosties would be pretty valuable, not to mention delicious.

- What's that? It's *frowsty*, not Frosties? Aha. Well, nevermind. A musty barn can't hope to match one filled with delicious ice cream treats. At least it's "accoutered" (furnished), though. Still, that doesn't help our speaker assign a value to the place.
- By calling the church a "barn," he once again shows that for him, the place is just a really big building with no greater significance.
- Still, he seems happy to hang out there, not saying anything. After all his criticizing, he can't escape the appeal that the church has for him.

## STANZA 7

### Lines 55-57

A serious house on serious earth it is,

In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,

Are recognized, and robed as destinies.

- As the final stanza begins, the speaker suggests that the reason he keeps coming back to the church is because it's so "serious." This seems to be a shift from the earlier vision of future churches as haunted houses. Superstition can hardly be taken seriously, after all.
- Line 56 compares the church to a place where all human desires and drives blend together ("blent" is just another word for blended) and meet. Religion for the speaker is not just a set of rules or customs.
- It's an entire worldview that speaks to every corner of human life.
- Further, the church not only recognizes human desires, but makes them seem significant to the entire universe by dressing them up or "robing" them "as destinies" (57). In this line, the speaker is recognizing the serious work done by the church and religion—giving purpose and structure to human experience.
- Still, he also portrays this work as really superficial, too. The church "robe[s]" these feelings as destinies, which suggests that this is not truthfully what they are.
- This guy is really torn! On the one hand, he recognizes the importance of the work done by religion. But, on the other, he just can't bring himself to buy into that work fully.

### Lines 58-60

And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,

- Still, the speaker recognizes that the church's power to make human life meaningful will always be an important task. Even though he's wondering about what this church will look like at when all the believers have gone, he acknowledges that the work of the church in giving meaning to life will never completely go away.
- Why is that? Because there will always be someone like speaker who will feel a "hunger in himself to be more serious" (60). Come again? In other words, people won't always be happy with just killing time and listening to the top singles on iTunes. It might not be everyone, but there will always be someone out there who looks for a deeper, more serious purpose to life. And the speaker recognizes that religion can provide that.

### Lines 61-63

And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round.

- This desire for deeper meaning in the universe, the speaker concludes, will always make someone "gravitate" toward the holy ground of a church, even if this ground is only metaphorical, and not a physical place.
- Term alert! There is a lot of metonymy in this poem. That's when a something is referred to by using something else that's closely related to it. For example, you might hear someone say "the White House," when speaking about the president. In this poem, the speaker discusses the church as a building and the ground on which it's built. What he's really talking about, in a broader sense though, is religion itself. It's kind of hard to talk about churches or church grounds without thinking about belief in God, right? That's what's happening here.
- So, when the speaker imagines someone "gravitating [...] to this ground," he's talking about the attraction of both the physical place where the church may once have stood, but also the attraction of belief in general. Got it? Good.

- The person will come to this place because he will find out what the church once stood for, that it was a "proper place to grow wise in" (62). But is there anything more to this claim than just hearsay? How do we know the church is a proper place to grow wise in?
- To answer that, the speaker says that the church grounds are meaningful because they're surrounded by dead folks. Nice. Here, the speaker is referring to the fact that the grounds surrounding churches are traditionally used as graveyards, meaning that a lot of dead bodies hang out nearby. He's saying that, even if there's not literally a God out there, there is still something to be said about this fact: for thousands of years, people have gone to their graves in the presence of a church—in other words, believing in God and heaven.
- For the speaker, whether it's a superstition or not, the church has to be respected for the impact it has had on human history. For atheists, it's not as easy as saying, "Well for thousands of years, all of those people wasted their lives on religious superstition." Rather, the poem in this moment suggests that, at the end of the day, people will always have a desire for finding a higher purpose in their lives—even if that can't be something that is grasped with any degree of certainty. So, there must be some significance to the fact that so many people over the millennia have satisfied this desire through religion.

## 12.2.2 Themes

### 1. RELIGION

If you really wanted to, you could say that "Church Going" is about the tension between religion and spirituality. Go ahead! Just say it. Religion here refers to the "official" answers that spiritual faith gives to those big life questions like, "Why are we here?" In contrast, "spirituality" tends more to ask questions. In this poem, you have a speaker who only has a slight knowledge of religion, yet this knowledge has a huge impact on him because he often wonders whether or not he's approaching spiritual questions in the "right way." Ultimately, it doesn't look like he can get behind religion, but he (and the poem as a whole) definitely admits to the appeal of religion, especially for people who want to find something in life that's worth taking seriously.

### 2. SPIRITUALITY

"Church Going" draws a pretty clear line between spirituality and religion. Spirituality is the part of the speaker that keeps drawing him back into churches, even though he doesn't find anything in organized religion. In this sense, spirituality refers to the basic human longing that leads people toward religion. The poem describes this longing as a profound desire to be serious and to have a serious meaning in your life. Otherwise, life is just a big joke. Not the funny kind either. More like an old, dusty, knock-knock kind. For this reason, the speaker implies, spirituality will always exist even if religion doesn't. Religion means knowing all of the customs and rules of a specific faith, while spirituality, as the speaker shows us, can be vague and "uninformed" (46). According to Larkin, religion provides hard answers to life's big questions, while spirituality is what keeps us asking these questions. In this sense, you might say that Larkin doesn't necessarily endorse religion, but he definitely finds something in the idea of spirituality.

### 3. MAN AND THE NATURAL WORLD

While it might not be as big of a deal in "Church Going" as religion or spirituality, the relationship between humanity and nature helps Larkin explore the conflict between the sense of order that humanity tries to force onto the natural world, and the indifference that nature has to this sort of effort. At several points in this poem, the natural world serves as a foil to religion, since nature is a symbol of the inevitable decay that happens to everything that humans try to impose, whether it's something physical like a church, or non-physical like Christian beliefs. It may not seem like it—heck, we may not even want to admit it—but humanity is a fleeting thing, and so are its attempts to mold the world into its own image. Nature, on the other hand, will keep on living long after we're dead. For this reason, the images of nature in this poem often have almost a post-apocalyptic feel to them, reflecting a world in which humanity and human forms of meaning are totally gone.

### 4. TIME

Like nature, time comes up as a theme in "Church Going" mostly for the purpose of showing how temporary humanity's time on earth actually is. In fact, Larkin's speaker suggests that it's *because* our time is so limited that we have a longing for some higher purpose, or for some sense that our lives will still be meaningful after we're gone. For this reason, we might believe we have immortal souls that'll go to heaven. Or maybe we believe that our time on Earth is best spent by treating others with compassion and kindness. In any case, the fact remains that all human beings will one day die (deal with it, people), and the inevitable passing of time is deeply connected to humanity's urge for spiritual significance.

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## 12.3 THE EXPLOSION

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### 12.3.1 Summary

#### STANZA 1

We know from the title that the poem is about an explosion, now, having read the first stanza, we know it's an explosion in a coal mine. The repetition of the word 'explosion' in the first line reinforces the sense of foreboding. The alliteration in the first stanza creates a gentle, peaceful atmosphere that is at odds with what we know will happen. The repeated 's' sound is calming and creates a gentle, soothing mood. However, the hint of underlying danger is created by referring to the slagheap 'sleeping' as if it were a dormant volcano a drowsy monster. By personifying the pile of coal dust and shale in this way, Larkin adds to the sense of menace something dangerous is lurking, something is threatening the miners. The shadows pointing towards the pithead are sinister. This is a very dark image of a sunny morning; the shadows are perhaps foreshadowing the impending deaths of the miners. The language of the poem is deliberately casual and informal, 'On the day of the explosion' tells us of a dramatic event in a deliberately understated way. The event is allowed to speak for itself; the poet makes no attempt to stir our emotions with strong words. Note the way the word 'explosion' stands out in the description of a calm, sunny, quiet morning. There is no other mention of sound; everything is

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still at this point, even if there is a sense of dread suggested by the mention of shadows and a sleeping slagheap.

### STANZA 2

Into this calm, quiet, sunny morning come the miners. They are rough, uneducated men, Aoife O'Driscoll 2008 Page 3 coughing, swearing and ignoring the beauty and silence of the early morning. They have no idea of their imminent deaths, naturally, but we do and the tension of the poem is mounting with each stanza.

### STANZA 3

This is a charming image of one of the young men playfully chasing rabbits and delightedly showing a nest of eggs to his fellow miners. The details are touching and sweet and the gentleness and playfulness only make the impending catastrophe more poignant. Although Larkin is remaining a detached observer in this poem, his sympathy for the miners is clear. He gives us positive images of them, moving details which bring them to life for us. Note the use of verbs in this stanza, 'chased', 'lost', 'came', 'showed', 'lodged', all adding the the sense of movement, of vibrancy and of life. Knowing as we do that this vibrancy, this life will soon end, we are moved. .

### STANZA 4

The miners pass by, but the word 'passed' is also used to talk of those who have died or 'passed away'. The men belong to a close-knit community, tied together by bonds of family and friendship. We know this because they are referred to as fathers and brothers and use nicknames when talking amongst themselves. They pass into the tall gates which may reflect the gates of heaven or of hell. The gates are 'standing open', almost as if the miners are being invited to their deaths. They walk through the gates, oblivious.

### STANZA 5

The actual explosion is described in a very detached way. There is no mention of the noise, the pain, the fear, the grief or the horror. Instead, Larkin only tells us that the cows stopped grazing for a moment when

they sensed the vibration and the sun appeared dim. The fact that the cows continued grazing is proof that life goes on regardless. The sun dimmed because the dust from the explosion rose into the air and created a haze or smog. It may also be a reference to the description of Jesus' death in the Bible: the sun darkened when he died, according to St. Luke. The simple language doesn't take from the emotional impact of the tragedy, rather, it adds to it. We use our own imaginations to fill the gaps. The miners were straightforward, simple men and it is only fitting that their deaths should be described in language they could understand, in language they would find accessible.

### **STANZA 6**

This is a prayer from a funeral service, it may be in italics to emphasise that it is not the poet's own words being used here but rather a quote from the Bible. It may also be because Larkin – an agnostic - wants to distance himself slightly from the quote or it may be because he is highlighting the significance of these words. The quote itself introduces a note of hope in the midst of despair. The message is a comforting one and brings some solace to the miners' wives.

### **STANZA 7 & 8**

It was said that the wives saw these words as plainly as if they were written on the chapel wall and that they also had a vision of their dead husbands walking towards them, transfigured into golden images of brightness, larger than life and walking with the sun glowing behind them, creating a halo of light. The vision the wives have of their husbands is a glorious one, of men transformed into heavenly beings, bathed in a golden light and larger than life. The sun, which had been dimmed at the moment of their deaths, now shines brighter than ever and surrounds them with a halo. One of the men in the vision is holding the eggs. The eggs are unbroken.

## **12.3.2 Themes**

The theme of this poem is the triumph of life over death. The men led hard lives and died horribly yet the main message is one of hope, of a vision of immortality.

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### 12.4 WANTS

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Philip Larkin, British modern poet, novelist and critic is regarded as the best poet in coast first world second period. He worked as university librarian in Hull. He was very famous because of his poetic work 'Collected Poems' in 1988. He has declared;

"I write poem, to preserve  
things...both for myself and  
others, though I feel that my  
prime responsibility is to keep  
from oblivion for its own sake."

The poem 'Wants' by is a very popular modern poetry in which the poet is examining himself and desire 'to be let alone', which is sometimes a feature of human personality. The poem also reflects endless wishes of human beings which presents the hectic life of modern man and explains that the aloofness and peaceful loneliness is basic of all his Want.

#### 12.4.1 Title

The title is always an important part of literary creation because it shows theme of poem. Here the title 'wants' short, simple and static but is an apt and thematic. As a verb, it shows feelings of an individual. On the other hand, as a noun it shows abundant desires of human being. Throughout the poem, poet just deals with plentiful desires of human beings.

#### 12.4.2 Theme

The poem reveals human psychology and human nature. 20<sup>th</sup> century has raised a moral and spiritual question towards man's faith and existence as a human being. Wars, modern philosophy, scientific approaches, and moral devaluation have made man 'mad' behind trivial tranquility of human life. The plentiful wants made him frustrated. So, Poet wants

aloofness. Wish to be alone is the theme of poem and the following lines from the poem can bear out.

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone. Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs.

### 12.4.3 Critical Summary

The great changed occurred in modern life during the First World War. Its consequence influenced many modern poets. The life suddenly swung from the traditional airing of sentimental philosophy to the drab. Larkin is the spokesman of the world. In first stanzas, the poet is expressing his ideas and thoughts about 20<sup>th</sup> century and men's psychology. Here poet's thought is about universal conception. He says,

'Beyond all this, the wish to be alone'.

However the sky grows dark with invitation-cards

In these lines poet does believe that after all kinds of human Wants, his Wants for loneliness is the main want. Further he shows day to day and routine style of living monotonous life through 'invitation-cards'. Though sky (nature) has remained an interest and fascination for us, man wants to remain aloof. Then the poet says about routine and inherited style of sex of modern man. The poet says,

However we follow the printed directions of sex

However the family is photographed under the flagstaff-

Sex should not be monotonous because Sex is the part of our routine life. As Sigmund Freud says, 'Sex is the supreme desire of men.' But poet tries to leave from such a boring life. That is why the poet wants to be alone. The unity of family is only seen in photographs of some certain occasions but in reality, it is almost impossible. Thus, once the poet wishes to be alone. In the second stanza, poet changes his tone and declares that men's running after everything is due to only for the sake of mental peace and relief. He describes

Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,

The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,

Man is running after money and following the time, the poet depicts about time bound personality of men. He worries not for his life but for his death. Here it is a satirical note about 'life insurance' and he asks what the use of it is. In this stanza, poet convinces us about physical and world happiness. At the end poet comes to his main thought that today where man is doing only due to his desire of oblivion run and he expresses, "Beneath it all, desire of oblivion run."

Thus, Man's wish for money, protection, happiness luxurious facilities and each every thing are like branches of his want. His main want to be alone and to be alone.

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## 12.5 AT GRASS

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### 12.5.1 Summary

#### Stanza I

The onlooker finds two horses at a distance merging themselves in shade and grass. One can only identify them as horses by their moving hair and tails.

A regular scene where a person notices horses wailing time in the field; but, Larkin uses the scene to express the anonymity of the horses and their insignificance at their current situation. They are regular horses holding nothing special about them until their true identity is revealed in the following stanza.

#### Stanza II

The same horses were famous fifteen years ago where they raced to become legendary. People knew about them as their names were everywhere and race enthusiasts followed them.

The onlooker knows something most people do not know – the past of the horses at grass. Larkin demonstrates the infidelity of life by contrasting the past glory of the horses, cheered by everyone, to the present where they are left alone.

### Stanza III

The horses enjoyed their fame, witnessed the glory of their jockeys, cheering of the crowd, people nervous about their horses winning or losing, etc. in the race course.

The silk worn by the jockeys symbolize joyous times of the past. Larkin intensifies the past by showing how the horses were responsible for making someone rich or poor, making people cheer or boo at the same time. This shows the fluctuations of life for victors who are cheered by some and discouraged by some. Larkin shows through the horses the nature of human life where everything has a duality.

### Stanza IV

An uncertainty occupies the mind of the onlooker as he wonders about the memory of the horses. The onlooker wonders if the horses' minds are plagued like the flies that cover their ears! In the present, there is nothing but the meadows and their past names are to seen only in the almanac of the previous years.

Philip Larkin details the inevitability of life and old age through the stanza. Memories become rustic and are plagued by nothingness for those who grow old. As seasons grow in number, the memories decline in number. "The starting-gates" indicate birth and every human goes through a process of living through the "crowd" and finally reaching to a stagnant "meadow". There is nothing left for humans to do once a certain age is acquired.

### Stanza V

The horses in their present are mere living things with nothing to achieve and nobody to care. There is no need for the horses to race to find joy in their lives and neither are their people who would bet on them for achievements. They live in the meadows and wait every day for the groom's boy to come and tend to them.

The pessimism of Philip Larkin is shown in the final stanza of the poem – At Grass. Underneath the shallow representation of the retired horses, Larkin presents the case of death. Groom's boy is death that everyman

## Notes

would wait after living long. The agony of letting go of their past lives is absent in the horses making them happy for what's to come; whereas, humans cannot let go of their "almanac" of memories and suffer at every age.

At Grass by Philip Larkin is a bright poem with a thoughtful end urging the humans to let go of their pride and glory. A simple life in the meadows with a friend or two is sufficient. The grass, wind, trees, etc. represent a harmonious life which is lacking in the society. The horses after all their struggles get back to the simple life where they tread in fields living at will.

### Check your progress -1

1. What is the theme of "The Explosion" by Philip Larkin?

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2. Who wrote "The Explosion"?

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3. Who wrote "At Grass"?

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4. Who wrote "Church Going"?

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5. Who wrote "Wants"?

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## 12.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we read the summary and themes of “Church Going”, the summary and themes of “Explosion”; the title, theme and critical summary of “Wants” and the summary of “At Grass” by Philip Larkin.

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## 12.7 KEYWORDS

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- **Dilute:** To water down something e.g. a fizzy drink
- **Embody:** Symbolize
- **Warp:** Distorted, not its usual status
- **Patronage:** To provide official support
- **Withdraw:** To take back one's backing or support

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## 12.8 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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1. Write the summary of “The Explosion” by Philip Larkin.
2. Write the summary of “At Grass” by Philip Larkin.
3. Write the themes of “The Explosion” by Philip Larkin.
4. Write the critical summary of “Wants” by Philip Larkin.
5. Write the themes of “Church Going” by Philip Larkin

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## 12.9 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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  5. Moran, Eugene V (2002). A People's History of English and American Literature. New York: Nova. ISBN 1-59033-303-9.
- Motion, Andrew (1993). Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life. London: Faber and Faber. ISBN 0-571-17065-X.

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## 12.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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1. The theme of this poem is the triumph of life over death. (**answer to check your progress – 1 Q1**)
2. “The Explosion” was written by Philip Larkin. (**answer to check your progress – 1 Q2**)
3. “At Grass” was written by Philip Larkin. (**answer to check your progress – 1 Q3**)
4. “Church Going” was written by Philip Larkin. (**answer to check your progress – 1 Q4**)
5. “Wants” was written by Philip Larkin. (**answer to check your progress – 1 Q5**)

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# **UNIT 13. TED HUGHES – HAWK ROOSTING, A CHILDISH PRANK, THE THOUGHT – FOX, THE JAGUAR - 1**

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## **STRUCTURE**

- 13.0 Objectives
- 13.1 Introduction
- 13.2 Early Life
- 13.3 Career
- 13.4 Death of Sylvia Path
- 13.5 Work
- 13.6 Themes
- 13.7 Translation
- 13.8 Commemoration and legacy
- 13.9 Archive
- 13.10 Ted Hughes Award
- 13.11 Ted Hughes Society
- 13.12 Ted Hughes Paper Trail
- 13.13 Elmet Trust
- 13.14 In Other Media
- 13.15 Let us Sum Up
- 13.16 Keywords
- 13.17 Questions for Review
- 13.18 Suggested Readings and References
- 13.19 Answers to Check your Progress

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## **13.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After the completion of this unit, you should be able to learn about:

- The life, career and work of Ted Hughes.

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## **13.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Edward James Hughes was an English poet, translator, and children's writer. Critics frequently rank him as one of the best poets of his generation, and one of the twentieth century's greatest writers. He served as Poet Laureate from 1984 until his death. In 2008 The Times ranked Hughes fourth on their list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945". Hughes was married to American poet Sylvia Plath from 1956 until her suicide in 1963 at the age of 30. Some admirers of Plath and feminist critics blamed him for her death after the revelation of letters written by Plath between 18 February 1960 and 4 February 1963, which claim that Hughes beat Plath two days before she had a miscarriage in 1961, and that he also told Plath he wished that she was dead.<sup>[6]</sup> His last poetic work, *Birthday Letters* (1998), explored their complex relationship. These poems make reference to Plath's suicide, but none addresses directly the circumstances of her death. A poem discovered in October 2010, "Last Letter", describes what happened during the three days before her death.

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## 13.2 EARLY LIFE

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Hughes was born at 1 Aspinall Street, in Mytholmroyd in the West Riding of Yorkshire, to William Henry (1894–1981) and Edith (Farrar) Hughes (1898–1969), and raised among the local farms of the Calder Valley and on the Pennine moorland. Hughes's sister Olwyn Marguerite Hughes (1928–2016) was two years older and his brother Gerald (1920–2016) was ten years older. His mother could trace her ancestry back to William de Ferrières, who came to England with William the Conqueror in the 11th century. One of her ancestors had founded the religious community at Little Gidding in Cambridgeshire. Most of the more recent generations of his family had worked in the clothing and milling industries in the area. Hughes's father, William, a joiner, was of Irish descent and had enlisted with the Lancashire Fusiliers and fought at Ypres. He narrowly escaped being killed when a bullet lodged in a pay book in his breast pocket. He was one of just 17 men of his regiment to return from the Dardanelles Campaign (1915–16). The stories of Flanders

fields filled Hughes's childhood imagination (later described in the poem "Out"). Hughes noted, "my first six years shaped everything."

Hughes loved hunting and fishing, swimming and picnicking with his family. He attended the Burnley Road School until he was seven, when his family moved to Mexborough, then attending Schofield Street junior school. His parents ran a newsagent's and tobacconist's shop. In *Poetry in Making* he recalled that he was fascinated by animals, collecting and drawing toy lead creatures. He acted as retriever when his elder brother gamekeeper shot magpies, owls, rats and curlews, growing up surrounded by the harsh realities of working farms in the valleys and on the moors. During his time in Mexborough, he explored Manor Farm at Old Denaby, which he said he would come to know "better than any place on earth". His earliest poem "The Thought Fox", and earliest story "The Rain Horse" were recollections of the area. A close friend at the time, John Wholly, took Hughes to the Crookhill estate above Conisbrough where the boys spent great swathes of time. Hughes became close to the family and learnt a lot about wildlife from Wholly's father, a gamekeeper. He came to view fishing as an almost religious experience.

Hughes attended Mexborough Grammar School, where a succession of teachers encouraged him to write, and develop his interest in poetry. Teachers Miss McLeod and Pauline Mayne introduced him to the poets Hopkins and Eliot. Hughes was mentored by his sister Olwyn, who was well versed in poetry, and another teacher, John Fisher. Poet Harold Massingham also attended this school and was also mentored by Fisher. In 1946, one of Hughes's early poems, "Wild West", and a short story were published in the grammar school magazine *The Don and Dearne*, followed by further poems in 1948. By 16, he had no other thought than being a poet.

During the same year, Hughes won an open exhibition in English at Pembroke College, Cambridge, but chose to do his National Service first. His two years of National Service (1949–51) passed comparatively easily. Hughes was stationed as a ground wireless mechanic in the RAF on an isolated three-man station in east Yorkshire, a time during which he had nothing to do but "read and reread Shakespeare

and watch the grass grow". He learnt many of the plays by heart and memorised great quantities of W. B. Yeats's poetry.

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### 13.3 CAREER

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In 1951, Hughes initially studied English at Pembroke College under M.J.C. Hodgart, an authority on balladic forms. Hughes felt encouraged and supported by Hodgart's supervision, but attended few lectures and wrote no more poetry at this time, feeling stifled by literary academia and the "terrible, suffocating, maternal octopus" of literary tradition. He wrote, "I might say, that I had as much talent for Leavis-style dismantling of texts as anyone else, I even had a special bent for it, nearly a sadistic streak there, but it seemed to me not only a foolish game, but deeply destructive of myself." In his third year, he transferred to anthropology and archaeology, both of which would later inform his poetry. He did not excel as a scholar. His first published poetry appeared in *Chequer*.<sup>[20]</sup> A poem, "The little boys and the seasons", written during this time, was published in *Granta*, under the pseudonym Daniel Hearing. After university, living in London and Cambridge, Hughes went on to have many varied jobs including working as a rose gardener, a night-watchman and a reader for the British film company J. Arthur Rank. He worked at London Zoo as a washer-upper, a post that offered plentiful opportunities to observe animals at close quarters. On 25 February 1956, Hughes and his friends held a party to launch *St. Botolph's Review*, which had a single issue. In it, Hughes had four poems. At the party, he met the American poet Sylvia Plath, who was studying at Cambridge on a Fulbright Scholarship. She had already published extensively, having won various awards, and had come especially to meet Hughes and his fellow poet Lucas Myers. There was a great mutual attraction, but they did not meet again for another month, when Plath was passing through London on her way to Paris. She visited him again on her return three weeks later.

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  
Between trees, and warily a lame  
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow  
Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,  
A widening deepening greenness,  
Brilliantly, concentratedly,  
Coming about its own business

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox  
It enters the dark hole of the head.  
The window is starless still; the clock ticks,  
The page is printed.

The last four stanzas of "The Thought Fox"  
from *The Hawk in the Rain*, 1957

Hughes and Plath dated and then were married at St George the Martyr Holborn, on 16 June 1956, four months after they had first met. The date, Bloomsday, was purposely chosen in honour of James Joyce. Plath's mother was the only wedding guest and she accompanied them on their honeymoon to Benidorm on the Spanish coast. Hughes's biographers note that Plath did not relate her history of depression and suicide attempts to him until much later. Reflecting later in *Birthday Letters*, Hughes commented that early on he could see chasms of difference between himself and Plath, but that in the first years of their marriage they both felt happy and supported, avidly pursuing their writing careers.

On returning to Cambridge, they lived at 55 Eltisley Avenue. That year they each had poems published in *The Nation*, *Poetry* and *The Atlantic*. Plath typed up Hughes's manuscript for his collection *Hawk In The Rain* which went on to win a poetry competition run by the Poetry centre of the Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association of New York. The first prize was publication by Harper, garnering Hughes widespread critical acclaim with the book's release in September 1957,

and resulting in him winning a Somerset Maugham Award. The work favoured hard-hitting trochees and spondees reminiscent of middle English – a style he used throughout his career – over the more genteel latinate sounds.

The couple moved to America so that Plath could take a teaching position at her alma mater, Smith College; during this time, Hughes taught at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. In 1958, they met Leonard Baskin, who would later illustrate many of Hughes's books, including *Crow*. The couple returned to England, staying for a short while back in Heptonstall and then finding a small flat in Primrose Hill, London. They were both writing, Hughes working on programmes for the BBC as well as producing essays, articles, reviews and talks. During this time, he wrote the poems that would be published in *Wodwo* (1967) and *Recklings* (1966). In March 1960, *Lupercal* came out and won the Hawthornden Prize. He found he was being labelled as the poet of the wild, writing only about animals. He began to seriously explore myth and esoteric practices within as shamanism, Buddhism and alchemy, perceiving that imagination could heal dualistic splits in the human psyche and poetry was the language of the work.

Hughes and Plath had two children, Frieda Rebecca (b. 1960) and Nicholas Farrar (1962–2009) and, in 1961, bought the house Court Green, in North Tawton, Devon. In the summer of 1962, Hughes began an affair with Assia Wevill who had been subletting the Primrose Hill flat with her husband. Under a cloud of his affair, Hughes and Plath separated in the autumn of 1962 and she set up life in a new flat with the children.

In 2017, previously unpublished letters were described in which Plath accuses Hughes of physically abusing her months before she miscarried their second child in 1961.

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## 13.4 DEATH OF SYLVIA PATH

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Beset by depression and with a history of suicide attempts, Plath took her own life on 11 February 1963, although it is unclear whether she meant to ultimately succeed. Hughes was devastated. In a letter to an old friend of Plath's from Smith College, he wrote, "That's the end of my life. The rest

is posthumous." Some people argued that Hughes had driven Plath to suicide. Plath's gravestone was repeatedly vandalized by those aggrieved that "Hughes" is written on the stone and attempted to chisel it off, leaving only the name "Sylvia Plath." Plath's poem "The Jailer", in which the speaker condemns her husband's brutality, was included in the 1970 anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings From The Women's Liberation Movement*. Radical feminist poet Robin Morgan published the poem "Arraignment", in which she openly accused Hughes of the battery and murder of Plath. There were lawsuits, Morgan's 1972 book *Monster* which contained that poem was banned, and underground, pirated editions of it were published. Other radical feminists threatened to kill Hughes in Plath's name. In 1989, with Hughes under public attack, a battle raged in the letters pages of *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. In the *Guardian* on 20 April 1989, Hughes wrote the article "The Place Where Sylvia Plath Should Rest in Peace":

In the years soon after [Plath's] death, when scholars approached me, I tried to take their apparently serious concern for the truth about Sylvia Plath seriously. But I learned my lesson early... If I tried too hard to tell them exactly how something happened, in the hope of correcting some fantasy, I was quite likely to be accused of trying to suppress Free Speech. In general, my refusal to have anything to do with the Plath Fantasia has been regarded as an attempt to suppress Free Speech... The Fantasia about Sylvia Plath is more needed than the facts. Where that leaves respect for the truth of her life (and of mine), or for her memory, or for the literary tradition, I do not know.

As Plath's widower, Hughes became the executor of Plath's personal and literary estates. He oversaw the publication of her manuscripts, including *Ariel* (1966). Some critics were dissatisfied by his choice of poem order and omissions in the book and some critics of Hughes argued that he had essentially driven her to suicide and therefore should not be responsible for her literary legacy. He claimed to have destroyed the final volume of Plath's journal, detailing their last few months together. In his foreword to *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, he defends his actions as a consideration for the couple's young children.

## Notes

Following Plath's suicide, he wrote two poems "The Howling of Wolves" and "Song of a Rat" and then did not write poetry again for three years. He broadcast extensively, wrote critical essays and became involved in running Poetry International with Patrick Garland and Charles Osborne in the hopes of connecting English poetry with the rest of the world. In 1966, he wrote poems to accompany Leonard Baskin's illustrations of crows, which became the epic narrative *The Life and Songs of the Crow*, one of the works for which Hughes is best known.

On 23 March 1969, six years after Plath's suicide by asphyxiation from a gas stove, Assia Wevill committed suicide in the same way. Wevill also killed her child, Alexandra Tatiana Elise (nicknamed Shura), the four-year-old daughter of Hughes, born on 3 March 1965. Their deaths led to claims that Hughes had been abusive to both Plath and Wevill. In shock, Hughes could not finish the *Crow* sequence, which remained unfinished until the work *Cave Birds* was published in 1975.

## 1970–1998

In August 1970, Hughes married Carol Orchard, a nurse, and they remained together until his death. He bought the house Lumb Bank near Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, and maintained the property at Court Green. He began cultivating a small farm near Winkleigh, Devon called Moortown, a name which became embedded in the title of one of his poetry collections. He later became President of the charity Farms for City Children, established by his friend Michael Morpurgo in Iddesleigh. In October 1970, *Crow* was published.

In 1970, he and his sister, Olwyn (26 August 1928 – 3 January 2016), set up the Rainbow Press, which published sixteen titles between 1971 and 1981, comprising poems by Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, Ruth Fainlight, Thom Gunn and Seamus Heaney, printed by Daedalus Press, Rampant Lions Press and the John Roberts Press.

Hughes was appointed Poet Laureate in December 1984, following Sir John Betjeman. A collection of animal poems for children had been published by Faber earlier that year, *What is the Truth?*, illustrated by R. J. Lloyd. For that work he won the annual Guardian Children's Fiction

Prize, a once-in-a-lifetime book award. Hughes wrote many works for children and collaborated closely with Peter Brook and the National Theatre Company. He dedicated himself to the Arvon Foundation which promotes writing education and runs residential writing courses at Hughes's home at Lumb Bank, West Yorkshire. In 1993, he made a rare television appearance for Channel 4, which included him reading passages from his 1968 novel "The Iron Man". He also featured in the 1994 documentary *Seven Crows A Secret*.

In early 1994, Hughes became increasingly alarmed by the decline of fish in rivers local to his Devonshire home. This concern inspired him to become one of the original trustees of the Westcountry Rivers Trust, a charity set up to restore rivers through catchment-scale management and a close relationship with local landowners and riparian owners.

Hughes was appointed a member of the Order of Merit by Queen Elizabeth II just before he died. He continued to live at the house in Devon, until suffering a fatal myocardial infarction on 28 October 1998 while undergoing hospital treatment for colon cancer in Southwark, London. His funeral was held on 3 November 1998, at North Tawton church, and he was cremated in Exeter. Speaking at the funeral, fellow poet Seamus Heaney, said: "No death outside my immediate family has left me feeling more bereft. No death in my lifetime has hurt poets more. He was a tower of tenderness and strength, a great arch under which the least of poetry's children could enter and feel secure. His creative powers were, as Shakespeare said, still crescent. By his death, the veil of poetry is rent and the walls of learning broken."

Nicholas Hughes, the son of Hughes and Plath, died by suicide in his home in Alaska on 16 March 2009 after suffering from depression.

Carol Hughes announced in January 2013 that she would write a memoir of their marriage. The Times headlined its story "Hughes's widow breaks silence to defend his name" and observed that "for more than 40 years she has kept her silence, never once joining in the furious debate that has raged around the late Poet Laureate since the suicide of his first wife, the poet Sylvia Plath."

A memoir by Hughes's brother Gerald was published late in 2014, *Ted and I: A Brother's Memoir*, which Kirkus Reviews calls "a warm recollection of a lauded poet".

In 2017, it was revealed that letters written by Plath between 18 February 1960 and 4 February 1963 claim that Hughes beat Plath two days before she had a miscarriage in 1961, and that Hughes told Plath he wished that she was dead. The letters were sent to Dr. Ruth Barnhouse (then Dr. Ruth Beuscher).

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## 13.5 WORK

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Hughes's first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), attracted considerable critical acclaim. In 1959 he won the Galbraith prize, which brought \$5,000. His most significant work is perhaps *Crow* (1970), which whilst it has been widely praised also divided critics, combining an apocalyptic, bitter, cynical and surreal view of the universe with what sometimes appeared simple, childlike verse. *Crow* was edited several times across Hughes' career. Within its opus he created a cosmology of the totemic Crow who was simultaneously God, Nature and Hughes' alter ego. The publication of *Crow* shaped Hughes' poetic career as distinct from other forms of English Nature Poetry.

In a 1971 interview with *The London Magazine*, Hughes cited his main influences as including Blake, Donne, Hopkins and Eliot.

He mentioned also Schopenhauer, Robert Graves's book *The White Goddess* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

Hughes worked for 10 years on a prose poem, "Gaudete", which he hoped to have made into a film. It tells the story of the vicar of an English village who is carried off by elemental spirits, and replaced in the village by his enantiodromic double, a changeling, fashioned from a log, who nevertheless has the same memories as the original vicar. The double is a force of nature who organises the women of the village into a "love coven" in order that he may father a new messiah. When the male members of the community discover what is going on, they murder him. The epilogue consists of a series of lyrics spoken by the restored priest in praise of a nature goddess, inspired by Robert Graves's *White Goddess*. It

was printed in 1977. Hughes was very interested in the relationship between his poetry and the book arts, and many of his books were produced by notable presses and in collaborative editions with artists, for instance with Leonard Baskin.

In addition to his own poetry, Hughes wrote a number of translations of European plays, mainly classical ones. His *Tales from Ovid* (1997) contains a selection of free verse translations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. He also wrote both poetry and prose for children, one of his most successful books being *The Iron Man*, written to comfort his children after Sylvia Plath's suicide. It later became the basis of Pete Townshend's rock opera of the same name, and of the animated film *The Iron Giant*.

Hughes was appointed Poet Laureate in 1984 following the death of John Betjeman. It was later known that Hughes was second choice for the appointment. Philip Larkin, the preferred nominee, had declined, because of ill health and a loss of creative momentum, dying a year later. Hughes served in this position until his death in 1998. In 1992 Hughes published *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, a monumental work inspired by Graves's *The White Goddess*. The book, considered Hughes's key work of prose, had a mixed reception "divided between those who considered it an important and original appreciation of Shakespeare's complete works, whilst others dismissed it as a lengthy and idiosyncratic appreciation of Shakespeare refracted by Hughes's personal belief system". Hughes himself later suggested that the time spent writing prose was directly responsible for a decline in his health.<sup>[58]</sup> Also in 1992, Hughes published *Rain Charm for the Duchy*, collecting together for the first time his Laureate works, including poems celebrating important royal occasions. The book also contained a section of notes throwing light on the context and genesis of each poem.<sup>[59]</sup>

In 1998, his *Tales from Ovid* won the Whitbread Book Of The Year Award. In *Birthday Letters*, his last collection, Hughes broke his silence on Plath, detailing aspects of their life together and his own behaviour at the time. The book, the cover artwork for which was by their daughter Frieda, won the 1999 Whitbread Prize for poetry.

## Notes

Hughes's definitive 1,333-page *Collected Poems* (Faber & Faber) appeared (posthumously) in 2003. A poem discovered in October 2010, "Last letter", describes what happened during the three days leading up to Plath's suicide.<sup>[7]</sup> It was published in *New Statesman* on National Poetry Day, October 2010. Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy told Channel 4 News that the poem was "the darkest poem he has ever written" and said that for her it was "almost unbearable to read."

In 2011, several previously unpublished letters from Hughes to Craig Raine were published in the literary review *Areté*. They relate mainly to the process of editing Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being, and also contain a sequence of drafts of letters in which Raine attempts to explain to Hughes his disinclination to publish Hughes's poem *The Cast* in an anthology he was editing, on the grounds that it might open Hughes to further attack on the subject of Sylvia Plath. "Dear Ted, Thanks for the poem. It is very interesting and would cause a minor sensation" (4 April 1997). The poem was eventually published in *Birthday Letters* and Hughes makes a passing reference to this then unpublished collection: "I have a whole pile of pieces that are all – one way or another – little bombs for the studious and earnest to throw at me" (5 April 1997).

### Poetry collections

- 1957 *The Hawk in the Rain*
- 1960 *Lupercal*
- 1967 *Wodwo*
- 1970 *Crow: From the Life and the Songs of the Crow*
- 1972 *Selected Poems 1957–1967*
- 1975 *Cave Birds*
- 1977 *Gaudete*
- 1979 *Remains of Elmet* (with photographs by Fay Godwin)
- 1979 *Moortown*
- 1983 *River*
- 1986 *Flowers and Insects*
- 1989 *Wolfwatching*
- 1992 *Rain-charm for the Duchy*
- 1994 *New Selected Poems 1957–1994*
- 1997 *Tales from Ovid*

- 1998 Birthday Letters — winner of the 1998 Forward Poetry Prize for best collection, the 1998 T. S. Eliot Prize, and the 1999 British Book of the Year award.
- 2003 Collected Poems
- 2016 A Ted Hughes Bestiary: Poems

### Volumes of translation

- Spring Awakening by Frank Wedekind
- Blood Wedding by Federico García Lorca
- 1968 Yehuda Amichai, Selected Poems by Yehuda Amichai, Cape Goliard Press (London, England), revised edition published as Poems, Harper (New York, NY), 1969.
- 1977 Amen by Yehuda Amichai, Amen, Harper (New York, NY)
- 1989 The Desert of Love: Selected Poems, by János Pilinszky, Anvil Press Poetry (Greenwich, UK)<sup>[86]</sup>
- 1997 Tales from Ovid by Ovid Farrar, Straus, and Giroux (New York, NY)
- 1999 The Oresteia by Aeschylus, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux (New York, NY)
- 1999 Phèdre by Jean Racine, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux (New York, NY)
- 1999 Alcestis by Euripides, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux (New York, NY)

### Anthologies edited by Hughes

- Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson
- Selected Poems of Sylvia Plath
- Selected Verse of Shakespeare
- A Choice of Coleridge's Verse
- The Rattle Bag (edited with Seamus Heaney)
- The School Bag (edited with Seamus Heaney)
- By Heart: 101 Poems to Remember
- Modern Poetry in Translation

### Short story collection

- 1995 The Dreamfighter, and Other Creation Tales, Faber and Faber, London, England.
- 1995 Difficulties of a Bridegroom: Collected Short Stories, Picador, New York, NY.

### Prose

- 1967 Poetry Is, Doubleday, New York.
- 1967 Poetry in the Making: An Anthology of Poems and Programmes from "Listening and Writing, Faber and Faber, London.
- 1992, revised and corrected 1993 Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York.
- 1993 A Dancer to God Tributes to T. S. Eliot. (Ed) Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York.
- 1994 Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose, (essay collection) Edited by William Scammell, Faber and Faber (London), Picador USA (New York) 1995.

### Books for children

- 1961 Meet my Folks! (illustrated by George Adamson)
- 1963 How the Whale Became (illustrated by George Adamson)
- 1963 The Earth-Owl and Other Moon-People (illustrated by R.A. Brandt)
- 1964 Nessie the Mannerless Monster (illustrated by Gerald Rose)
- 1967 Poetry in the Making<sup>[87]</sup>
- 1968 The Iron Man (first illustrated by George Adamson and in 1985 by Andrew Davidson)
- 1970 Coming of the Kings and Other Plays
- 1976 Season Songs (illustrated by Leonard Baskin)
- 1976 Moon-Whales and Other Moon Poems (illustrated by Leonard Baskin)
- 1978 Moon-Bells and Other Poems (illustrated by Felicity Roma Bowers)
- 1981 Under the North Star (illustrated by Leonard Baskin)
- 1984 What is the Truth? (illustrated by R. J. Lloyd), for which Hughes won the Guardian Prize<sup>[46]</sup>
- 1986 Ffangs the Vampire Bat and the Kiss of Truth (illustrated by Chris Riddell)
- 1987 The Cat and the Cuckoo (illustrated by R. J. Lloyd)
- 1988 Tales of the Early World (illustrated by Andrew Davidson)
- 1993 The Iron Woman (illustrated by Andrew Davidson)
- 1993 The Mermaid's Purse (illustrated by R. J. Lloyd, Sunstone Press)
- 1995 Collected Animal Poems: Vols. 1–4, Faber & Faber

## Plays

- The House of Aries (radio play), broadcast, 1960.
- The Calm produced in Boston, MA, 1961.
- A Houseful of Women (radio play), broadcast, 1961.
- The Wound (radio play), broadcast, 1962.
- Difficulties of a Bridegroom (radio play), broadcast, 1963.
- Epithalamium produced in London, 1963.
- Dogs (radio play), broadcast, 1964.
- The House of Donkeys (radio play), broadcast, 1965.
- The Head of Gold (radio play), broadcast, 1967.
- The Coming of the Kings and Other Plays (based on juvenile work).
- The Price of a Bride (juvenile, radio play), broadcast, 1966.
- Adapted Seneca's Oedipus, produced in London, 1968).
- Orghast (with Peter Brook), produced in Persepolis, Iran, 1971.
- Eat Crow, Rainbow Press, London, England, 1971.
- The Iron Man, juvenile, televised, 1972.
- Orpheus, 1973.

## Limited editions

- The Burning of the Brothel (Turret Books, 1966)
- Recklings (Turret Books, 1967)
- Scapegoats and Rabies (Poet & Printer, 1967)
- Animal Poems (Richard Gilbertson, 1967)
- A Crow Hymn (Sceptre Press, 1970)
- The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar (Richard Gilbertson, 1970)
- Crow Wakes (Poet & Printer, 1971)
- Shakespeare's Poem (Lexham Press, 1971)
- Eat Crow (Rainbow Press, 1971)
- Prometheus on His Crag (Rainbow Press, 1973)
- Crow: From the Life and the Songs of the Crow (Illustrated by Leonard Baskin, published by Faber & Faber, 1973)
- Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter (Rainbow Press, 1974)
- Cave Birds (illustrated by Leonard Baskin, published by Scolar Press, 1975)
- Earth-Moon (illustrated by Ted Hughes, published by Rainbow Press, 1976)

## Notes

- Eclipse (Sceptre Press, 1976)
- Sunstruck (Sceptre Press, 1977)
- A Solstice (Sceptre Press, 1978)
- Orts (Rainbow Press, 1978)
- Moortown Elegies (Rainbow Press, 1978)
- The Threshold (illustrated by Ralph Steadman, published by Steam Press, 1979)
- Adam and the Sacred Nine (Rainbow Press, 1979)
- Four Tales Told by an Idiot (Sceptre Press, 1979)
- The Cat and the Cuckoo (illustrated by R.J. Lloyd, published by Sunstone Press, 1987)
- A Primer of Birds: Poems (illustrated by Leonard Baskin, published by Gehenna Press, 1989)
- Capriccio (illustrated by Leonard Baskin, published by Gehenna Press, 1990)
- The Mermaid's Purse (illustrated by R.J. Lloyd, published by Sunstone Press, 1993)
- Howls and Whispers (illustrated by Leonard Baskin, published by Gehenna Press, 1998)

Many of Ted Hughes's poems have been published as limited-edition broadsides.

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## 13.6 THEMES

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This house has been far out at sea all night,  
The woods crashing through darkness, the booming hills,  
Winds stampeding the fields under the window  
Floundering black astride and blinding wet

Till day rose; then under an orange sky  
The hills had new places, and wind wielded  
Blade-light, luminous black and emerald,  
Flexing like the lens of a mad eye.

From "Wind"

The Hawk in the Rain, 1957

Hughes's earlier poetic work is rooted in nature and, in particular, the innocent savagery of animals, an interest from an early age. He wrote frequently of the mixture of beauty and violence in the natural world. Animals serve as a metaphor for his view on life: animals live out a struggle for the survival of the fittest in the same way that humans strive for ascendancy and success. Examples can be seen in the poems "Hawk Roosting" and "Jaguar".

The West Riding dialect of Hughes's childhood remained a staple of his poetry, his lexicon lending a texture that is concrete, terse, emphatic, economical yet powerful. The manner of speech renders the hard facts of things and wards off self-indulgence.

Hughes's later work is deeply reliant upon myth and the British bardic tradition, heavily inflected with a modernist, Jungian and ecological viewpoint. He re-worked classical and archetypal myth working with a conception of the dark sub-conscious.

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## **13.7 TRANSLATION**

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In 1965, he founded with Daniel Weissbort the journal *Modern Poetry in Translation*, which involved bringing to the attention of the West the work of Czesław Miłosz, who would later go on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. Weissbort and Hughes were instrumental in bringing to the English-speaking world the work of many poets who were hardly known, from such countries as Poland and Hungary, then controlled by the Soviet Union. Hughes wrote an introduction to a translation of Vasko Popa: *Collected Poems*, in the "Persea Series of Poetry in Translation," edited by Weissbort. which was reviewed with favour by premiere literary critic John Bayley of Oxford University in *The New York Review of Books*.

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## **13.8 COMMEMORATION AND LEGACY**

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A memorial walk was inaugurated in 2005, leading from the Devon village of Belstone to Hughes's memorial stone above the River Taw, on Dartmoor, and in 2006 a Ted Hughes poetry trail was built at Stover Country Park, also in Devon.

## Notes

On 28 April 2011, a memorial plaque for Hughes was unveiled at North Tawton by his widow Carol Hughes. At Lumb Bridge near Pecket Well, Calderdale is a plaque, installed by The Elmet Trust, commemorating Hughes's poem "Six Young Men", which was inspired by an old photograph of six young men taken at that spot. The photograph, taken just before the First World War, was of six young men who were all soon to lose their lives in the war. A Ted Hughes Festival is held each year in Mytholmroyd, led by the Elmet Trust, an educational body founded to support the work and legacy of Hughes.

In 2010, it was announced that Hughes would be commemorated with a memorial in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. On 6 December 2011, a slab of Kirkstone green slate was ceremonially placed at the foot of the memorial commemorating T. S. Eliot. Poet Seamus Heaney and actress Juliet Stevenson gave readings at the ceremony, which was also attended by Hughes's widow Carol and daughter Frieda, and by the poets Simon Armitage, Blake Morrison, Andrew Motion and Michael Morpurgo. Motion paid tribute to Hughes as "one of the two great poets of the last half of the last century" (the other being Philip Larkin). Hughes's memorial stone bears lines from "That Morning", a poem recollecting the epiphany of a huge shoal of salmon flashing by as he and his son Nicholas waded a stream in Alaska: "So we found the end of our journey / So we stood alive in the river of light / Among the creatures of light, creatures of light."

In October 2015, the BBC Two major documentary Ted Hughes: Stronger Than Death examined Hughes's life and work. The programme included contributions from poets Simon Armitage and Ruth Fainlight, broadcaster Melvyn Bragg, biographers Elaine Feinstein and Jonathan Bate, activist Robin Morgan, critic Al Alvarez, publicist Jill Barber, friend Ehor Boyanowsky, patron Elizabeth Sigmund, friend Daniel Huws, Hughes's US editor Frances McCullough and younger cousin Vicky Watling. His daughter Frieda spoke for the first time about her father and mother.

In November 2018, Dr. Hannah Roche, a lecturer in English at the University of York, suggested that Hughes' poem "Pike" had an unacknowledged debt to a poem by the American poet Amy Lowell. In

her paper "Myths, Legends, and Apparitional Lesbians", published in the academic journal *Modernist Cultures*, Roche pinpointed similarities between the poems.

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## 13.9 ARCHIVE

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Hughes archival material is held by institutions such as Emory University, Atlanta and Exeter University. In 2008, the British Library acquired a large collection comprising over 220 files containing manuscripts, letters, journals, personal diaries and correspondence. The library archive is accessible through the British Library website. Inspired by Hughes's Crow the German painter Johannes Heisig created a large painting series in black and white which was presented to the public for the first time on the occasion of Berlin Museum Long Night in August 2011 at the SEZ Berlin.

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## 13.10 TED HUGHES AWARD

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In 2009, the Ted Hughes Award for new work in poetry was established with the permission of Carol Hughes. The Poetry Society notes "the award is named in honour of Ted Hughes, Poet Laureate, and one of the greatest twentieth century poets for both children and adults". Members of the Poetry Society and Poetry Book Society recommend a living UK poet who has completed the newest and most innovative work that year, "highlighting outstanding contributions made by poets to our cultural life." The £5,000 prize was previously funded from the annual honorarium that former Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy received as Laureate from The Queen.

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## 13.11 TED HUGHES SOCIETY

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The Ted Hughes Society, founded in 2010, publishes a peer-reviewed online journal, which can be downloaded by members. Its website also publishes news, and has articles on all Hughes's major works for free access. The Society staged Hughes conferences in 2010 and 2012

at Pembroke College, Cambridge, and will continue to stage conferences elsewhere.

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### 13.12 TED HUGHES PAPER TRAIL

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On 16 November 2013, Hughes's former hometown of Mexborough held a special performance trail, as part of its "Right Up Our Street" project, celebrating the writer's connection with the town. The free event included a two-hour ramble through Mexborough following the route of young Hughes's paper round. Participants visited some of the important locations which influenced the poet, with the trail beginning at Hughes's former home, which is now a furniture shop.<sup>[84]</sup>

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### 13.13 ELMET TRUST

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The Elmet Trust, founded in 2006, celebrates the life and work of Ted Hughes. The Trust looks after Hughes's birthplace in Mytholmroyd, which is available as a holiday let and writer's retreat. The Trust also runs Hughes-related events, including an annual Ted Hughes Festival.

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### 13.14 IN OTHER MEDIA

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- Hughes's 1993 River anthology was the inspiration for the 2000 River cello concerto by British composer Sally Beamish.
- Selected stories from Hughes' *How the Whale Became* and *The Dreamfighter* were adapted into a family opera by composer Julian Philips and writer Edward Kemp, entitled *How the Whale Became*. Commissioned by the Royal Opera House, the opera was premiered in December 2013.
- Hughes was portrayed by Daniel Craig in the 2003 film *Sylvia*.

#### Check your Progress -1

1. When was Ted Hughes born?
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2. When was Elmet Trust founded?

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3. What is the birthplace was Ted Hughes?

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4. What was Ted Hughes's sister's name?

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## 13.15 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we learned about Ted Hughes' life, career, works, commemoration and legacy.

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## 13.16 KEYWORDS

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- **Buoyancy:** The ability to float
- **Sophistry:** Intellectual deception
- **Copse:** A small group of treesMetaphor

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## 13.17 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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- Write a note on the life of Ted Hughes.
- Write a note on the career of Ted Hughes.
- Write a note on the work of Ted Hughes

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## 13.18 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## Notes

1. Philip Hensher reviews Collected Works of Ted Hughes, plus other reviews". Daily Telegraph. April 2004. Archived from the original on 22 February 2004.
  2. ^ Bate, Jonathan (2015). Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life. HarperCollins. ISBN 978-0-0081-182-28.
  3. ^ (5 January 2008). The 50 greatest British writers since 1945. The Times. Retrieved on 1 February 2010.(subscription required)
  4. ^ Joanny Moulin (2004). Ted Hughes: alternative horizons. p.17. Routledge, 2004
  5. ^ Kean, Danuta (11 April 2017). "Unseen Sylvia Plath letters claim domestic abuse by Ted Hughes". The Guardian. ISSN 0261-3077. Retrieved 11 February 2019.
- ^ Jump up to:<sup>a</sup> <sup>b</sup> "Exclusive: Ted Hughes's poem on the night Sylvia Plath died". Retrieved 11 April 2017.

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## 13.19 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- 1. Ted Hughes was born on 17th August, 1930.(**answer to check your progress – 1 Q1**)
- 2. The Elmet Trust was founded in 2006..(**answer to check your progress – 1 Q2**)
- 3. Ted Hughes birth place was Mytholmroyd..(**answer to check your progress – 1 Q3**)
- 4. Ted Hughes's sister's name was Olwyn Marguerite Hughes..(**answer to check your progress – 1 Q4**)

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# **UNIT 14. TED HUGHES – HAWK ROOSTING, A CHILDISH PRANK, THE THOUGHT – FOX, THE JAGUAR - 2**

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## **STRUCTURE**

14.0 Objectives

14.1 Introduction

14.2 Hawk Roosting

14.2.1 Summary

14.2.2 Analysis

14.2.3 Themes

14.2.4 Style

14.3A Childish Prank

14.4The Thought- Fox

14.4.1 Summary

14.4.2 Analysis

14.4.3 Themes

14.5 The Jaguar

14.5.1 Analysis

14.6 Let us Sum Up

14.7 Keywords

14.8 Suggested Readings and References

14.9 Questions for Review

14.10 Answers to Check your Progress

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## **14.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After the completion of this unit, you should be able to learn about:

- the summary, analysis, themes and style of Hawk Roosting by Ted Hughes;
- A Childish Prank by Ted Hughes and
- The analysis of the Jaguar by Ted Hughes.

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## 14.1 INTRODUCTION

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Hughes included this poem in his second book of poetry called *Lupercal*, which was published in 1960. Hughes was met with almost instant acclaim in 1957 after his first book of poetry, *Hawk in the Rain*, was published; it catapulted Hughes into the spotlight. Hughes was born in England in 1930; he received his formal education at Cambridge, and he even served in the Royal Air Force. Hughes married American poet Sylvia Plath in 1956. Hughes and Plath had two children, but the majority of their marriage was rocky and unstable. Plath ended her life in 1963. Hughes served as Poet Laureate from 1984 until his death of cancer in 1998. *Birthday Letters*, the last book of poetry published before his death, explored the complex relationship he shared with Plath.

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## 14.2 HAWK ROOSTING

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I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.  
Inaction, no falsifying dream  
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:  
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.  
The convenience of the high trees!  
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray  
Are of advantage to me;  
And the earth's face upward for my inspection.  
My feet are locked upon the rough bark.  
It took the whole of Creation  
To produce my foot, my each feather:  
Now I hold Creation in my foot  
Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly –  
I kill where I please because it is all mine.  
There is no sophistry in my body:  
My manners are tearing off heads –  
The allotment of death.  
For the one path of my flight is direct

Through the bones of the living.  
No arguments assert my right:  
The sun is behind me.  
Nothing has changed since I began.  
My eye has permitted no change.  
I am going to keep things like this.

### 14.2.1 Summary

#### Lines 1-4

“The wood” in line 1 refers to a forest, as in the American expression “the woods.” Seated in a treetop, the hawk is able to look down on the world like a king. Hughes establishes the hawk’s personality in the first line, though, by describing it as having its eyes closed: the hawk is impressed with neither the vastness of the world nor with itself for being above the world. This hawk has no “falsifying dreams” about anything being better or worse than it really is. In line 3, the imagery, or physical symbol of the bird being “hooked” at top and bottom not only reminds the reader of the physical appearance of the bird, but also emphasizes the sharp parts of the bird that are used for attacking and killing. In addition, the use of “feet” instead of “claws” creates a link in the reader’s mind between the hawk’s life and human existence; this sort of connection is called personification. The hawk’s claim in line 2 that it has no falsifying dreams is contradicted by its statement in line 4 that it rehearses “perfect” kills in his sleep. Critics have pointed out that, although this hawk is supposed to be an impersonal killing machine, it has too much self-consciousness for us to consider it to be motivated by instinct alone. The hawk has an opinion about what would be perfection in killing, which shows that it is not outside of the sphere of morality, despite its claim to the contrary.

#### Lines 5-8

In its tone, this stanza displays a sense of self-importance that matches the hawk’s physical position above the world. The words “convenience,” “buoyancy,” “advantage,” and “inspection” are all examples of elevated, sophisticated diction. Spoken by the hawk, these words indicate that it is a very intelligent bird. This use of language implies that the hawk is

mentally as well as physically superior. In line 8, the hawk uses the word “face” to give human qualities to the earth, and it says not only that it can see the earth’s face but that it is there “for my inspection,” as if the earth awaits the hawk’s inspection.

### Lines 9-12

“Creation,” because it is capitalized, refers not just to all that exists, but to God, since references to God or pronouns that stand for God are usually capitalized. The understanding of God here is less specific than the images usually accepted by major religions. In the third stanza, there are three mentions of the hawk’s feet. The first is a somewhat simple one, linking the hawk to its natural habitat, which is portrayed as a difficult one through the use of the word “rough.” In the second mention, the hawk asserts that it is not just part of the world, but the end of, the reason for all that exists. In line 12, the hawk takes this self-important view even further, implying that since it exists as the summation of all that is, it is superior even to God. According to such reasoning, God and other beings are not recognized as having any more will or desire than the tree’s bark has. The hawk sees others as creatures performing their specific functions, just as it performs its function when it kills. Presumably, in this worldview, the hawk’s victims understand that it has no purpose but to kill them.

### Lines 13-16

“Sophistry” is reasoning that is clever and seems to be well-founded, but in actuality is hollow and false. When the hawk says in line 15, “There is no sophistry in my body,” it is indicating that the body does not reason badly because it does not reason at all; it acts. In this way, the poem seems to express the idea that any amount of reasoning will have some falseness to it and that the only way to avoid falseness is to avoid reasoning. The author has responded to criticisms that “Hawk Roosting” seems to approve of cruelty by saying that he only wanted the hawk to show what “Nature is thinking.” If nature’s thoughts are direct and without reason (such as “I see the mouse, I kill the mouse”), then this poem could be seen as a record of responses to physical stimuli. However, the hawk has ideas about the ways of the world (“I kill where I please because it is all mine”) that seem to come from the exact sort of sophistry

that the hawk denies. Similarly, line 16 uses language that is intentionally harsh (“tearing off their heads,” rather than a more impartially descriptive phrase like “removing heads,” which would match the diction of stanza 2). The hawk appears quite conscious of the fact that its actions are vicious, and almost seems to enjoy it.

### Lines 17-20

Each stanza of this poem begins with a direct, declarative statement that is brought to a stop at the end of the first line with punctuation. Lines such as these are called “end-stopped lines.” An end-stopped line that brings the flow of the poem to a halt just as the stanza is beginning gives the speaker’s tone a cold sharpness, as if the speaker is stating conditions and making demands rather than having a conversation with the reader. In line 17 this technique is used to make the hawk’s position on killing seem absolute and undisputable. As with the earlier reference to “the whole of Creation” (line 10), this stanza makes absolute statements such as “the one path,” “direct,” “through” (as opposed to “into”), and “No arguments” to convey the hawk’s unhesitating certainty.

In line 20 the hawk says that the rights it is entitled to are not the product of any arguments, implying that it has undeniable rights and that these rights are more important than anything, including God. This echoes the claim made in lines 18 and 19. Both lines emphasize a division between rationality and nature (referred to here as Creation), implying that man, as a rational creature, is separate and distinct from the natural world and from God.

### Lines 21-24

In lines 1, 5, 9, and 21 this poem intermittently establishes a setting for the hawk who is speaking. The image in line 21 is especially notable because it does not emphasize the hawk’s viewpoint but specifically tells us about something, the sun, that is out of the range of the hawk’s vision. For the reader who is imagining a hawk on a tree branch, this detail helps to paint a picture, but given the hawk’s self-centered attitude throughout the poem, that it would mention something it does not see is unusual. To some extent, the perspective in this stanza is not just the hawk’s, but an objective point of view that is spoken through the hawk’s “I.” This is seen in the difference between lines 22 and 23: line 22 is an impartial

statement, and line 23 expresses the same basic idea, but through the hawk's all-encompassing ego. In making these two statements, one a passive observation and the other an aggressive claim, this poem draws attention to the different degrees of animal mentality that it offers. The final line is pure arrogance, extending the hawk's previous claims about being the centre of all that came before and all that currently exists to include all that will come to be.

### **14.2.2 Analysis**

The hawk serves as the speaker of this poem; his tone is confident and almost haughty at times, although his belief in his superiority appears to be more steeped in honesty than it does in false bravado. The hawk continuously uses the pronoun "I" throughout the course of the work. Another interesting fact to note about the poem is that Hughes has written it entirely in the present tense, which adds to the sense that the hawk has always been, and will always be, at the top of the food chain.

The poem consists of six stanzas, each containing four lines. There is no set rhyme scheme to the poem, and Hughes relies on free verse in order to convey his themes to his readers.

#### **Stanza 1**

In the first stanza, the hawk seems to be deep in meditation. He does not feel threatened by anything in the wild, and therefore, he can easily close his eyes and not worry about his surroundings. He is perched in a tree where he can easily look down on the forest he inhabits. Hughes uses interesting diction in this stanza in order to create imagery. He writes, "Between my hooked head and hooked feet..." which emphasizes the dangerous and sharp beak and claws of the bird. In line four, the hawk tells the reader that he is able to perform the perfect kill even in his sleep.

#### **Stanza 2**

In the second stanza, the hawk conveys to his reader how easy and convenient his life is. Everything in nature, it seems, has been made for the sake of his pleasure and ease. In line five, the hawk seems to be marvelling at how much nature has given him; he is so emphatic that he even uses an exclamation point to convey his feelings. The trees are high for him; the air is buoyant, making it easy for him to glide; the sun's ray

gives him warmth. He claims that all of these aspects of nature make his life more convenient. Hughes also creates a parallel between up and down. All is below the hawk; the earth sits below him so that he can inspect it from his perch. This dichotomy reflects the superiority of the hawk.

**Stanza 3**

In this stanza, the hawk is announcing his perfection to his reader. Again, he draws attention to his sharp claws, stabbing into the tree limb as he perches. He explains that it took Creation—probably capitalized here in order to represent God—everything He possessed in order to produce just one of the hawk's feet, and each and every feather on his body. This stanza gives an image of a higher power hard at work, slaving over how to create such a great and powerful being. Now, the hawk proclaims, he, himself, is God, more powerful than any being on both Earth and in Heaven.

**Stanza 4**

The hawk is essentially saying that he can do whatever he pleases. He can fly slowly through the air, taking in all of the sights beneath him. He can kill wherever he pleases because all of the world belongs to him. There is no need to lie or pretend otherwise because the hawk can prove his power by tearing off the heads of his victims.

The fourth stanza does not end neatly; again, Hughes carries the thoughts of the hawk into the fifth stanza.

**Stanza 5**

The hawk is so god-like in this stanza that he says he chooses who lives and dies. The one flight he makes is the one he takes to kill his prey. There are no arguments necessary because he is all-powerful.

**Stanza 6**

The sixth and final stanza closes the poem in an absolute way. The hawk claims that the world has not changed since he was created. Since then, it has been perfect and permanent. He says it has not changed because he has not allowed it to do so.

Particularly in his earlier poetry, Hughes liked to use nature to symbolize the plight of man. In this poem, one can easily compare the hawk to a human, inarguably the most powerful and resourceful being on the planet.

### 14.2.3 Themes

#### Death

The hawk is a cunning and silent death from above, a bird of prey often portrayed as the noble killer who perches on top of the food chain. The poem begins with the regal image of the hawk sitting “on top of the wood ... and the earth’s face upward for my inspection.” The theme of death in “Hawk Roosting” may be closely tied to its images of creation, as many religions also believe our lives on this earth are temporary. The hawk’s speaking tone, with its elevated diction bordering on arrogance, combined with the bird’s physical position overlooking the whole of its world, seem to place it firmly in control of life or death. Even the “Creation” which produced its claws and “each feather” now becomes its prey, gripped firmly in its talons.

While the subject of death is often weighted with grief and remorse, the hawk is emotionless in its discussion, referring to it as an “allotment,” as if it were to be rationed out. There is no room for remorse in that small skull, since the bird’s path toward survival “is direct / through the bones of the living.”

#### Violence and Cruelty

Students first encountering Ted Hughes’s work in the Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry are greeted with the following introduction: “Ted Hughes works within a subject-matter of violence, and his acknowledged talent in this area has evoked uneasy admiration.” While “Hawk Roosting” does portray images of violence, as in the line “My manners are tearing off heads,” this theme is balanced by a sort of nonchalant tone that diffuses the cruelty normally associated such a harsh act.

Some critics have called the hawk’s ability to kill without remorse and speak of her killing with such casual ease proof the bird is symbolically a fascist, citing lines like “I kill where I please because it is all mine.” Ted Hughes denies this, instead saying he intended the bird to represent

“Nature thinking. Simply Nature.” Hughes may have put himself (and the hawk) in the line of criticism by crafting the voice of the poem in first person. By making the bird the narrator, the reader feels as though he or she is listening to another person talking, and judges what is said accordingly.

Perhaps a central theme of “Hawk Roosting” is that violence and cruelty are really a matter of perspective: while to humans any harmful act upon another person is cruel, in nature there are laws of survival which can not or should not be judged in human terms.

## Natural Law

When Hughes himself defended the hawk against accusations of cruelty and of even being a fascist, he said he rather intended the bird to represent “Simply Nature.” Perhaps this means the poem’s theme shows that while a human act of violence against another human can be judged as wrong, nature has its own set of laws. Hughes has said that we are too “corrupted” by Christian morality and judgment to be able to see nature. The hawk doesn’t kill out of anger, evil or greed, but out of pure survival, a need for “perfect kills and eat.” The sense that the bird’s actions follow a “Law” which should not be questioned are reinforced by lines that repeatedly refer to “legal” phrases, such as “my inspection,” “sophistry” and “No arguments assert my right.” Instead the hawk follows a natural law that has been in place for so long it will remain long after humans have left the earth. As the poem begins with “inaction,” so it ends “nothing has changed since I began. / My eye has permitted no change. / I am going to keep things like this.”

### 14.2.4 Style

This poem has no strict pattern to its rhythm or its rhyme scheme, thus it is considered an open form poem. However, the poem does make use of structural devices and repetition in other ways to make its point.

The most obvious structural pattern in “Hawk Roosting” is that there are four lines to each stanza, or cluster of lines. The lengths of the lines within each stanza are different, so the number of words in each stanza varies. Nevertheless, there is a visual consistency as the eye skims down the page. This degree of order corresponds to the poem’s subject matter

## Notes

by giving the piece an overall design, just as the speaker of the poem implies in stanza 3 that Creation has an overall design. A poem with a more rigid structure—for example, uniform rhythm in each line, or a regular rhyme scheme—would contradict the hawk’s sense of being accountable to no one.

There are rhymes at the ends of the third and fourth lines in the first stanza and again in the first and third lines in the second. The fact that these are in the beginning of the poem, and that the poem never rhymes again, may indicate that the author intended his readers to think at first that this poem was more traditional in sentiment and structure than it really is in order to make the hawk’s coldness more shocking. Throughout the poem there are internal rhymes, or rhyming words placed near each other but not at the ends of lines, such as “flight” and “right” in stanza 5. Many of these rhymes use assonance, in which the vowel sounds of the two words are alike, even though the end sounds of the words are not. Some examples of these are “sleep” and “eat” in stanza 1; “ray” and “face” in stanza 2; “took” and “foot” in stanza 3; and “began” and “am” in stanza 6. Such repetition of sounds allows the author to give a musical quality to the poem without adopting a rigid structure.

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### 14.3 A CHILDISH PRANK

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Man’s and woman’s bodies lay without souls,  
Dully gaping, foolishly staring, inert  
On the flowers of Eden.  
God pondered.  
The problem was so great, it dragged him asleep.  
Crow laughed.  
He bit the Worm, God’s only son,  
Into two writhing halves.  
He stuffed into man the tail half  
With the wounded end hanging out.  
He stuffed the head half headfirst into woman  
And it crept in deeper and up  
To peer out through her eyes

Calling its tail-half to join up quickly, quickly  
 Because O it was painful.  
 Man awoke being dragged across the grass.  
 Woman awoke to see him coming.  
 Neither knew what had happened.  
 God went on sleeping.  
 Crow went on laughing.

The sequence of poems from which this comes constitutes Ted Hughes's most difficult work. The majority of the Crow poems were collected in the 1970 volume *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow*, although Hughes published other poems about Crow between 1967 and 1971. This was one of those latter poems.

Ted Hughes was deeply interested in shamanism, and saw the role of the poet as a shaman, using primal knowledge of the natural world to act as a healer and mediator with the spirit world. In this cycle, and through the figure of Crow, Hughes as shaman sought to explain humanity.

Crow is a trickster, a bringer of chaos, set at once against both God and his creation. He takes the role of mankind, attempting to understand and dominate all that he sees. There are poems in the cycle that deal with war, with nature, with language and, as in *A Childish Prank*, with sex.

Sex is not the creation of God, but of Crow who splits God's son, the worm, and implants half in each of man and woman. Thus the sexes are drawn inexorably together so that the worm can become whole as a new human child. Sex is a cosmic joke, inflicted on humans by the trickster Crow while God was asleep.

The poems are dark in tone and violent in language, blood flows through them as through a battlefield. Crow is God's creation, a runt - but stronger than death. He cannot be controlled, nor can he be destroyed. It is Crow who gives humanity its chaotic soul.

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## 14.4 THE THOUGHT- FOX

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I imagine this midnight moment's forest:  
 Something else is alive

## Notes

Beside the clock's loneliness  
And this blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star:  
Something more near  
though deeper within darkness  
Is entering the loneliness:

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  
Between trees, and warily a lame  
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow  
Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,  
A widening deepening greenness,  
Brilliantly, concentratedly,  
Coming about its own business

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox,  
It enters the dark hole of the head.  
The window is starless still; the clock ticks,  
The page is printed.

The Thought-Fox is an animal poem with a difference. Ted Hughes 'captured' his fox at the same time as he completed the poem. The fox manifests within the poem, the fox is the poem and both are a product of the poet's imagination.

'So you see, in some ways my fox is better than an ordinary fox. It will live for ever, it will never suffer from hunger or hounds. I have it with me

wherever I go. And I made it. And all through imagining it clearly enough and finding the living words.' Ted Hughes (Poetry in the Making)

This was no coincidence. Ted Hughes, through his lifelong interest in mythology and symbology, considered the fox his totemic animal. It would turn up in dreams at critical times in his life as a kind of spirit guide.

One such dream occurred whilst he was at Cambridge University, studying English. In a particularly busy schedule, he found himself with lots of essays to write and struggled to finish them. In a dream he was confronted by 'a figure that was at the same time a skinny man and a fox walking upright on its hind legs.'

This incinerated fox-man approached, put a bloody paw-hand on his shoulder and said, 'Stop this - you are destroying us.'

Ted Hughes accepted this as a message from his subconscious, a symbol - stop all this academic nonsense because you are destroying the creative impulse within.

The Thought-Fox could well have been created for this very reason - the poet wanted to permanently safeguard his totem by combining the two worlds in one poem, the fox slowly, carefully forming out of the poet's language.

### **14.4.1 Summary**

The speaker, sitting in his home at midnight, struggles to write a poem. He "imagines" that some idea must be brewing inside his head, even if he can't quite figure out a first line. He looks out of the window and sees no stars against the dark night sky. However, he feels that "something more near" must be lurking in the forest, waiting to enter his consciousness.

Outside the window, the speaker sees a fox emerge from the forest's clearing. The fox sniffs a branch and slowly wanders between the trees

and stumps at the forest's edge, leaving behind a series of paw prints in the snow. The fox's shadow hangs behind him, "in hollow" of its bold body, while the speaker continues to watch the fox move, contemplating his image.

Stanza 6 continues the enjambment at the end of stanza 5, when the describes the fox's shadow. Now, the speaker shifts his attention to the fox's eye, zooming in on its "widening deepening greenness." The speaker remarks that the animal is simply "Coming about its own business"; then, suddenly, the "sharp hot stink of fox" hits the "dark hole" of the speaker's head. He notices that stars have yet to appear in the sky. But, as the clock continues ticking, the speaker finally puts pen to page.

### 14.4.2 Analysis

There's a lot to unpack in these first two stanzas, so let's start with the basics: tone, mood, and setting.

We know right away that the poem is told from the perspective of a first-person speaker. We also know that he's alone, and it's midnight, and he's addressing his audience from his home, located at the edge of a forest. It's rather dark, even for midnight: the speaker can't see a single star in the sky when he looks out of the window. He wants to write something—let's say a poem—but for some reason, he's at a loss for inspiration. His fingers move over the blank page, but no words come. However, the clock isn't the only thing that keeps the speaker company on this lonely night: he feels that "something else is alive," even if he can't quite say or see what this something is.

The first line contains an important clue to understanding "The Thought-Fox." The speaker "imagines" this moment's "forest," which functions both as the poem's setting and its metaphorical and symbolic foundation. To grasp the forest's symbolic resonance, we can connect its image to the speaker's action and look for similarities between them. Because we "imagine" an idea or image with our heads, we know that the forest must also refer to the speaker's mind. Likewise, the "something else" lurking

just beyond his reach must also lurk outside within the forest. The speaker imagines the poetic significance of the forest and the fox, but he also sees them. Additionally, everything contained in the forest must also exist in the speaker's mind, which will be useful when analyzing the fox's role in the poem.

The line "Something else is alive" imbues the poem with an ambiguous, disconcerting tone. It's difficult to say whether the speaker is anxious, afraid, or eager to encounter this "something." This tone is subtly emphasized by the poem's slow, steady pace, established through the abundance of "s" sounds, long vowels, and stressed syllables, all of which continue from the first stanza into the second. Combined, these elements create a sense of dread, while also foreshadowing the fox's careful, considered movements in the forest. The speaker draws out the first two stanzas the same the way the fox will slowly, then suddenly, emerge from the forest's clearing.

Although the speaker's struggle continues in stanza 2, he feels again that "something" is approaching him through the dark night. The absence of stars signals the speaker's lack of inspiration, but his intuition that an idea may be growing closer causes him to gaze deeper into the darkness outside, into the darkness within his mind. This something is "deeper within darkness" than the absent stars because of the forest's density and his mind's depth. The speaker isn't looking to unveil inspiration, but to discover something lurking deep within him, to coax this idea into the light, to make it so present that his words pour forth upon the page.

While stanza 1 lays bare the poem's situation, stanza 2 sets the stage for this "something" to come, which turns out to be the fox sniffing around in the dark, and the poem his image inspires.

While first two stanzas served mainly to establish the poem's setting, tone, and conflict, stanzas 3 and 4 get into the poem's action—or rather, the speaker's detailed description of what he sees outside his window. The "something" the speaker anticipated in the previous stanzas turns out to be a fox lurking at the edge of the forest, sniffing a tree branch. The speaker

## Notes

pays careful attention to the fox's eyes, which "serve" the fox's careful movements between the forest's trees and stumps.

It's significant that the speaker describes the fox through a series of parts, and through a highly focused sequence of images. First, the speaker homes in on the fox's nose "delicately" touching the tree branch. Then, he concentrates on the fox's "two eyes" which "serve a moment, that now/ And again.../ Sets neat prints into the snow," which evokes an image of the fox looking down, cautiously measuring his steps. Finally, in this section, the speaker describes the fox's shadow, which "warily.../...lags" by a tree stump, "in hollow" of the fox's body. This strategy allows us to develop a complete image of the fox through the actions and specific features the speaker emphasizes.

Additionally, the speaker's piecemeal approach to describing the fox echoes the manner in which the poem comes together. The ambiguity of stanzas 1 and 2 creates an outline of the "something" the speaker anticipates, which is later filled in by images of the fox in stanzas 3 and 4. The repetition of "now" in lines 11 and 12 continues the slow, steady pace from stanzas 1 and 2, while also evoking an image of the fox cautiously moving through the snow, calculating each the step the same way a poet will try out different words in a line to see which fits best. The fox's "neat prints" are like a poet's precise language, careful and deliberate, each with its proper place and meaning. This repetition also echoes the poet's labor, the constant effort and dedication a writer must devote to his work to compose anything of substance.

An interesting parallel between stanza 1 and stanza 4 occurs in line 15. In line 4, the speaker's fingers move over the blank before him, while in line 15 the fox's eyes "serve a movement, that now/ And again.../ Sets neat prints in the snow." While the speaker goes through the motions of writing in an attempt to begin his poem, the fox carefully selects his steps. The similarities between these two actions—grasping for the right words, inspecting the snow to determine the best next move—subtly suggests a spiritual or conceptual likeness between the speaker and the fox. As the speaker watches the fox through his window, does he feel some kind of

connection to the animal, alone in the snow, as they both search for some unknown, indefinite thing?

The fox's cautious inspection of the forest's clearing continues into stanza 6, echoing the manner in which a poet explores an idea, experimenting with different combinations of sound and rhythm before settling on the final version of a line. His shadow "lags by stump and in hollow/ Of a body that is bold" to emerge from the forest's depths, as if it can't keep up with the fox's pace. This image brings to mind the speaker's current situation, sitting beside his window struggling to bring an idea to the surface of his mind. The speaker is ready, willing, and waiting to write, but the ideas brewing in his head have yet to catch up with him.

We know from the poem's first two stanzas that the fox exists both at the edges of the forest beyond the speaker's window, and within the metaphorical dark forest of his mind. However, in the poem's final stanzas, these meanings converge: the fox is both animal and idea, literal and metaphorical. The phrase "Across clearings" at the beginning of stanza 5 could signal this collision. The speaker draws out his description of the fox's eye, its "widening deepening greenness," as though prolonging the image to test a combination of words, to determine which feels best.

As the fox continues to go "about its own business," the speaker is struck with the "sudden sharp hot stink of fox," which represents a creative breakthrough. Something about the fox, or about the speaker's careful observation, triggers the words the speaker has been searching for. This "sharp hot stink" of inspiration, though anticipated by the poem's previous stanzas, jolts the speaker, compelling him to write. The language used to describe the speaker's head—a "dark hole"—makes his mind seem abyssal and threatening; however, the speaker's mind, in spite of this darkness, proves to be a fecund, generative space.

The organic nature of the speaker's work is emphasized in line 23 when the speaker notices that "the window is starless still." The inspiration for the poem he writes is not divine or lofty, but grounded in the world in

front of him and rooted in his perspective of this world. Ultimately, the fox inspires the speaker because he forces him to recognize the power of his own vision, mining the material lurking within the dark, dense forest of his mind. The clock continues to tick, but it is no longer lonely: the page, now filled with the speaker's words, is printed.

The final stanza differs also from the rest of the poem through its introduction of violence. Inspiration, represented by the fox's smell, is no gentle force. The fox's "hot stink...enters" the speaker's head like an arrow piercing a target's bullseye. The language used to describe the fox's smell—"sudden," "sharp," "hot"—juxtaposes with the animal's cold and delicate, albeit bold, demeanor. By including elements of the fox's wild nature, the speaker creates a nuanced picture of the inspiring power he signifies: inspiration, at times, can be variously affronting and all-consuming, unbiased and unaccommodating. As a result, the speaker's poetic creation arises through a kind of violence. Something has "entered" or disrupted the speaker's mind; now he is changed. This fertilizing disruption is what the speaker had been waiting for, and it is the source of the poem.

### 14.4.1. Themes

#### The Act of Writing

"The Thought-Fox" provides a metaphorical glimpse into the act of writing—or, more precisely, one poet's struggle to write. The poem explicitly mentions the loneliness writing demands, and the late nights many writers spend slaving over their work, waiting for inspiration to strike, or obsessively exploring an idea. At the same time, "The Thought-Fox" also suggests that writing is innate and organic: while a specific image or event may inspire a first line, a poem ultimately comes from the dark forest of its poet's mind.

#### Inspiration

Ironically, the fickle nature of inspiration inspires "The Thought-Fox." The speaker's feeling that "something more near" lurks beneath his

window outside, closer than the night's absent stars, suggests that inspiration need not be lofty; it can be right in front of us, waiting for us to take notice. Just before the "sudden sharp hot stink of fox" enters "the dark hole" of the speaker's head, the speaker remarks that the fox is merely "Coming about its own business." There is nothing particularly special about this fox, besides the fact that it was in the right place at the right time, and the speaker happened to pay attention to him.

### Nature

Nature plays a powerful role across Hughes' body of work, and "The Thought-Fox" is no exception. The poem takes place in a home near the edge of the forest on a dark, snowy night. This setting corresponds to the loneliness writing often involves, while the dark, dense forest represents creative potency lying dormant, waiting to be activated. The poem suggests that being a writer is like living alone in the middle of this forest, unsure of what lies beyond its clearing, but both anxious and eager to discover what lurks in its depths. Specifically, the fox bears a personal significance for Hughes.

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## 14.5 THE JAGUAR

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The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun.  
 The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut  
 Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut.  
 Fatigued with indolence, tiger and lion

Lie still as the sun. The boa-constrictor's coil  
 Is a fossil. Cage after cage seems empty, or  
 Stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw.  
 It might be painted on a nursery wall.

But who runs like the rest past these arrives  
 At a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized,  
 As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged  
 Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes

On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom—  
The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,  
By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear—  
He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him

More than to the visionary his cell:  
His stride is wildernesses of freedom:  
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.  
Over the cage floor the horizons come.

### 14.5.1 Analysis

“The Jaguar” is a tribute to the majesty of the animal. The eminence of the jaguar is contrasted against the insignificance of other animals. The apes yawn at their humdrum existence. Their only point of adoration is aimed at the fleas that surround them. The parrots have to screech to invite attention to themselves, as though one gets the impression that they are on fire. These shrieks are particularly aimed at the stroller with nuts. The tiger and lion appear lethargic and overcome with lassitude. Through the mechanical routine of the animals' life, the poet seems to make a statement on the current mechanized human condition where people relegate the true meaning of life to basic biological functions.

The Boa constrictor (Boa constrictor) is a large, heavy-bodied species of snake. Its color pattern is highly variable yet distinctive. It is one of its kind. Yet, its static nature gives the impression of it being a fossil, an archeological remnant. It appears as though it has no utility value. The animals though supposed to be a source of amusement in the zoo, fail to make their presence felt. Cage after cage appears to be empty as all the animals lie in indolence. The only evidence of their being alive seems to be the stink emanating from the cages. The picture of the animals in sluggishness appear as static as a painting on a nursery wall.

People, however, do not hold any fascination for these sorts of animals. They just rush past these animals like the rest. The cage that holds the onlookers spell-bound is the cage of the Jaguar. The jaguar holds the

crowd mesmerized as a child in a trance. The atmosphere in the cell seems to pale into darkness as compared to the fierce gleam in the jaguar's eye.

This temporary darkening of his cell is not owing to boredom on part of the onlooker. People prefer to be blinded by the splendor of this fire. The wildness in the tiger's blood is 'bang on' to the human brain. The grandiose roar falls on deaf ears. As he traverses distances within the cage, there are no bars for him, for nothing can imprison his magnificent spirit. The jaguar is beyond cages and taming. It is just as the imprisoning of a visionary cannot incarcerate his profound thoughts, or freedom of expression. His instinctive attitude and wildness of spirit is implicit in each stride of his. The world is encompassed in the stride of his paw as he enamors humanity with his innate elegance. He does not have to look outside the cage to look beyond the horizon. Rather, the cage floor traces horizons over it, owing to the immense presence of the jaguar.

### Check your Progress -1

1. Whom did Ted Hughes marry?

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2. Who wrote "Hawk Roosting"?

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3. Who wrote "A Childish Prank"?

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4. Who wrote "The Thought - Fox"?

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5. Who wrote "The

Jaguar"? 

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## 14.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we through “Hawk Roosting”, “A Childish Prank”, “The Thought- Fox” and “The Jaguar” by Ted Hughes.

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## 14.7 KEYWORDS

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- **Capitulate:**The act of giving in to an opponent
- **Materialization:** The sudden appearance of an object
- **Chloroform:**A poisonous liquid

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## 14.8 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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- Write the summary of The Thought- Fox by Ted Hughes.
- Write the analysis of The Thought- Fox by Ted Hughes
- Write the summary of Hawk Roosting by Ted Hughes.
- Write the themes of Hawk Roosting by Ted Hughes.
- Analyze Hawk Roosting by Ted Hughes.

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## 14.9 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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1. Boyanowsky, Ehor (2010). Savage Gods, Silver Ghosts In the Wild With Ted Hughes. Douglas & McIntyre Limited. p. 195. ISBN 978-1-55365-323-3.
2. ^ "Tragic poet Sylvia Plath's son kills himself". CNN. 23 March 2009. Retrieved 16 July2010.
3. ^ "My life with Ted: Hughes’s widow breaks silence to defend his name". Valentine Low. The Times. 7 January 2013. Retrieved 21 May 2015.

4. ^ "Ted and I: A Brother's Memoir by Gerald Hughes". Kirkus Reviews. 15 October 2014. Retrieved 21 May 2015.

^ Jump up to:<sup>a</sup> <sup>b</sup> "Unseen Sylvia Plath letters claim domestic abuse by Ted Hughes | Books". The Guardian. Retrieved 13 April 2017.

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## 14.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- 1. Ted Hughes married an American poet Sylvia Plath in 1956.(**answer to check your progress – 1 Q1**)
- 2. “HawkRoosting” was written by Ted Hughes.(**answer to check your progress – 1 Q2**)
- 3. “A Childish Prank”was written by Ted Hughes. (**answer to check your progress – 1 Q3**)
- 4. “The Thought - Fox”was written by Ted Hughes. (**answer to check your progress – 1 Q4**)
- 5. “The Jaguar”was written by Ted Hughes. (**answer to check your progress – 1 Q5**)