The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower Study Guide

The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower by Dylan Thomas

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Dylan Thomas made a dramatic impact on the literary world when his first collection of poetry, with the unassuming title *18 Poems,* appeared in December of 193 4, when he was only twenty years old. Although he had published a few poems in literary magazines during the previous year, Thomas was basically an unknown figure. From the beginning, he was a controversial poet. Not part of the conventional literary establishment, unconnected with any particular poetic movement, his work was difficult to categorize. Although Thomas's poems received critical acclaim for the force and vitality of their language and imagery, he was also criticized for obscurity. Because of this, he was often identified with the Surrealist movement, where images and language violated the rules of logic, frequently imitating the landscape of dreams, or even nightmares. On the surface, Thomas seems to have much in common with Surrealism; however, he vehemently denied the relationship, insisting that his poetry was carefully planned and controlled. Thomas fully intended his images to be understood. Unfortunately for the reader, the intensely personal nature of many of his metaphors makes this difficult.

The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower," one of the most popular and least obscure of the poems in the collection, illustrates both the vivid language and the complex, powerful, but often confusing imagery. While it is easy to get caught up in the rhythm and drama of the language, it is far more difficult to unravel meaning. On its most basic level, however, the poem describes the cycle of life and death, noting that creation and destruction are part of the same process, both for man and for nature. Each stanza presents the flow of time moving to its inexorable conclusion.

Author Biography

Thomas was born at home in the Uplands district of Swansea, Wales, on October 27, 1914, the second child and only son of middle-class parents. His sister Nancy was nearly nine years older than he. His father was a schoolmaster in English at the local grammar school. Though considered a cold and bitter man who resented his position as a teacher, the elder Thomas's love for literature encouraged a similar devotion in his son. Thomas feared, respected, and deeply loved his father, and in some sense his life appeared to be an attempt to realize his father's frustrated dream of being a great poet. In contrast to his father, Thomas's mother was loving, overly protective, and inclined to overindulge her son. Even at the end of his life, she found no fault in his public behavior and the drinking habits which ultimately led to his death.

Thomas enjoyed his childhood in Wales, and his work in later years would reflect a desire to recapture the relatively carefree years of his youth. A generally undistinguished student, Thomas entered theSwansea Grammar School in 1925. In 1931 he left school to work for the *South Wales Daily Post* in Swansea. He would later say that his real education came from the freedom he was given to read anything in his father's surprisingly well-stocked library of modern and nineteenth-century poetry and other works. Following his resignation from the paper early in 1933, poetry became Thomas's primary occupation. By all accounts, he was not a successful news reporter: he got facts wrong, and he failed to show up to cover events, preferring instead to loiter at the pool hall or the Kardomah Cafe. During the early 1930s Thomas began to develop the serious drinking problem that plagued him throughout the remainder of his life. He also began to develop a public persona as a jokester and storyteller. However, his notebooks reveal that many of his most highly regarded poems were either written or drafted during this period and that he had also begun to experiment with short prose pieces. In May of 1933 his poem "And Death Shall Have No Dominion" was published in the *New English Weekly,* marking the first appearance of his work in a London journal, and in December of the following year his first poetry collect ion, *18 Poems,* was issued. During this period he established a lifelong pattern of travel between London and some rural retreat, usually in Wales. As the decade progressed he gained increasing recognition for both his poetry and his prose.

In the summer of 1937 Thomas married Caitlin Macnamara, a young dancer of Irish descent whose Bohemian lifestyle and behavior rivaled Thomas's own. For the next twelve years the couple led a nomadic and financially difficult existence, staying with friends, relatives, and a series of benefactors. The stories later collected in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940) were written primarily during the couple's stay in the Welsh coastal village ofLaugharne in late 1938 and early 1939. Too frail for active military service and needing to support himself and his wife, Thomas took work writing scripts for propaganda films during World War II, at which time he also began to participate in radio dramas and readings for the BBC. His financial burdens increased during this time. In January 1939 Thomas's first child, a son named Llewelyn, was born. Daughter Aeron followed in March 1943. Thomas emerged from the war years a respected literary figure and popular performer; however, his gregarious social life and

the excessive drinking it encouraged seriously interfered with his writing. Seeking an environment more conducive to poetic production, Thomas and his family returned to Laugharne in 1949.

During the early 1950s Thomas wrote several of his most poignant poems, including "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" and " Lament." Nevertheless, fearing that his creative powers were rapidly waning and seeking to avoid the pressures of writing, he embarked on a speaking tour of the United States in the spring of 1950. During the final years of his life he traveled to the United States four times, each time engaging in parties and readings in and around New York City, followed by readings and more celebrations at numerous universities throughout the country. Thomas's personal charisma and self-described public reputation as a drunkard, a Welshman, and a lover of women seemed to serve only to enhance his standing in literary circles. His fourth and final American tour began on October 19, 1953, and ended with his death from a massive overdose of alcohol on November 9.

Poem Text

The force that through the green fuse drives the

flower

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

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

The force that drives the water through the rocks Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing

streams

Turns mine to wax.

And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

The hand that whirls the water in the pool

Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind

Hauls my shroud sail.

And I am dumb to tell the hanging man

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

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;

Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood

Shall calm her sores.

And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind

How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb

How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

Plot Summary

Line 1:

"The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" is a complicated poem. On the first reading, it may seem almost too difficult for a beginning reader to understand. However, careful analysis will make much of the imagery clearer. As a survey of critics reveals, there is no one right explanation for the more complicated ideas in the poem. Even critics interpret lines in different and often contradictory ways. Since the poem is about contrast, change, and paradox, this may prove part of the poem's meaning.

The first stanza in the poem is the easiest to understand. It is important to be aware of the pattern that Thomas develops in this stanza, in order to look for variations that appear later. The first three lines contrast the creative and destructive forces that surround man. Thomas's imagery emphasizes the explosive nature of this power. The green fuse is obviously the flower's stem, yet the word "fuse" gives the connotation of explosive growth, rather than gentle development. In this line, Thomas introduces the creative force in nature.

The rhyme scheme in this stanza is *ababa.*

Line 2:

In the first four words of this line, the power that causes growth in nature is revealed as the same force that causes the speaker to grow. Like the flower, the speaker is still in the process of growing. Green age implies youth, since the word *green* has connotations of spring and renewal. Although green is often used in poetry to convey youth, this phrase also contains a sense of opposites; *green* conveys youth, while *age* often speaks of being old. Throughout the poem, Thomas will combine many seemingly opposite words.

After the caesura□the pause or break in the rhythm at the semicolon□the destructive power is unleashed. Grammatically, the phrase refers back to the force in the first line. However, now it is a destructive power, obliterating trees by their very roots. Thomas makes it clear that the fuse which blasted the flower into existence is also the blast which destroys it.

Line 3:

Like nature, the speaker is also subject to the same fate. The change in length helps to emphasize the line's power. With three words, the speaker describes his ultimate fate.

Line 4:

The fourth line in each stanza begins with the same four words indicating that the speaker is unable to convey his insight. *Dumb* has several meanings which could be applicable. While the speaker may be unable to "tell" for physical reasons, it is more likely for emotional ones, a sense of inadequacy to express the idea.

Once again, Thomas combines words with opposite connotations. The rose is a symbol of beauty, of the growth described in the first line; using the adjective *crooked* to describe it changes our impression of the flower. Like much of Thomas's imagery, this phrase is not precise. It relies on the reader's feeling or impressions. The entire stanza leaves the reader with the impression that the crooked rose is blighted.

Line 5:

The speaker shares the same fate as the flower. The verb *bent* furthers the connection between the speaker and the rose, as the reader understands that the vigorous youth will become stooped and crooked with age, like the rose. In *wintry fever* Thomas includes still another paradox as the cold of winter is blended with a fever's heat.

Line 6:

The pattern in this stanza is the same as the first, both grammatically and in the organization of ideas. However, the focus now changes from relationship between man and the biological world to man and the geological world. The force that was introduced in the first stanza pushes the water from under the earth's surface through the rocks to give birth to the mountain stream.

Line 7:

Once again, Thomas compares the speaker to nature in the first four words; the line opens with "drives" just as line 2 did, emphasizing the similarity. Blood is pushed through man's veins just as the water coursed through the rocks. Thomas frequently uses color in his poems; the red blood in this line is a counterpart to green age in the previous stanza. The contrasting element following the caesura describes these same streams dying. The alliterative half-rhyme of *drives* and *dries* reinforces this contrast.

Thomas is noted for his ability to combine words to create arresting images, such as *mouthing streams,* which are open to a variety of interpretations. A stream's mouth is the place where it enters another body of water. Rather than being destroyed at the source like the trees in line 2, the stream dries before it reaches its destination; it is thwarted from completing its route. The word *mouth* will appear in two different contexts later in the stanza.

Line 8:

Mine in this line refers to the speaker's blood. It is turned to wax by the embalmer; it will flow no longer to sustain life but will become as solid as wax.

Line 9:

In the previous stanza, the speaker was unable to communicate with the rose. In this line, his inability to express his feelings is even more poignant, since he cannot communicate with his own body. The word *mouth* again is used, and while to "mouth" in this line literally means to speak, the phrase takes on extra significance because of the repetition and variation in the use of this word.

Line 10:

Again the speaker shares nature's fate. *Mouth* in this line takes on an almost vampirish quality, as it sucks away life, the water from the stream, the blood from the speaker's veins.

Line 11:

The first two stanzas were extremely similar. The rhyme pattern was the same. Each image in the first found a parallel in the second. The third stanza, however, varies the pattern in several ways. The rhyme scheme will shift to *ababc,* leaving the last line unconnected to this stanza and to the previous ones.

Force is replaced by *hand. Force,* as an abstract and general term, is easier to understand as a controller of human destiny than the very specific word *hand.* In the previous stanzas, the contrasts were clear. The first line in both previous stanzas described growth and creation; the images Thomas uses here are not as clear. Water may be life-giving, but as the hand whirls it in the pool, the words join to convey a sense of danger, of the whirlpool.

Line 12:

The first four words of the second line in previous stanzas connected the speaker's growth with nature's. In this line, the pronoun is left out. Instead, the hand stirs quicksand. Like the whirlpool, it is a destructive force. Both however, are limited in their ability to damage. All flowers will die; few individuals are caught in quicksand or a whirlpool. As the first half of the comparison is longer clear in its constructive nature, the destructive element is also less obvious. To rope the wind only implies control over nature.

Line 13:

Thomas includes the personal pronoun again, in the second half of the comparison. The destructive nature of the phrase is clear; the shroud means death. Indeed, the phrase conjures up visions of a type of Viking funeral as the corpse is sent to sea. Interestingly, a secondary meaning of *shroud* is a rope used to take pressure off a mast; this use ties the line to the ones before and after it.

Lines 14-15:

In each previous refrain, the speaker failed to communicate: to the rose, to his veins. Neither of those were new images; they followed from the first part of the stanza. The hanging man is introduced for the first time in this refrain. His connection with the details in the previous lines is vague, unless the image of a rope can be counted. Even the words *hanging man* are imprecise. The obvious conclusion is that he is the man who has been hung, but that is not specifically stated. He could be the hangman himself. Perhaps it even refers to both. In the previous stanzas, the speaker looked ahead to his ultimate fate. Line 15 looks back from a future when the speaker is already clay, part of the lime-filled pit where the hangman disposes of his victims. The unattached rhyme in this line looks ahead to *time* in line 16.

Line 16:

This is the most difficult of the stanzas. The punctuation is different; the semicolon isolates this line so that the first four syllables of the next line are no longer directly connected. Time is the creative and destructive force that has been operating in the previous stanzas, and now time itself becomes the focus of the poem, as time joins with the fountainhead or source. There are obvious sexual connotations in this line; the lips represent the vagina, while the fountainhead is a phallic image. The use of *leech* as a verb here connects this line to the *sucking mouth* of stanza two.

The rhyme scheme joins the first two lines, *head* and *blood;* the third and fifth lines are also connected. The fourth line refers back to line 12 in the previous stanza.

Lines 17-18:

Thomas again combines positive and negative images in these lines, which are open to varied interpretations. The fallen blood may have sexual or birth connotations; it can be connected with Christ's blood and salvation, as well, in its calming power. These lines also foreshadow the final couplet, connecting love and death.

Lines 19-20:

Thomas has moved from a single flower to the cosmos. The speaker cannot tell the wind about the nature of time or of the heavens. The image of speaking to the wind is a powerful one. Much of this stanza is more easily felt than defined.

Lines 21-22:

The final couplet restates Thomas's theme of creativity aligned with destruction. *Lover's tomb* is an almost perfect symbol for love and death. The speaker, too, shares the same fate as the lovers. The last line may be interpreted in two different ways. The sheet may be viewed as a shroud, and the worm that which feeds on the corpse. The worm may also be seen as a phallic symbol and the sheet a bed sheet. Both images are integral parts of Thomas's theme. The crooked worm also returns the poem to the first stanza and the crooked rose. The poem, itself, becomes a cycle, combining conception, birth, growth, and death, all part of the same process.

Themes

Cycle of Life

"The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" describes the cycle of birth and death. It is one of several poems by Thomas which explores this pattern; in fact, the pattern provides such a consistent theme throughout his work that some critics have categorized this group as process poems. As the poem opens, the speaker presents the creative and destructive forces in life and nature. In the first two stanzas, Thomas clearly indicates that birth and blight are simply aspects of one continuum. The opening lines of these stanzas make this evident to the reader. The same force creates the flower, the child, the mountain spring, the circulatory system. However, the force which brings life also brings death. The force which "drives the flower" is also the force which "blasts the roots," killing the tree.

This process, although in more complex form, occurs in the third stanza as well. However, the contrast between life and death imagery is less clear. The destructive elements seem more dominant. In place of the unmistakable positive images in the first stanzas, the whirling water hints at a whirlpool; it is followed by quicksand, another destructive element. Yet the poem continues to indicate that out of death comes conception. Consider the stanza's final line, "How of my clay is made the hangman's lime." Although the initial impact of the phrase may be negative, upon reflection, it demonstrates the cycle in practice. Man is born, dies, is buried and then joined with nature as dust or clay. This clay is used to create the pit where the hangman buries his corpses. The lime, a cleansing agent, soon reduces the corpse to bone, then dust or earth or clay. Eventually from that earth, "the force ... drives the flower." The poem indicates that the process does not end with death. Both the creative and destructive aspects of life are steps in a process, part of a continuous cycle. Thus, in every birth there is an element of death; every death somehow holds the intimation of rebirth.

Balance

The process described in the poem is expressed by using positive and negative imagery as counterparts. This contrast or balance becomes a secondary theme; in fact, Thomas uses this principle to structure his poem. This balance serves as an underpinning, reinforcing his main theme, the cycle of life and death. The first two stanzas begin with lines describing the polar opposites in the process. Even the lines themselves are balanced, as a semicolon provides a physical demarcation between the two aspects of the force. This balance is extended to the imagery as well. The crooked rose of the first stanza may be paired with the crooked worm in the last, neatly joining the poem's opening and closing stanzas. The fourth stanza, while complex, also contains balance in its imagery. "Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood / Shall calm her sores" is a passage that is open to several interpretations. Critics have seen both religious and sexual overtones in the language. In either case, however, the line

contains the pairing of both positive and negative forces. The use of the conjunction *but* provides a clear indication of this. Even if love should falter, it shall be redeemed. Whether the calming blood is that of the crucifixion or of menstrual blood, both suggest the image of birth or rebirth. Thomas continues this balance even in simple phrases, such as "wintry fever," "green age," and "lover's tomb." The pairing of these last two words, in many ways, effectively sums up the poem's theme of life and death.

Microcosm/Macrocosm

An additional theme in the poem involves the relationship, the interconnectedness, among all living things as the poem introduces the reader to the role of the microcosm and the macrocosm. The speaker makes clear that all living matter follows the same pattern. What is true for the flower is also true for man. The poem extends the premise of interconnectedness beyond organic matter, which is of course subject to life and death, in the second stanza. The geological world, rocks and water, is also subject to the universal pattern. Later, the poem includes the "weather's wind" and the stars. The pattern of creation which applies to the smallest cell foreshadows the fate of the universe.

These three themes work together to create a picture of a universe where all matter is linked together, intricately united and balanced. Interestingly, critics are divided on whether the poem's ultimate message is one of hope or despair. For some, the final two stanzas reveal an impenetrable barrier between the universe and its governing force. Others find that the poem itself, a balanced cycle, presents a message of hope, illustrating that life will survive.

Human Isolation

A final theme deals with one's inability to express one's feelings and thoughts. Throughout the poem, the final couplet of each stanza begins "And I am dumb." The speaker indicates that although he is aware of the process, he is unable to share that knowledge with the rest of nature. He may be part of the same cycle as the rose and stream, but he cannot speak to them. He cannot even tell his own veins, his own body, about this knowledge. Although the entire universe is part of one continuum, each individual, in many ways, remains ultimately alone.

Style

"The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" is made up of four stanzas, each with five lines, followed by an ending couplet. Its meter is often described as iambic pentameter, a line of verse featuring five segments of two syllables ("feet") where the first syllable is unstressed and the second is stressed, as in the word "above." But Thomas's poetry seldom fits neatly into conventional metric analysis. While most poems contain some irregularity in meter, Thomas's poetry uses more variation than most. Thus many critics choose to view his poetry in terms of the number of syllables in each line, rather than by metric feet. Thus "The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" may also be described as decasyllabic, having ten syllables in a line. Thomas's predominant use of one-syllable words frequently means that the stress or emphasis in a line depends on the reader's decision about which syllables should be emphasized. Notice, for example, the first four words in the second line of the poem, "Drives my green age." Read them aloud to see which ones you emphasize. The result will vary from person to person. In fact, William Lord Tindall remembers that when Thomas himself read another phrase from the poem, "And I am dumb," he stressed the words equally, giving separate emphasis to each one.

More important than meter for Thomas is the poem's pattern. "The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" is a very complicated poem, but each stanza is organized in a similar manner. When there are alterations in the pattern, it provides a guideline for the reader to look for changes in the poem's imagery and meaning as well. The first two stanzas set the basic pattern; the first three lines in each provide a contrast between a creative and a destructive force. This contrast is marked grammatically with a semicolon after the fourth syllable in the second line. The final two lines are a refrain describing the poet's inability to articulate the extent of the contrast he has just described. Similarities in the opening words of the lines in the stanzas also help to reinforce the pattern of the poem. When the structure shifts, slightly in the third stanza and more noticeably in the fourth, this indicates a shift in Thomas's thematic development.

The use of rhyme is also an important element in Thomas's poetry. In this poem, he uses end rhyme in each stanza. The first two stanzas, using half-rhyme or slant rhyme, follow an *ababa* pattern, where the first, third, and fifth lines are based on one rhyme and the second and fourth lines on another. Alliteration and assonance are also very important in the poem's rhyme. The first two lines provide numerous examples. With their initial letter / *force, fuse,* and *flower* are all alliterative, while *drives, blast,* and *trees* show assonance, or similarly located vowel patterns.

Historical Context

Just as the poetry of Dylan Thomas is difficult to characterize as springing from any particular poetic movement, it is also problematic to pin down his poetic roots, his literary heritage. Although he is Welsh, his poetry seldom reflects this, since his themes are intensely personal, having little relation to either his Welsh background or his historic period. Even in poems such as "Fern Hill," which is based on a childhood location and memory, the setting is more deeply rooted in the world of the imagination than in the countryside of Wales.

Because of this, critics are often bitterly divided about the description of Thomas as a Welsh writer. Many feel that he should not be characterized as such since he was unable to speak Welsh and stated that he had no interest at all in the language. He rejected the cause of Welsh nationalism and was reported as saying, "Land of my fathers, and my fathers can keep it." Other critics, however, believe that Thomas is the product of a long tradition of Welsh poetry. They find traces of this rich Welsh heritage in Thomas's passion, celebration of wild nature, elaborate play with meter, and highly structured poetic forms. A review of the role which language and literature have played and continue to play in Welsh history may help illuminate both sides of this argument.

Wales, like most of western Europe, was overrun by successive waves of invaders who eventually settled the land. Gradually, however, the people of Wales began to forge a national identity. By the sixth century, the Welsh language had evolved. A century later, the people of the land□who were called "Welsh" or "foreigners" by the inhabitants of Britain□described themselves as Cymry, or compatriots. During the seventh and eighth centuries, four main kingdoms were established: Gwynedd, Powys, Deheubarth, and Morgannwg. By the ninth century the country had a national name and identity, Cymru.

During the period while these kingdoms were being forged, poetry played an important role in the forming of a national consciousness. Two famous sixth-century poets celebrated the valiant struggles of Welsh heroes. Taliesin created odes praising the passion of the leader Urien. Anerin also wrote of the valorous exploits of Welsh warriors. They are often considered the fathers of the intricate rhyme and rhythm schemes which characterize modern Welsh poetry. The Welsh literary heritage is one of the oldest and most consistent in the world.

During the next few centuries, the bardic tradition played an increasingly important role in the development of the society. Bards were poets trained in metrics and the conventions of poetry, such as alliteration and complex internal rhyme; frequently the role of bard was a family tradition, passed down through successive generations. The role of these poets was highly honored, since bards served to heighten national pride and unity. In addition, many households kept their own bard to record the family's private triumphs and celebrations.

The period of the Norman invasion of Wales during the eleventh and twelfth centuries became the heroic age of Welsh poetry. Court poets played an official role in

government, and verse assumed an integral role in the royal court. It celebrated the feats of national heroes such as Owain Gwynedd, who resisted the Normans in North Wales. His son, Hywel ab Owain, further strengthened the importance of the role of the bard, since he was respected not only as a prince and warrior but also as a poet.

This esteem for poetry was strong throughout Wales. In the southern section of the country, Lord Rhys, who was the last of the kings of Deheubarth, exchanged his royal title to take over for the English monarch, becoming Henry IFs Justice of South Wales. Like other Welsh people, he placed a great value on poetry. Therefore, in 1176, he declared the first eisteddfod, a contest to acknowledge the nation's best poet and best musician. This accolade became one of the country's highest honors.

The next few centuries saw the decline of the power of the bardic tradition. The gentry no longer supported poets, and the role of the bard diminished in importance. Nominal English control during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries allowed Welsh to remain the dominant language and culture. However, when Henry VIII passed the Act of Union in 1536 declaring Wales "for ever ... annexed" to Britain, Welsh ceased to be the official language of the country. Although Elizabeth I declared an eisteddfod to be held at Caerwys to bolster the strong Welsh poetic tradition, this had little effect on the gradual encroachment of the English language and culture in Welsh society.

By the eighteenth century, the industrialization which flourished in many portions of South Wales helped to create a kind of cultural divide, since the language of business was English. This was countered by a movement to honor the language, art, and culture of Wales. The Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, founded in 1751, dedicated itself to this purpose. Unfortunately, the Welsh language found itself increasingly under attack. Another blow came in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when English was ordained as the official language taught in schools.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many Welsh parents were convinced that English was the language of success and prevented their children from speaking Welsh. This was true for Thomas. Although both of his parents spoke Welsh, his father discouraged him from learning the language. At the same time, however, a strong nationalist movement began to form. By 1934, when Thomas wrote this poem, there was a renewed interest in reaffirming the strong traditions of the Welsh language and poetry.

Critical Overview

Critics interpret "The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" in a number of different ways. For M. L. Rosenthal, it is basically a tragic poem. In *The Modem Poets: A Critical Introduction,* he analyzes Thomas's style, asserting that the power of his poetry, particularly in his early work such as this poem, lies not in his themes but in the grandeur and power of his language. Like many critics, he finds the poem's ideas about the cycle of birth, growth, and death in man and nature the least compelling aspect of the poem. Rosenthal traces the comparison between man and nature and man and sub-organic nature through the first three stanzas. The fourth stanza reveals the tragic premise he finds in the poem. Although it reveals a passionate desire for a union, or communion, between all living things and the force which governs them, this is not possible. "The poem ends in despair, with a bizarre and deliberately ugly phallic image that, in degrading the symbolism of the fourth stanza, doubly underlines the anguish out of which it has arisen."

In *Entrances to Dylan Thomas's Poetry,* Ralph Maud sees "The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" as an expression of the unity of life. He classifies it as one of Thomas's process poems, using the balance of symbols such as the crooked rose and the crooked worm to support the poem's antithetical organization. The shift in positive and destructive imagery in stanza three, instead of being "subversive," develops the point that the life and death forces are the same. For Maud, the poem shows that positives flow from negatives. The lime pit where the dead are placed has a cleansing function. *Leech* is an archaic term for a doctor, and a loss of blood may be beneficial. For him, the central focus is "the idea of the unity of contrary forces."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Kushner, the poetry editor for Neworld Renaissance Magazine, *earned an M.A. in creative writing fromBoston University. In the following essay, Kushner describes how "The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" "can be read as an ode to life or a meditation on death. "*

A legend. That's what Dylan Thomas remains for the thousands of people who heard him read during several U.S. lecture tours in the 1950s. Thomas's trance-inducing, powerful voice, which rolled rs and trilled *Is,* has been described by dozens of enthralled American writers and also chronicled by all kinds of ordinary folks who felt personally touched by a genius. In those electrifying readings, Thomas reportedly began by reading poems by greats like William Butler Yeats and T.S. Eliot and then moved on to his own work.

But the hypnotizing "genius effect" of Thomas the man had an equally well-chronicled downside. His trouble with alcohol and his often embarrassing tendency to pursue very young women has also been detailed by a variety of literary types. All this background information, however, pales next to the poems themselves. What matters is the words in front of us, the work the man left before he died at age thirty-nine in an emergency room in New York City, a casualty of alcoholism.

"The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives The Flower" is one of Thomas's most famous poems, and it is propelled by his trademark lush, gorgeous sound. The ear is king for Thomas, and the immediate first impression this poem gives is a rush of consonants, kneaded into a relatively strict yet graceful form that Thomas created for the occasion.

Thomas's early critics often berated his work as difficult and obscure. Here, it's possible to read the entire poem several times through, utterly in love with the sound of it, without understanding a word. This confusion requires a global look at the poem's structure, followed by slow first impressions and a grasp toward meaning. While Thomas may not be easy, he is certainly comprehensible.

First, a look at overall form. Thomas veered between strict and lovely villanelles like "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" and rifts into free verse. Here, he falls somewhere in between with a form that has a little flexibility. The first four stanzas each have five lines. Each of the first four stanzas has a second line which is split by a semicolon or comma, followed by a much shorter third line. The last stanza is a couplet, for a total of twenty-two lines.

Right from the title, which doubles as the first line, there is a palpable power here, an obvious comfort with the big subjects□another Thomas hallmark. Birth, death, and sex are his themes, and he frequently refers to all three in a single poem. Above all, poetry itself is his terrain, and the beauty of letters, consonants, vowels, and the life they depict is his great obsession.

Thus the title and the first line are about power—both poetic power and the power of the world's beauty. *Force, fuse, drives,* and *blasts* are all cyclical, whooshing words. *Age,* also appearing in the first stanza, establishes that this is a big poem, one that aims for the fences. Against this huge, complex backdrop of a sweeping look at the entire world is the rather small "I," who is "dumb to mouth"—a speechless speaker.

But also from the start there is a definite density to the poem, along with that sense of known destiny. The words are piled on thickly, as are their connotations. Thomas is a poet of double meanings, and this poem is a classic example:

The force that through the green fuse drives the

flower

Drives my green age; That blasts the roots of trees Is my destroyer.

The force that brings life to the flower and to the trees is the same force that "destroys"—or brings death. This idea repeats throughout the poem, as each stanza presents a variation on the theme of a huge force that both gives life and removes it. Despite all of the power of the poet to notice something as magnificent as "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower," or "the force that drives the water through the rocks," or "the hand that whirls the water," he still feels inadequate. He still feels "dumb to mouth" or "dumb to tell."

While this feeling of inadequacy is clearly expressed, readers cannot help but notice the tour-deforce of sound, which indicates that the poet was anything but inadequate at his work. Thomas, however, operated by different standards. In an interesting piece written decades after Thomas's death, well-known poet Donald Hall told of talking to Thomas and praising his work. Thomas was not pleased with Hall's praise and answered that only three of his poems were good. As Hall explained, Thomas compared himself to greats such as Yeats and Hardy, so in his mind, he was always coming up short. And so the only two-line stanza here again emphasizes that "I am dumb"—that huge helplessness and inadequacy of the poet against the great world.

As is typical in a Thomas poem, a few words repeat throughout, giving the poem both structure and rhythm—and making it easy to memorize. *Force, drives,* and *dumb* show up again and again, as do related words that share a consonant with them, such as *dries* next to *drives.*

Many words are related to death, though death itself is never named. *My green age, destroyer,* and *youth* are mentioned right in the first stanza. In the third stanza, *shroud, hangman,* and *quicksand* are introduced. By the fourth stanza, *time* and *heaven* come in, and in the penultimate two-line stanza, *tomb, sheet,* and the *same crooked worm* have made their way in.

It is possible to read the poem as a meditation on death, but it is also possible to read the same poem as an ode to the glory of life. British literary editor Anthony Thwaite wrote that Thomas believed that beings begin to die the moment they are born and that

all of his poems express this idea. Thus Thomas's interest in death is the same as his interest in birth□all life leads toward that final ending.

Thomas, however, is not just a poet of thick sounds, with like letters piled one on top of the other. He is also a poet of layers, of thick meanings. Half an hour spent with a dictionary reveals an interesting undercurrent to the poem. Many of the words here have secondary nautical meanings.

Fuse, shroud, and *lime* are all words related to the sea.

In fact, water itself is a major force in the poem, beginning in the second stanza.

The force that drives the water through the rocks Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing

streams

Turns mine to wax.

And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

By stanza three the water imagery has reached full force:

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

By the fourth stanza, "love drips and gathers." This view of water as life-giver and life-taker is related to the cyclical view of both life and water expressed in Ecclesiastes and quoted in the epigraph to Ernest Hemingway's 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises,* published a few years before "The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower":

All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place whence the rivers came, thither they return again.

Much of Thomas's poetry sounds prophetic, with a span and largeness that, to a certain extent, draws on the Bible□the original bastion of double meanings that have occupied scholars for centuries. Practically every word here can be read in at least two ways. In this poem which can be read as an ode to life or a meditation on death, a key example of how one word packs two divergent possibilities is *leech.* A leech, according to the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary,* can be either a rapacious, exploitative, blood-sucking person or animal□or it can be a physician or a healer. Like water, or the mysterious "force" blasting through the poem, nearly every word carries the possibility of connoting either death or life. And in another twist, *leech* also has a nautical meaning□the vertical edge of a square sail.

All of these meanings seem to prove the early critics wrong. If Thomas's poetry seems difficult, it is not because of a lack of meaning but rather because of an abundance of meaning. In creating layers of possibility within a brief twenty-two-line poem, Thomas has□despite all the self-deprecating remarks about being "dumb to tell" and even "dumb to mouth"□succeeded in his mission of capturing life in words. The memorable, water-like rush of sound creates a "force" that beautifully mimics the brute power and frequently baffling tendencies of the natural phenomena the poem describes. In its thick twists and turns that somehow plough forward, Thomas's artful explosion of sound mirrors life itself.

Source: Aviya Kushner, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Bruce Meyer is the director of the creative writing program at the University ofToronto. He has taught at several Canadian universities and is the author of three collections of poetry. In the following essay, Meyer explains how Thomas "attempts to capture a portrait, in miniature, of the scope of life itself."

There is an overwhelming sense of the emphatic that pervades Dylan Thomas's poetry. There is a feeling of passionate insistence that results from his use of an elliptical syntax, where nouns and their accompanying adjectives work against the preconceived notions of phraseology not only to express but to plead for their subject matter. He rarely addresses his subject matter frontally; instead he talks around his issues and concerns by inverting the expected relationships between nouns and adjectives and by describing the energy and the processes behind an idea rather than just the elements that comprise the action. This approach to poetry refocuses the reader's attention away from the "things" of a poem's content and onto the actions, processes and verbs to the point where it can be said that Dylan Thomas is a poet who is fascinated by the inner workings, the deep energies and the intense modus operandi that lie behind both human and natural events.

"The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" is a good example of Thomas's poetry of process. What emerges from the poem is not simply an examination of the botanical life force that makes a flower bloom, but the connectedness of that same life-energy between all living things. The poem starts with an inquiry into what "drives the flower"□life itself□and ends with an understanding that the same active presence in the world inhabits "the same crooked worm" that eats his shroud in death. What is evident throughout the rhetorical movement of the poem is not just the connectedness of things but the strange, paradoxical mystery behind the blurred relationship between life and death. Between the alpha and omega of this poem, Thomas attempts to capture a portrait, in miniature, of the scope of life itself. This is a tall order for such a short poem. Indeed, it is a tour de force of sorts, where the reader is asked to make large leaps of logic between a very disparate set of images within the poem's system; yet what must be recognized is that Thomas's poem is not operating by linear logic per se but by a system of imaginative "leaps" and gaps (created through his metaphors and his unique syntax).

To understand how the poem works rhetorically and how it operates as a piece that plays upon the paradox between what we know and what we do not understand, we have to go all the way back to the way texts were read in the Middle Ages. In medieval times, especially in the context of Romance literature, the reader was expected to approach the text on four levels. The first level, the literal reading, simply asked the question "what is happening?" The literal reading was meant to establish narrative, events, and settings. The second level, the symbolic reading, asked the reader to examine the images and perceive the range of possibilities and specific associations that certain objects or situations represented. The third level, the allegorical reading, demanded that the reader examine the dynamics of a situation and find parallels in

other stories where the moral attributes from, say, a biblical story could be applied to the specific situation in the text. The first three levels of reading were intended to help the reader understand the logical and moral meaning of the text. But a final demand was usually placed upon the reader, a demand that required the reader's mind to leap beyond logic and make emotional, spiritual and even mystical connections to sizable abstract concepts such as truth, God, faith, and love. This fourth level was called the anagogic reading. It was meant to take the reader beyond the text and into a deep sense of comprehension, where the reading took on profound resonances. Dante constructed his *Divine Comedy* to be read in this fashion, as did the authors of such medieval Romances as *The Quest of the Holy Grail.* It was the approach that was used to interpret passages from the Bible and formed the basis of Scholastic theological arguments and critiques.

Thomas's poem asks the reader to make a whole series of anagogic leaps. In the first stanza, the persona says that "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower / Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees / Is my destroyer." In other words, he is paraphrasing T. S. Eliot's epigram to "East Coker" (a quote Eliot stole from Mary Queen of Scots' last words), "In my beginning is my end; in my end is my beginning." Thomas, in a very poetic if not roundabout manner, is attempting to show that the energy that animates nature is both the cause and the effect of things, that it propels both the beginning of life and the end of life. He asks the reader to make this connection, to see the beginning as the end and the end as the beginning, but as is often the impact of the anagogic moment, he confesses that "I am dumb to tell the crooked rose / My youth is bent by the same wintry fever." In other words, he can no more explain his perception of the way the universe operates to that most "eternal" of images, the rose, than he can explain that same understanding to himself. And in his universe, where explanations fail and so much has to go unsaid, the rose is not the "sacred, most inviolate rose" of Yeats's poetry, or even the beautiful love-object rose of Romance (as is the case in Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *Romance of the Rose)* but a "crooked rose" that is bent and shaped by the same forces that act upon the persona.

He searches for an exemplum of the way the world operates and finds yet another useful parallel, an allegory, in "The force that drives the water through the rocks / Drives my red blood." His circulatory system is based upon the same tidal forces that make the oceans rise and fall with an almost uncanny predictability. What Thomas is again emphasizing is the cyclical manner in which a human being is caught up in the processes of nature an idea not unlike another rendering of the same notion in his poem "Fern Hill."

In each of the stanzas he repeats the phrase "I am dumb." The process of explaining the relationship between mankind and nature is not something that can be explained. It is not a matter of science and rational discussion, and it is a question that exceeds the capabilities of poetic utterance. The mystery stems from the insistence that life leads to death and that everything, all human experience and all of nature, from the small life of a plant to the movement of the constellations in "heaven," is caught up in this unspeakable mystery. Yet the reader is left with the impression that, having witnessed

this encapsulation of the machinations of totality, there is some sort of wisdom that can be drawn from it all. What Thomas is attempting to describe, on a very simple level, is life, the time-limited animating principle that governs all things. On a symbolic level, nature itself, in all its splendor and symbolic possibilities is really a series of perceptual reverberations□-just as the stanzas of the poem are a series of reverberations□what the complex system of the cosmos is being driven by□ a kind of mystical and elusive energy. On an allegorical level, the reader is meant to come away from the poem with the same sense of acceptance of the way things are that is offered by Ecclesi-astes□a simple acceptance that to buy into life is also to buy out of it when things have run their course and that everything is all part of some wonderful divine operating system. But on the anagogic level, when the persona is struck "dumb" by it all, there is still an incredibly moving sense of wonder at the complexity of the universe and the subtle sense of empathy not only between the persona and his cosmos but between the reader and all of nature.

Thomas's sense of the emphatic is achieved not only through these repetitions of stanzas or through his rather unique phraseology or even through his rather cheeky attempts to encapsulate the meaning of life in a single poem, but through his linguistic desire to echo the "forces" of nature through the forcefulness of his argumentation and through the concreteness of his language and images. If he loses the reader in the final stanza, where he declares, "The lips of time leech to the fountain head; / Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood / Shall claim her sores," he can be forgiven. He has already warned the reader that he is struck dumb by his comprehension of things, and by this point in the poem we are far beyond the point where the statements can be read logically. Like the persona, we are moved with a wonder we cannot fully explain.

Source: Bruce Meyer, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

Alice Van Wart teaches literature and writing in the Department of Continuing Education at the University ofToronto. She has published two books of poetry and has written articles on modern and contemporary literature. In the following essay, Van Wart offers a biographical perspective on "The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower."

Poet Dylan Thomas was a legend in his lifetime, a legend that grew from both his success as a writer and from a certain notoriety. Though thought by some to be a genius and by others a charlatan, he was neither. Despite criticisms of obscurity and ambiguity, Thomas's literary abilities have never been in doubt. As a writer of poetry, drama, stories, and reminiscences, Thomas was one of the most popular poets of his day. Known for his extravagant rhetorical style, he was a lyrical writer who thought in unusual images. His work offered to many readers a welcome contrast to what was perceived as the stark desolation of much early modern poetry, such as T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland* and the early cantos of Ezra Pound, for example. In the early 1930s Thomas moved to London, where he lived a flamboyant life and where his work, helped along by his work in the mass medium of radio, gained wide public recognition. Despite the success of his work and a loving relationship with his wife, Caitlin, Thomas lived a turbulent life. He died an ignominious death from alcoholism, under sordid circumstances, at the young age of thirty-nine while working in New York.

Thomas was born in Swansea, Wales, to country people in 1914, the first year of the Great War. He grew up in an atmosphere of war, mass unemployment, amid industrial ugliness and social protest and lived through two world wars. It was an age when much of the poetry being written was poetry of social protest. There are few social references in Thomas's work, however, but this does not mean he had no social awareness; in fact, he was very much aware of the social realities of his time, but he was not politically minded, like his contemporaries W. H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, and Stephen Spender. Thomas celebrated life in his writing, inspired not by the world of politics or social unrest, but by the natural world itself. Though he was not a nature poet per se, his imagination was rooted in the countryside of Wales. In much the same way that James Joyce's writing is rooted in Dublin and William Faulkner's in Mississippi, Thomas's work was rooted in his recollections of the people, the places, and the language of south Wales and particularly of his happy early childhood there.

As Thomas matured, so did his awareness of his own human nature and his ability to present the human nature of other people in his work. At the core of his writing is his attempt to evoke the phys-icality of life. As a poet, Thomas had considerable technical skill and command of structure, but what finally makes his work powerful is the kinetic power of his language, his use of imagery, and his ability to evoke the sensations of experience□its very smells, sights, and sounds.

Thomas's themes were the universal ones of love, birth, death, and the mutability of physical existence. In a well-known early poem, "If I Were Tickled by the Rub of Love,"

the poet asks in the last stanza, "And what's the rub?" After supplying three possible answers he concludes: "I would be tickled by the rub that is: / Man be my metaphor." In the Note prefixed to his Collected Poems (1952), Thomas also writes, "These poems with all their crudities, doubts and confusion, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God, and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't." Both remarks are telling; man as representative of the human condition is the final subject of all his writing.

For Thomas the human condition was a struggle from darkness to some form of light. The spiritual was not separate from the physical but contained in it. Though his poetry is not overtly spiritual, there is a pantheistic sense of the divine in the natural world. This sense is evident in "The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower," collected in his second volume of poetry, *Twenty-five Poems* (1936).

Thomas shows considerable technical skill in this poem to show the integral connection between the creative and the destructive forces in life. The poem turns on a single idea established in the first stanza and reiterated through each succeeding stanza. Composed of four five-line stanzas and two concluding lines, the poem conforms to a regular metrical and syntactical pattern, appropriate to conveying the single idea contained within the poem.

"The force" in the first line is "the green fuse" that "drives the flower." The action of the verb *drive* evokes the power behind "the green fuse." The image of "the green fuse" suggests an electrical current; it is what produces the green chlorophyll of the plant, which will result in a flower. In this case the force is the energy from the sun, a power of irradiating energy that animates and brings the flower to life.

The enjambment between the first and second line connects the force that drives the flower to the force that "drives my green age." The repetition of the color green in "green fuse" and "green age" provides a correspondence between the two images. The energy of the green fuse is also the one behind the "green age." Green in this context, however, means unseasoned or unripe and points to the unformed youth of the poet. A semicolon completes the first syntactical unit connecting the two parts of the second line so that the force that "drives my green age" also "blasts the roots of trees" and "is my destroyer." The semicolon provides a stronger break than a comma, but it also connects the two images to the third line. The force associated with the green fuse and green age is the same one that "blasts the roots of trees."

The verb *blasts,* however, not only suggests the constructive force that drives the flower and the tree, but also a violent force with the potential to destroy. Another enjambment between the second and third lines connects "the force that blasts the roots of trees" to the short next line, "Is my destroyer." The dramatic shift from constructive to destructive force is emphasized by the metrical shift from the iambic pentameter of the first two lines to the iambic dimeter of the third. The effect creates a structural tension in the stanza that corresponds to and emphasizes the thematic tension.

The fourth line begins with the coordinating conjunction *and,* which connects the line syntactically to the preceding ones and to the final two lines of the stanza: "And I am

dumb to tell the crooked rose / My youth is bent by the same wintry fever." The lines turn on the word *dumb,* suggesting the poet's inability to express what seems a paradox, to comprehend what is a fundamental fact of life□ the force that gives also takes away. More fittingly, the flower is truly dumb in its cycle of flowering and death. The poet is aware that the force that makes the rose grow crooked will also end it in a "wintry fever." The oxymoron compresses the symbolic meaning of winter as death and the fever of the cycle that pushes the flower to its inevitable conclusion. The poet intuits that his "green age" is subject to the same "wintry fever," that it will bend his body too as he grows old.

The following three stanzas employ the same structural and metrical form to reiterate this dichotomy. In the second stanza, the force "that drives the water through the rocks" also "drives my red blood." The strength of the force, expressed through the repetition of the verb *drives,* is suggested in the image of water breaking through the rocks. Again, however, the same force that drives the water through the rocks also "dries the mouthing streams" and turns the healthy red blood of the poet "to wax." As in the first stanza, the third line creates contrast and tension between the healthy red blood of a living being and wax, a lifeless, insoluble substance suggestive of death.

The beginning of the fourth line repeats the phrase "And I am dumb," changing "to tell" in the first stanza to "to mouth unto my veins / How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks." In the third line the image of "the mouthing streams" suggests a gushing spring in a mountain. Water is traditionally a symbol of the life-force. In the final line "the same mouth sucks" refers back to "the mouthing streams," but is also the force that sucks it dry. "I am dumb to mouth," on the other hand, simply means as it did in the first stanza the inability to speak, but again the poet comprehends "how at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks." The red blood that flows through the poet's veins giving him life will, like the water from the mountain spring, eventually dry up.

In the third stanza "the force" becomes "the hand that whirls the water in the pool." The force that makes the water whirl is not a hand but some physical power, the same one that "stirs the quicksand" or gives it its dangerous sucking property, the same force "that ropes the blowing wind." The image of quicksand again suggests a destructive force, one that "hauls my shroud sail." The isolated image of the shroud□a cloth wrapped around a body before it is buried□being blown by the wind is parallel to the destructive powers in the third lines of the previous two stanzas and is equated with death.

The final two lines□"And I am dumb to tell the hanging man / How of my clay is made the hangman's lime"□also work in a manner similar to those of the preceding stanzas. Yet there is a more concrete acknowledgment of the connection between the constructive and destructive natures of the force. The hanging man□literally, the man who hangs others□is a symbol of death. The body of the person hanged is placed in the "clay," which is associated with earth covering the dead. The breakdown of the body in the earth, however, enriches the soil and helps plants grow.

In the third stanza the cycle from birth to death has come full circle from the "green age" through the "wintry fever" and the "shroud" to "lime." The force here is regenerative, and

the polarities of life and death are integrally connected: in life there is death, and death brings new life. In the final stanza the poet makes this paradox even more explicit. The force is referred to as "the lips of time." The image recalls the imagery of the second stanza. Like the mouth that sucks the mountain stream dry, the lips of time "leech to the fountain head." The fountain head, often equated with the source of inner life and spiritual energy, is where "love drips and gathers."

The image of the fountain head is also sexual, the source from which life pours forth. In this respect it echoes the image of "the mouthing streams," now associated with fertility and fecundity. The sensuous image of love dripping and gathering suggests the act of coitus and the spilling of semen, while "the fallen blood" suggests both the hymen breaking and the menstrual cycle, and "the fallen blood / Shall calm her sores" implies the bringing forth of new life through the sexual act. The final two lines of the stanza suggest a connection between the sexual and the cosmic, if not the spiritual. The lips of time that suck like a leech at the substance of life are ceaseless like the "weather's wind." The expansive image of time ticking "a heaven around the stars" suggests a never-ending process, since heaven and its stars are thought to be infinite.

The concluding lines of the poem connect the image of ceaseless time ticking a heaven around the stars back to the sexual act of love and to the regenerative process suggested in the third stanza. The lines begin by repeating the first six words of the last two lines of the fourth stanza: "And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb / How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm." "The lover's tomb" is where the lovers will finally lie together after the "wintry fever." In this context, "fever" suggests the end of physical passion. The "crooked worm" echoes the image of "the crooked rose" and recalls the leech of time at the fountain head. The "crooked worm" now goes "at my sheet," with the implication being that, even though the sexual act may bring forth new life, the end of life is contained in conception, just as the death of a plant is contained within its seed. The "crooked worm" is both the phallus that contains the seed of life and the worm that eats away at it. As such it is the double image of regeneration and degeneration.

In his poem Thomas not only uses structural and metrical parallelism to convey his idea, but he also exploits the resources of figurative language to create a powerful incantatory effect. He uses repetition and alternates alliteration ("the force that drive my green fuse drives") with assonance ("And I am dumb") to heighten his diction; he uses strong active verbs such as *drives, blasts, whirls,* and *leech* to create a powerful dramatic effect; and he uses startling images such as *green fuse, green age, mouthing streams, shroud sail, weather's wind,* and *lover's tomb* and the oxymorons of *wintry fever* and *lover's tomb* as well as a pun in *the hangman's lime* to enhance and reinforce the contradictory nature behind "the force" that is, in fact, one and the same thing.

Source: Alice Van Wart, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Adaptations

The Caedmon Collection of English Poetry, released in 1996, includes several poems by Dylan Thomas.

In 1995, Harper Collins Audio released a cassette version of *Under Milk Wood* with Dylan Thomas reading one of the roles.

In 1988, Vestron Video released a dramatization of Thomas's childhood memoir, *A Child's Christmas in Wales.*

An audiocassette, *Dylan Thomas Reads "A Child's Christmas in Wales" and "Fern Hill, "* which also contains other poems, was released by Caedmon in 1992.

CBS/Fox released a 1971 film version of *Under Milk Wood,* which is based on a Dylan Thomas radio play about a Welsh fishing village.

Topics for Further Study

The Eisteddfod, a competition among poets, has been a Welsh tradition for over eight hundred years. Find out how it is celebrated in Wales today. Note: the most effective way to research this is by using the Internet.

Sometimes it is "dumb" to tell. In either a story or an essay, describe an incident where someone spoke hastily and wished they had remained silent. You may choose to describe the reverse, a situation where someone remained quiet and later regretted it.

The poem mentions a lover's tomb. Both literature and history are filled with famous lovers who died tragically: Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra, Bonnie and Clyde. Select a pair of fictional, historical, or modern-day lovers and retell their story in a poem, song, or narrative.

Compare and Contrast

1934: The Dionne quintuplets were born. 1997: The McCaughey septuplets were born.

1998: Nkem Chukwu gave birth to octuplets; the smallest one, weighing only 10.3 ounces, died of heart failure one week after birth. This renewed the debate about the medical ethics of the prescribing of fertility drugs.

1934: The Hayes Office was established by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors to create a code for behavior in the movies. Female breasts and "unconventional" kissing were banned from the screen.

1969: Jack Valenti developed the current rating system for movies.

1999: The movie rating system came under attack for allowing too much violence in movies after the shooting atColumbine High School. President Clinton challenged the industry to improve and enforce their system.

What Do I Read Next?

A Reference Companion to Dylan Thomas, by James A. Davies, is an extremely helpful resource which includes a biography, discussion of each book, analysis of Thomas's techniques, and discussion of the critical reaction to his work. It was published by Greenwood Press in 1998.

Thomas is frequently mentioned in *Anglo-Welsh Literature: An Illustrated History,* by Roland Mathias, a 1986 publication of Poetry Wales Press that presents an overview of Welsh writers who wrote in English.

Although David Holbrook, the author *of Llar eg-gub Revisited,* a 1962 publication by Cedric Chivies Press, noted in later editions of this work that his criticism of Thomas was too hostile, his negative comments on "The Force" remain interesting.

In 1962, Noonday Press published William York Tindall's *Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas,* which provides one of the best overall introductions to Thomas's work. It is an invaluable resource for readers seeking insight into Thomas and his poetry.

Constantine FitzGibbon's 1965 biography, *The Life of Dylan Thomas,* provides a compassionate portrait of Thomas's life and reveals much about the sources and complexity of his poetry.

The Land Remembers: A View of Wales, by Gywn Williams, provides a clear history of the complex background of Welsh culture and society. This is a 1977 book from Faber & Faber.

In his 1960 work, *A Casebook on Dylan Thomas,* John Malcolm Brinnan has collected essays in which some of the most prominent writers and critics of the twentieth century discuss Thomas's poetry.

Further Study

Ackerman, John, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work,* New

York: Oxford University Press, 1964.

The book discusses Welsh and Anglo-Welsh literature along with Thomas's role in both traditions.

Davies, Aneirin Talfan, *Dylan: Druid of the Broken Body,*

Swansea: Christopher Davies, 1977.

Davies analyzes Thomas's poetic craftsmanship as well as discussing major influences on his poetry.

Dodd, A. H., *A Short History of Wales,* London: B. T. Bats-ford Ltd., 1981.

This concise history explains the development of Welsh culture and national pride throughout the centuries.

Kershner, R. B., *Dylan Thomas: The Poet and His Critics.*

Chicago: American Library Association, 1976.

Kershner focuses on the critical response to the major issues dealing with Thomas's life and poetry. The extensive list of references following each chapter provides a helpful resource for students.

Maud, Ralph, *Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry.* Pittsburgh: University ofPittsburgh Press, 1963.

In this excellent introductory source which analyzes each poem, Maud evaluates the poem's themes, structure, and unity.

Peach, Linden, *Ancestral Lines: Culture and Identity in the Work of Six Contemporary Poets,* Bridgend, Mid Glamorgan, Wales: Seren Books, 1993.

Peach provides an interesting analysis of the influence of politics, history, myth, and culture on several poets, including Dylan Thomas.

Tedlock, E. W., *Dylan Thomas: The Legend and the Poet,*

Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1960.

This collection of biographical and critical essays attempts to summarize the most important aspects of Thomas's life and poetry.

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Maud, Ralph, in his *Entrances to Dylan Thomas's Poetry,* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963, 175 p.

Rosenthal, M. L., "Exquisite Chaos: Thomas and the Others," in his *The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction,* Oxford University Press, 1960, pp. 203-72.

Thomas, Dylan, *Collected Poems,* London: Dent, 1952, p. 163.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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