



NOTES FOR TEACHERS – FERN HILL

- The poem 'Fern Hill' offers a challenging read for KS3 pupils. For younger pupils or those with lower reading ability, the focus of the unit should be on grasping the essence of the poem and focusing attention on the opening 2/3 verses in order to gain a sense of mood and atmosphere as well as the overall themes. For older pupils, the poem offers the opportunity to work with the text in groups to gain experience of responding to a complex text, where the readers are required to discuss possible meanings and tease out their interpretation.
- It is important that pupils are encouraged to be exploratory in their approach and to understand that the aim is to respond to Dylan Thomas's techniques for creating powerful aural effects, to form an impression of his images and work towards an understanding of themes such as the passage of Time. A complete detailed understanding of each line is not necessarily the best way to appreciate the poem.
- Pupils should be given the chance to read aloud, to 'feel' the sense of the poem as they speak it.
- Fern Hill is the name of a farm in Llangain near Carmarthen where Dylan Thomas went to stay with his aunt, Ann Jones, as a boy.
- He associated the place with happy memories of freedom and childhood innocence, and with feeling a sense of immortality that comes with being young.
- It is one of the most famous of his poems, which captures an almost mystical tone, through use of imagery, repetition and building up the structure through repeated use of 'and'.
- It is a poem which conveys the sense of joy at being young, and at identifying with the time of Creation itself.
- He uses the natural world as a source of imagery to convey a sense of the 'golden' time of childhood, and his love for this corner of west Wales.
- The poem is an excellent example of Dylan's techniques of using sounds to create a powerful effect – assonance and alliteration, rhymes (repeated and internal), repeated rhythms and the harmony of sounds and stresses, inverted word order.



- Over 200 manuscripts versions of this poem exist. Every time Dylan Thomas went back to make a change to it he would copy it out from the beginning again. This was his way of 'keeping the poem together,' so that it grew and refined itself gradually, gathering new sounds and patterns.
- The six verses follow a very similar pattern of syllables.
- Note the use of colour- green and golden – suggesting youthful innocence, even naivety, and richness and preciousness.

VERSE 1

- This sets the scene for Ann Jones's farm and how he felt joyous as a young boy – his life there was 'easy'. Swinging from the apple boughs, the house seemed to be 'lilting', adding a visual sense of movement to enhance the sense of rhythm.
- The verse conveys beauty – green grass, starry night, rivers of windfall light.
- He felt immortal, as Time was allowing him to climb 'golden' – caught in a shining, blessed time.
- He felt like a 'prince' or a lord, seemingly able to see the trees and flowers and crops flowing together through the light of the end of summer (windfall).
- 'Once below a time' – he uses a familiar narrative phrase and changes it to make it seem as if all this happened a very, very long time ago, almost before time.

VERSE 2

- This follows a very similar pattern to the first verse in terms of repeated phrases and line structures.
- Again he is the centre of his world – 'famous among barns'.
- We get a sense of the farm buildings, rooting the poem in the everyday quality of his life there.
- By saying that the sun is 'young once only' he seems to be saying that the brilliance of childhood is something that vanishes with time. However, during these precious years, Time seems to stand still and allow him to feel as if nothing will change.



- He lived in his imagination, taking on different roles - 'hunter and herdsman'.
- The naming of animals places him directly in the middle of this rural world.
- 'The sabbath rang slowly' seems to suggest the slow passage of time out in the world of nature. Or it might suggest that the sound of the streams seemed like a holy sound to him – the natural world takes on this kind of dimension in his mind.
- Note the alliteration and balancing of lines – green and golden/herdsman and hunter/ clear and cold

VERSE 3

- 'All the sun long' is like saying all the day long, but it is a more specific visual image, and contributes to the sense of illumination running through the poem.
- The piling of images conveys a sense of joy and exuberance, and the repetition of 'lovely' increases this effect.
- 'The tunes from the chimneys' seems to suggest that a pattern of smoke looks like lines of song; it could perhaps refer to the sound of wind blowing over the chimney stacks.
- Dylan Thomas lists words, allowing them to rest and beat against each other, linked by 'and' to pile up a sensory quality – air and playing, lovely and watery, and fire green as grass. And nightly under the sleeping stars".
- The sound of the owls hints at other noises, and the end of the verse focuses on the sounds of the night. This adds a mysterious sense.
- Repetition of the first line in 'All the moon long' creates a sense of a day and night cycle in this verse.

VERSE 4

- This verse starts another day and the mood changes somewhat.
- The farm is personified as a wanderer, as if Dylan Thomas is seeing it for the first time. 'The cock on his shoulder' presents us with another early morning image on the farm – the natural world is awakening.



- By calling the awakening of the farm 'Adam and maiden', it conveys a sense of Fern Hill as a paradise.
- Dylan Thomas suggests a new day forming – the sun grew round that very day – and feels a connection with the dawning of the created world – 'the birth of the simple light/ In the first, spinning place.'
- He sustains this lexical thread of religion by saying how the horses came out of their stables and went to 'On to the fields of praise.'

VERSE 5

- He continues with a description of his happiness, and feeling honoured to be alive among the creatures of the natural world.
- There is a sense of newness – 'new made clouds', the sun born over and over – as if every day is a new beginning in childhood.
- He continues to see himself as carefree – 'heedless', 'and nothing I cared.'
- He says how it did not matter to him then that this time of blissful childhood is such a short time in life, and that the 'green and golden' children follow time 'out of grace' – they grow old, and all this changes.
- This verse changes the mood from the joy of the opening 3 verses, to the appreciation of the dawning of new days, to an awareness of time passing.

VERSE 6

- He opens with the repetition of the idea of not caring – 'Nothing I cared in the lamb white days' – the days are pure and innocent in childhood.
- He doesn't care that Time will take him out of the light. Words such as 'shadow' and 'moon' suggest a sense of moving away from illumination.
- However, in this verse he conveys how he knows that Time will one day take him by the hand, and that one day he will awake to a time beyond childhood – 'forever fled from the childless land'.
- The poem finishes with very famous lines – the repetition of the words from the first verse of the poem creates a chain effect.



- The word chain in the last line connects with this.
- He knows that in Fern Hill as a child he was both 'green' – i.e. youthful and seemingly immortal in his own eyes and 'dying' – he was as much a hostage to Time as anyone or anything. Even as he was young, he was dying.
- However the last line sounds very positive, being a juxtaposition of contrasting words – 'sang' conveys joy, while 'in my chains' suggests imprisonment. It is like the sea (often a source of images linked to both life and death in Dylan Thomas's work) which is both free and never changing, and at the same time confined within the passage of time.