



## THE POWER OF THE WORD

Listen to Hannah Ellis, Dylan Thomas's grand-daughter, talking about his love of words and writing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qQksawXK5I>

What I love about Dylan Thomas's work, the secret piece of fun in his work, really, is that he plays with words; he experiments with them. He doesn't see them as one word meaning one thing. So, he swaps words around, he finds ways that they rhyme; he uses alliteration to have a lovely sort of bounce to his words. He had a book as well, he called it his 'Doomsday Book', and it was his book where he would just have one word and find as many different ways to rhyme those words, have different ways to turn them backwards or make words out of one word, and I just think: we can have so much fun with language – it's not stilted, it's not boring, and he knew that....

He must have been writing all the time, all the time. He had little cigarette packets and he used to write notes on the back of them for ideas, everywhere he went. It was like words were his food, that's the way I think of it, and his inspiration was all around him. If he saw the sea, it gave him an idea for a description, if he saw someone behaving in a certain way, he'd be noting it down – everything. If somebody told him an episode that had happened a few weeks earlier in the bar, he would be writing it down – everything was fuel for his writing.

Read the famous opening to his play for voices, ***Under Milk Wood***. Which words or phrases strike you as being playful and made up? Can you find words that rhyme, or examples of alliteration?

To begin at the beginning:

It is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobble streets silent and the hunched, courtiers' and rabbit's wood limping invisible down to the sloeback, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea. The houses are blind as moles (though moles see fine to-night in the velvet, snouting dingles) or blind as Captain Cat there in the muffled middle by the pump and town clock, the shop in mourning, the Welfare Hall in widows' weeds. And all the people of the lulled and dumbfound town are sleeping now.



Hush, the babies are sleeping, the farmers, the fishers, the tradesmen and pensioners, cobbler, school-teacher, postman and publican, the undertaker and the fancy woman,

drunkard, dressmaker, preacher, policeman, the webfoot cocklewomen and the tidy wives. Young girls lie bedded soft or glide in their dreams, with rings and trousseaux, bridesmaided by glow-worms down the aisles of the organplaying wood. The boys are dreaming wicked or of the bucking ranches of the night and the jollyrodgered sea. And the anthracite statues of the horses sleep in the field, and the cows in the byres, and the dogs in the wetnosed yards; and the cats nap in the slant corners or lope sly, streaking and needling, on the one cloud of the roofs.

You can hear the dew falling, and the hushed town breathing. Only your eyes are unclosed to see the black and folded town fast, and slow, asleep. And you alone can hear the invisible starfall, the darkest-before-dawn minutely dewgrazed stir of the black, dab-filled sea where the *Arethusa*, the *Curlew* and the *Skylark*, *Zanzibar*, *Rhiannon*, the *Rover*, the *Cormorant* and the *Star of Wales* tilt and ride.

Listen. It is night moving in the street, the processional salt slow musical wind in Coronation Street and Cockle Row, it is grass growing on Llareggub Hill, dewfall, starfall, the sleep of birds in Milk Wood.

Dylan Thomas created compound nouns frequently to create sound effects and vivid images. Compound nouns are words made up of two or more words put together to create a sound effect or vivid image.

Sometimes they would be based on sound:

Sky-scraping, grave-grabbing, whale-weed, hairy-heeled, sea-sucked, tomorrow-treading, tide-traced.

Sometimes they would be theme based, such as these sea words:

Water-clocks, tide-hoisted, seawhirl, tide-tongued, sea-ghost, seawax, water-lammed, ringed-sea, sea-hatched.



Or these, number words:

Four-fruited, twin-boxed, half-blind, two-a-vein, one-marrowed.

TASK: How many compound words can you find in the extract? Create your own compound words based on the following themes:

Creatures – animals or birds; sun or moon; colours; time.

## THE POWER OF RHETORICAL STYLE

Dylan Thomas himself said:

I should say I wanted to write poetry in the beginning because I had fallen in love with words...what the words stood for, symbolised, or meant, was of very secondary importance; what mattered was the sound of them...

Listen to any YouTube recording of Dylan Thomas reading his poetry. Do you find that you respond to it when you listen to it, even though the meaning might not be entirely clear? Does it matter that you do not understand every line in poetry?

Dylan Thomas also wrote stories. This extract is from **The Peaches**.

Dylan's 20 year old cousin, Gwilym, is studying to be a minister, and here he is trying out his preaching style on the young Dylan in a make-believe chapel in an old barn on the farm. Dylan Thomas makes use of what he knows about the rhetorical style of delivering a sermon, and exaggerates it to create humour.

Read it aloud, as if you were a minister getting into the 'hwy!' of delivering a passionate sermon. How does Dylan Thomas use the power of Biblical rhetoric to create effect in this extract?

You may find Adrian Metcalfe's rendition of a section of the extract an inspiration, or you may wish to look at it after you have presented your interpretation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79UnSHgUuN0>

'O God, Thou art everywhere all the time, in the dew of the morning, in the frost of the evening, in the field and the town, in the preacher and the sinner, in the sparrow and the big buzzard. Thou canst see everything, right down deep in our hearts; Thou canst see us when everything is gone; Thou canst see us when there aren't any stars, in the gravy blackness, in the deep, deep, deep, deep pit; Thou canst see and spy and watch us all the time, in the little black corners, in the cowboys' prairies, under the blankets when we're snoring fast, in the terrible shadows; pitch black, pitch black; Thou canst see everything we do, in the night and day, in the day and night, everything, everything; Thou canst see all the time. O God, mun, you're like a bloody cat.'