



A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London

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Background of poem

This poem was written and first published in 1945 in *The New Republic* and a year later in 1946 in Dylan Thomas's collection of poems, *Deaths and Entrances*. It is a response to the death of a child who was a victim of air raids during the Second World War in London, where Dylan Thomas spent extended periods of time.

The child is not named but is obviously a girl ('The mankind of her going' / 'London's daughter' / 'the dark veins of her mother...'). London had suffered greatly due to Nazi air raids (the Blitz in 1940-41 and then V-1 flying bombs and V-2 rockets in 1944-45), with tens of thousands of people having lost their lives during the course of the war. Although many of the city's children had been evacuated to safer areas, this child had unfortunately remained in the city.

Background of recording

Dylan Thomas was well known for his public readings of his poems, stories and scripts, especially in America. Between December 1945 and May 1949, for instance, Dylan either wrote, narrated or took part in over a hundred BBC radio programmes. He also recorded many of his poems for radio, including this recording from 1949. As a child, both his parents had read aloud to him. There is a trace of a Welsh accent and lilt, but Thomas had been given elocution lessons so that he didn't sound like someone who hailed from Swansea. One can sense from the reading that Dylan Thomas revelled in language.



Title of poem

The title is long, and paradoxically, although Thomas states that he refuses to mourn, the poem is in fact an expression of mourning for the dead child. The death of a child is more poignant and tragic than any other death as it is an unfulfilled life;

therefore by refusing to mourn the death of a child, Dylan Thomas is in fact remembering all who have died, especially those who lost their lives as innocent victims of war.

Stanza 1

First sentence

The first sentence encompasses three stanzas/thirteen lines (from the beginning to the end of the first line of stanza 3). It is complex, with three dependent clauses. The main clause is: 'Never ... shall I let pray...'. Between 'Never ...' and '... shall I let pray...' come the conditions which must be fulfilled before DT will allow himself to mourn. These conditions in fact refer to the end of the world; therefore the poet is saying that he will not mourn until the end of the world comes.

The first sentence, which the reader needs to read to the very end before its main meaning can be grasped, creates a great sense of drama. The poet himself is the main character with many first-person references. Indeed, the poet was criticised for being much too self-centred and conspicuous in the poem as a whole and for placing his own response to the child's death foremost, rather than the child who has died or the sadness her family may feel.

Never

The poem begins with an emphatic 'Never', which is then qualified by 'until' which follows it.

until the ... darkness

The noun 'darkness' is modified by many unpunctuated compound adjectives:

'mankind making'

Darkness is involved in the making of mankind, i.e. the creation of mankind.

'Bird beast and flower fathering'

Again, darkness 'fathers' or creates all natural life – bird, beasts (animals) and flowers.



all humbling

Darkness (or death) comes to everyone and is the ultimate 'leveller'. It makes us all humble in the end, whatever our situation during our lives.

Therefore, darkness for Thomas is a symbol of life and death. It creates life (or life came from darkness) but darkness is also what is left when life comes to an end. It is therefore a part of the cycle of life and death which is examined in this poem.

the darkness tells with silence the last light breaking tells with silence

Here, darkness, which is inanimate, is personified – it tells, but paradoxically does so with silence. Death is often personified in the Christian tradition.

the last light breaking

This suggests the last dawn breaking on earth, i.e. the final day. There is a Biblical reference here to the stars falling in the book of Revelation which signify the end of the world.

and the still hour is come of the sea tumbling in harness

The sea, which has been 'tumbling in harness', suggesting a horse-like movement, possibly referring to waves as sea horses, will become still when the end of the world comes.

Stanza 2

And I must enter again the round/Zion of the water bead ...

I must enter again - This is the first reference to the poet himself. **Again** and **round** suggest that the poet has already entered here before, that this is a part of a cycle.

The **water bead** may suggest the source of life and that the poet will have to be reabsorbed into nature, (i.e. die), so that the cycle of life again may begin again. The adjective **round** also reaffirms this reading.

Some critics have suggested that it may be the water of baptism.

Zion – One of the two hills in ancient Jerusalem where the Temple of Jerusalem was built. Mount Zion is where the God of Israel dwells. (It also came to signify the Jewish homeland – Zionism was the movement to establish a Jewish state in Palestine).



And the synagogue of the ear of corn

The **synagogue** is a place of worship for Jews and where they come together for discussion and study. It was created when the Jews were in exile in place of the Temple of Jerusalem (above)

ear of corn – the Hebrew word for ‘ear of corn’ (*shibboleth*) was used as a test of nationality for its difficult pronunciation. It could be used here as a symbol of fertility and rebirth (and therefore link up with **the round Zion of the water bead** above.

Therefore, the poet will not mourn the child’s death until the world comes to an end and he has died and become a part of the never-ending cycle of life and death.

Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound

let pray – reminds us of ‘let us pray’, used in Christian services.

shadow of a sound – a slight sound.

Or sow my salt seed

Shed a tear, cry. Salt can make land infertile, so this may suggest that crying, a stage of mourning, is futile and unproductive as death is a part of the cycle of life and death in the natural world.

In the least valley of sackcloth

Sackcloth garments were worn by Jews when they were in mourning.

Valley of sackcloth alludes to the ‘valley of the shadow of death’ (Psalm 23).

Stanza 3

The majesty and burning of the child’s death.

The child is mentioned for the first time.

The poet views the child’s death as majestic (magnificent, stately and grand). It is bright (**burning** here is also an allusion to the means by which the child died).

For the poet, the child is not just another war casualty and he elevates her death, giving it special importance (some critics have used the word ‘sacred’). Therefore, mourning the child’s death would render it banal and trivial. The poet refuses to mourn using traditional means until the end of the world and he himself has become a part of the natural world’s cycle of life and death.



Understanding Poetry (1976) – Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren – prose paraphrase of the opening sentence:

“Never until the darkness that begets and humbles all tells me that hour of my own death will I utter any prayer or weep any tear to mourn the majesty of this child’s death”.

I shall not murder

Allusion to the Ten Commandments in the Bible (Exodus 20) (Thou shall not...) and the fact that the child was murdered by fire caused by the enemy in the Second World War.

The mankind of her going

The word ‘mankind’ is repeated here (cf. **the mankind making... darkness**)

The child has followed the same path as all mankind, i.e. to death, therefore the child represents all the dead.

with a grave truth

The poet does not wish to mourn the girl by uttering a serious funeral speech about her. Also, **grave** refers to the child’s ultimate lying-place.

Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath

blaspheme – to speak irreverently about God or sacred things (O.E.D.) This suggests that mourning the child by traditional means would be tantamount to blasphemy.

stations of the breath – allusion to ‘stations of the Cross’, the images depicting the stages of Jesus’ suffering or passion. They may also refer to the stages of mourning which the poet is unwilling to follow.

elegy – a poem of serious reflection, typically a lament for the dead. (O.E.D.)

Stanza 4

Deep with the first dead lies London’s daughter

The girl is from London, which is personified here as her mother. She lies buried with those who have died before her – either the other Londoners who died as a result of the war or even, as some critics have suggested, the ‘first dead’ in the Bible – Cain, Adam and Eve.

Robed in the long friends



Robed - the dead child is wearing a robe in the coffin but she is also robed in 'long friends'.

The **long friends** may be the worms who will form a part of the decomposition process. Or they may be those people who have died before her, she is now surrounded by them so that they seem like a robe around her.

The grains beyond age

Again, a reference to the dead who have turned to grains of dust.

the dark veins of her mother

This may mean the dark veins or soil strata of 'mother earth' or London, as the girl has been referred to as 'London's daughter' earlier in the stanza.

unmourning water / Of the riding Thames.

The Thames (the river flowing through London) is personified here. Like the poet, it does not mourn but seems to ride its own waves (cf. **the sea tumbling in harness**).

After the first death, there is no other.

This final short sentence seems to convey that the girl becomes a part of the cycle of life and death after she dies, so that her body, in death, is already being transformed into new life.

It could also mean much simply that it is the first death which we experience during our lives which creates the greatest impact, and that after it, we are not affected in the same way.