



## I have longed to move away – General teachers' notes

- This poem comes from the volume of Dylan Thomas's poetry entitled *25 Poems* (1936)
- It is a book which continues in the vein of self-questioning which was evident in his first volume, *18 Poems*
- The poems in it deal with themes such as death, looking inwards, sex, the isolated individual.
- There is a generally deeper religious attitude to experience than in his first book, and he continues to turn to Biblical imagery and ideas.
- **A general presentation on Dylan Thomas's life is available in the resource material for Hunchback in the Park**, to provide the students with an overall context of his life.
- Dylan grew up very influenced by his father's love of literature and reading. As a Senior English Master, he was able to share a wide range of material with his son, who loved English above else in school.
- He had little time for any other academic pursuit, but was committed to words and writing.
- His father regularly read Shakespeare and other literature to him as a young boy, and so Dylan was exposed to intricate and rhythmic use of language from early on. These patterns and structures of lines and verses, syntax and stylistic devices, influenced his own way of writing.
- Dylan wrote poems which could often seem to be obscure. These invite the reader to allow themselves to be immersed in the poem, and listen to what the experience of hearing reveals. Much of Dylan Thomas's poetry is for reading aloud, and this allows the complex and unique interconnectedness of his lexical and syntactical choices to become meaningful.
- Dylan Thomas was raised in a house which was full of opposing tensions, and his poetry reflects often contradictory positions.



- His parents could speak Welsh, his father gave private Welsh lessons, yet Dylan did not grow up speaking the language and was dismissive of it – and yet, the rhythms and sounds of the language surrounded him and imbued his poetry.
- His father, D.J.Thomas, was a self-avowed atheist; Florence, his mother, was a devout church goer. So, Dylan Thomas was brought up caught between both these influences. He was taken by his mother to the Walter Road Congregational Church in Swansea. The influence of Bible readings and hymns heard there can be heard in his poetry.
- Wales and Welsh people were at the heart of much of Dylan Thomas's writing, and yet he could often seem as if he was dismissive of his home country and culture, finding it stifling.

## LOOKING AT THE POEM

### FIRST VERSE

- The entire verse is one sentence, divided by a semi colon.
- These two halves start with the repeated phrase of the title, giving his wish a sense of urgency.
- Here the poet is expressing a heartfelt wish – 'longed'.
- He wants to move away from the 'hissing of the spent lie' – note the harsh alliterative sound of the 's' and the monosyllabic 'spent lie' which adds rhythmic weight at the end of the line.
- 'Hissing' is an onomatopoeic word, with connotations of snakes, and therefore fear or something disturbing or bad.
- The monosyllabic lie/cry rhyme adds emphasises a sense of pain or despair.
- The line runs on, building up its effect. This is enhanced by the use of polysyllabic words – continual, terrible – creating a sense of building up to a crescendo, which then tumbles off into the monosyllabic 'the deep sea' at the end.



- The terrors associated with the lie build up over time even into old age – this is conveyed through the metaphor of the day moving towards its sunset beyond the sea. Dylan Thomas often used the sea as a metaphor for death. There is no escape from the lie.
- The second half of the sentence insists on the same wish.
- The sound of 'repetition of salutes' with its consonant sounds and clipped stresses sounds unforgiving. The word 'repetition' conjures up a sense of routine, of expected conventions, and 'salutes' seems mechanical – the anticipated responses of people or society in some way.
- This contrasts with the softer effect of the assonance in the final three lines. The 'o' and 'a' sounds suit the impression given by the poet that he is troubled by things which perhaps haunt him more, which matter more to him, or which remind him of truer responses.
- At the end of the first verse we feel that the poet is desperate, disturbed by a lie which he feels has run its course - it is 'spent'. It has nothing to offer, but like a snake, it has connotations of evil. The first half conveys how terrifying he finds his situation. The second half of the poem seems to be sadder, even slightly fearful; it conveys how the poet is tired of convention and is moved by other, faint thoughts.



## SECOND VERSE

- The title phrase is repeated for the third time, this time followed by a pivotal word – 'but'. So we realise that the poet is perhaps paralysed by his fear, and cannot act on his desire to distance himself from the lie.
- This verse is more fragmented in terms of punctuation. Lines 2-4 describe his fear, and the broken up nature of the lines reflects the content – the potential for explosion, the onomatopoeic sound made by the word 'crackling'. It has a disturbed energy.
- Words echo the previous stanza – spent/unspent; hissing/crackling.
- The poet is fearful in case there might be some life left in the lie which could still come back to damage him, rendering him incapable of ever seeing clearly again.
- Lines 5-8 have an inverted word order. By starting with the more negative 'Neither' it adds a feeling of determination to his statement. He is not prepared to die trapped by the conventions of the lie which he so fears.
- The night's ancient fear is that he will not wake. The parting of hat from hair is the polite customs of society – respectful, dutiful observation of customary behaviour when someone dies, perhaps, such as the formal shaking of hands after church or chapel. Pursued lips at the receiver is a way of describing the polite, restrained way in which people receive the news of death, as if no emotion can be expressed.
- The poet does not wish to die in this way and according to these conventions – the narrow, rigid observations of grief.
- Death's feather is a delicate way of conveying mortality. A feather is light, and perhaps this is how he feels death comes, a light touch. The rhyming words add an unexpected gentleness at the end of an emotional outpouring.
- The final couplet sums up the poet's thoughts. What he wants to avoid at all costs is being trapped between the mechanical conventions of society and the lie that sustains them.
- Finally, we can look at the poem and hear its frustration in the repetition of the title line – and yet, it is not a declaration of intention, because of the three words 'but am afraid'. We sense that the poet is trapped in a state of indecision – longing to have the courage to be truer to himself and to reject what he feels to be wrong and corrosive in his life, yet not being quite able to turn move away.