



## POEM ANALYSIS

# “Fern Hill” by Dylan Thomas

Essay by Thomas J. Steele

**Author:** Dylan Thomas

**Born:** October 27, 1914; Swansea, Wales

**Died:** November 9, 1953; New York, New York

**Country:** United Kingdom; United States

**Culture:** British; American

### ABSTRACT

The speaking voice belongs to a male adult recalling his childhood and its inevitable end. “Fern Hill” re-creates and communicates the experience of a child who (for the first part of the poem) has not yet grown into historical awareness and who consequently lives in an eternal present in the Garden of Eden. The garden might have been lost in reality for the poem’s speaker, but in the act of speaking and reading “Fern Hill,” both the speaker and reader are essentially able to re-create that lost world and relive it until the poem’s end.

### KEYWORDS

- Animals
- Children
- Farms, Farmers, or Farming
- Naïveté
- Nature
- Rural or Country life
- Sea or Seafaring life
- Time
- Trees

### TYPE OF POEM

Lyric; Meditation

### APPEARS IN

*Deaths and Entrances* by Dylan Thomas

*Collected Poems, 1934-1953* by Dylan Thomas

The speaking voice belongs to a male adult recalling his childhood and its inevitable end. “Fern Hill” re-creates and communicates the experience of a child who (for the first part of the poem) has not yet grown into historical awareness and who consequently lives in an eternal present in the Garden of Eden (“it was Adam and maiden” and “the sun grew round that very day,” lines 30 and 32).

The boy’s life is composed of repetitions of the cycles of nature, so to him there seems to be no passage of time; from his adult vantage point, however, he realizes that time was toying with him (“time let me,” he says in lines 4 and 13) until, inevitably, it exiled him from the privileged land of childhood.

In a casual, conversational tone, the poem begins by introducing the innocent boy in the context of a “middle landscape” composed of nature, the cultivation of domesticated plants and animals, and the art of song (the “lilting house”) in a small Welsh valley with wooded sides (a “dingle”). Because he still lives in the innocent world of the fairy tale (“once below a time”), he has the power of a lord to command the trees and leaves, to have them do his will. This time of life, as the poet idealizes it, is a windfall—an undeserved and unexpected boon, like a ripe apple that has blown off a tree on a stranger’s property and that the hungry passerby has a right to take and eat.

The second stanza reinforces the picture of the first with different images. The boy lives in happy unison

with the domesticated calves and the wild foxes; time passes musically, like the eternal Sabbath, as the instrument the boy plays consorts in a single hymn with the voices of the singing animals.

Stanza 3 presents a capsule summary of the days in the boy's life and of his experience of falling asleep every night. The owls and nightjars, two sorts of nocturnal birds, seem to carry the farm off (the "ricks" are well-built haystacks), and the horses seem to escape from him.

The next stanza, appropriately, presents the experience of awakening. The farm returns, with the crowing rooster on "his" shoulder, like a sailor coming home with a parrot he has trained to talk. This new day is, as always, the first day in a brand-new world in which God has created the animals afresh.

The next stanza begins the breakdown of the illusory world of the eternal present. The boy's "heedless ways" have kept him ignorant of a central fact of human life—that because time is like the Pied Piper, childhood innocence is ephemeral, and the experience of graceless adulthood is inevitable. The final stanza offers a brief account of the end of childhood, a sort of rising in space or falling asleep in which the child dies to his childhood and the farm departs forever; yet both survive in the form of poetry.

The poem is composed of six nine-line stanzas that rhyme (mostly with slant rhymes) *abcddabcd*. The lines have a very flexible accentual rhythm. Lines 1, 2, 6, and 7 have six accents each; lines 3, 4, 8, and 9 have three accents; and line 5 usually has four accents.

Dylan Thomas ties the poem together effectively with strong verbal formulas. The "I" is described as "young and easy," "green and carefree," "green and golden," and finally "green and dying." Furthermore, he is "happy as the grass was green," "singing as the farm was home," and "happy as the heart was long"; he is "honoured among wagons," "famous among the barns," "blessed among stables," and "honoured among foxes and pheasants." His adversary, time, is also accorded verbal formulas: "Time let me hail and climb/ Golden in the heydays of his eyes"; "Time let me play and be/ Golden in the mercy of his means"; "time

allows/... so few and such morning songs." There are other formulaic systems to charm the ear, such as the conversational "Now as I was," "And as I was," and "Oh as I was"; the spatial "About the lilting house" and "About the happy yard"; and the temporal "All the sun long" and "All the moon long."

The color scheme is pervasive and insistent. Implied or explicit, it portrays the Edenic color scheme of nature and its growing things: green, golden, yellow, white, and blue. Even fire is "green as grass." Green is the most pervasive color, with gold second, as is appropriate for a poem about childhood ripening into adulthood.

There are delightful images, such as the half-concealed list of the four elements in lines 20-22 ("fields," "air," "watery," and "fire"). The eternal day of creation (Genesis 1:3-4, 16-18) is elegantly described as a time and place in the passage "So it must have been after the birth of the first simple light/ In the first spinning place." God sets the sun spinning in a place called "day"; God the Creator spins the cosmos out of chaos as a woman spins a strong, even thread from a random mass of raw cotton or wool or flax, then to weave it into the fabric of the material world.

The "I" of the poem begins in innocence, the young Adam of the new world. As he experiences it, his correlative is as innocent as he, whether that be the farm or the princess, who is "maiden" rather than "Eve" because (as Genesis 3:20 states) the latter name means "giver of life" or "mother of all the living." Saint Augustine of Hippo said that history began only after the Original Sin, so the child's world seems timeless, a new world freshly created at each dawn.

As in many Renaissance poems (William Shakespeare's Sonnets 18, 55, 65, and 116, for example), time is the enemy, but for the Renaissance reader, Father Time was Cronos (Saturn), who in Greek myth devoured all of his own children. In Thomas's poem, time is a temporarily benevolent despot, "allowing" and "permitting" the child a time of perfect happiness before he sacrifices his own progeny to the demands of his cannibalistic nature.

At the beginning of the final stanza, Thomas uses

a very private and obscure symbol: The lamblike child ascends to the loft of the barn at moonrise and sleeps to awaken no longer innocent, no longer childlike, alienated from the farm and from nature—expelled from Eden. Thus far, the reader may choose to understand this as a symbol of sexual experience of some sort. The episode involves bird symbols as well, however, and these the reader may well interpret as symbols of poetry—swallows, the implied owls and nightjars from the earlier episode of literal sleep (lines 23-27), and the moon herself as mistress of the creative imagination (like the fairy queen, Titania, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, c. 1595-1596). A child does not compose the songs of childhood. Only an adult can do so, for only the adult is thematically possessed of his own past history. Under the influence of the moon of imagination, the sea rises and falls; although a repressive king-figure (Father Time, the god Cronos, the Persian despot Xerxes, or the Danish King Canute of Britain) can attempt to chain the sea, he will not succeed. Hence, the perennial human symbol of expulsion from the limited Eden of newly created innocence also symbolizes the initiation into the more fully human and creative world of mature experience.

When the sea "sing[s] in its chains," therefore, it does not sing only the green, white, and golden world of Fern Hill, it also sings the green and dying world of the mortal adult. Like a ritual incantation, the poem "Fern Hill" re-creates for the reader the Eden of boyhood, its loss, and its retrieval. Whenever the poem is read and for as long as it takes to read it, the paradise of Fern Hill exists again, is lost again, and is regained.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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