

Learning to Appreciate Poetry

Presented by Paul Rogers

Dylan Thomas



In My Craft Or Sullen Art

A few words in advance

Dylan Thomas, 1914-1953, was a Welsh poet, writer and broadcaster. He died young in New York, where he had been feted and admired for several years after the end of WW2. He was a heavy drinker, and his death was undoubtedly alcohol related.

He was also drunk on words. Few writers have had the facility to manipulate language to such an extent. One of his most famous works is *Under Milk Wood*, tellingly, a play for voices. Although it contains a lot of poetry, the play is mainly in prose, but which is rich in imagery and evocative of time and place.

Thomas spoke no Welsh, yet his voice is distinctly of that country. It is plangent, yearning and melancholy. He hearkens back to the innocence and joys of childhood which cynical adulthood has lost, remaining only in memory. Today, he is much admired, even revered, in Wales, which is ironic because his behaviour at the time was frequently admonished and frowned upon. His house by the sea in the small coastal town of Laugharne (pronounced “Larne”) is a museum and source of pilgrimage today for lovers of his poetry.

The Poem

In my craft or sullen art
Exercised in the still night
When only the moon rages
And the lovers lie abed
With all their griefs in their arms,
I labour by singing light
Not for ambition or bread
Or the strut and trade of charms
On the ivory stages
But for the common wages
Of their most secret heart.

Not for the proud man apart
From the raging moon I write
On these spindrift pages
Nor for the towering dead
With their nightingales and psalms
But for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,
Who pay no praise or wages
Nor heed my craft or art.

Rhyme Scheme

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The rhyme scheme is a complicated a b c d e b d e c c a in the 11 lines of the first stanza and a b c d e e c c a in the 10 lines of the second .

Rhythmically, it is an example of syllabic meter, with seven syllables to each line and six in the final line. If elegantly executed as here, syllabic meter doesn't draw attention to the number of syllables in each line, so that it reads almost like blank verse, or even prose.

Imagery

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Thomas is a master manipulator of language and metaphor. He creates images that are at once unique and apposite. In this poem, there are metaphors on virtually every line. His sullen art is his poetry – sullen because of the nature of writing: alone and frustrating if he can't find the language he needs. The raging moon is an image from the time when it was believed that a full moon could cause insanity (i.e. lunatic). The lovers' grief is the unspoken knowledge that their love is finite – it is bounded by time and the inevitable process of ageing. He writes not for fame, money, or status (strut and trade of charms / on the ivory stages) but for lovers to know how he empathises with their condition.

The second stanza lists all those for whom he is *not* writing. It ends with the forlorn acknowledgment that, although he writes for lovers, they are so bound up in themselves, they won't take notice of him anyway.

Basic Meaning

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When you strip away the figurative language, this is quite a simple poem. Thomas is talking about the act of artistic creation (in his case, poetry) and the intended readership – lovers – who probably won't read him. The mood is, therefore, resigned and melancholy. You get the impression that while he knows his writing of the poem is virtually pointless, he cannot help himself. The act of creation is natural to him and he must carry on regardless of being ignored.

Concluding Remarks

I have to declare an interest here. I am Welsh, and Dylan Thomas was never far away from my childhood and later education. I am disciplined enough in the study of literature to know that he is not in the same league as Yeats or Wordsworth, but on an emotional level, he speaks directly to me, and to countless others.

I suspect the main reason for this is not simply emotional or cultural identification but the joy of language and its use. I have been in love with words since I was a small boy and my chosen profession – a teacher of English language and literature – stems directly from that. Anyone who similarly loves language, therefore, cannot fail to be moved by the poems of Dylan Thomas.

Preparing for the Next Unit

