

**ENGLISH HL 8 June 2024**

**GRADE 12 POETRY NOTES ON: FERN HILL – Dylan Thomas**

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| **FERN HILL – Dylan Thomas** |

1. **Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs**
2. **About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,**
3. **The night above the dingle starry,**
4. **Time let me hail and climb**
5. **Golden in the heydays of his eyes,**
6. **And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns**
7. **And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves**
8. **Trail with daisies and barley**
9. **Down the rivers of the windfall light.**

1. **And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns**
2. **About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,**
3. **In the sun that is young once only,**
4. **Time let me play and be**
5. **Golden in the mercy of his means,**
6. **And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves**
7. **Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,**
8. **And the sabbath rang slowly**
9. **In the pebbles of the holy streams.**

1. **All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay**
2. **Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air**
3. **And playing, lovely and watery**
4. **And fire green as grass.**
5. **And nightly under the simple stars**
6. **As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,**
7. **All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars**
8. **Flying with the ricks, and the horses**
9. **Flashing into the dark.**

1. **And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white**
2. **With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all**
3. **Shining, it was Adam and maiden,**
4. **The sky gathered again**
5. **And the sun grew round that very day.**
6. **So it must have been after the birth of the simple light**
7. **In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm**
8. **Out of the whinnying green stable**
9. **On to the fields of praise.**

1. **And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house**
2. **Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,**
3. **In the sun born over and over,**
4. **I ran my heedless ways,**
5. **My wishes raced through the house high hay**

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| **42.** | **And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows** |
| **43.** | **In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs** |
| **44.** | **Before the children green and golden** |
| **45.** | **Follow him out of grace,** |
| **46.** | **Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me** |
| **47.** | **Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,** |
| **48.** | **In the moon that is always rising,** |
| **49.** | **Nor that riding to sleep** |
| **50.** | **I should hear him fly with the high fields** |
| **51.** | **And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.** |
| **52.** | **Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,** |
| **53.** | **Time held me green and dying** |
| **54.** | **Though I sang in my chains like the sea.** |

**POET – DYLAN THOMAS**

Dylan Thomas was born in Wales in 1914. He died in 1953. He left school at the age of 16 to pursue a literary career. He was famous for his original and lyrical poetry and radio broadcasts.

**DICTION**

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| **Word** | **Meaning** |
| Easy | Relaxed |
| Lilting | seem to go up and down in a songlike manner. In this poem the speaker suggests that there's something songlike about the house |
| Dingle | Forested valley |
| Hail | someone in greeting or refer to where someone comes from |
| Heydays | The best days of someone's life |
| Honoured | Celebrated |
| Lordly | Like a Lord, ruler or king |
| Barley | Edible grain |
| Windfall | Stroke of luck |
| Sabbath | God’s day of rest after creation. Commemorated by Christians and Jews |
| Bearing | Caring |
| Nightjars | Nocturnal birds that feed on insects |
| Ricks | Stacks of hay |
| Simple light | God’s creation of light which seemed simpler at the beginning |
| Spinning Place | Could be referring to the Garden of Eden |
| Whinnying | Neighing (Sound of Horse |
| Pheasants | Colourful ground birds |
| Gay | Happy |
| Heedless | Not paying attention |
| Trades | Skilled work |
| Grace | A state of being close to God’s love |
| Swallow | Small type of bird |
| Thronged | Filled with crowds |

**SUMMARY:**

The speaker reflects on and celebrates the joy he experienced during his youth in the countryside. He reflects on the freedom he felt and the beauty that surrounded him. It is a nostalgic poem – the speaker, once an innocent child, is aware of his loss of innocence and fantasy freedom.

In “Fern Hill,” Thomas presents an idyllic view of childhood on a farm, filled with vivid imagery which presents a child’s view of the world. This is contrasted in the final stanzas with the regret of the adult as he recalls the loss of the innocence and splendour of childhood.

**FORM/STRUCTURE:**

This poem consists of six stanzas, each comprising nine lines. There is a strict syllabic count in each line which is repeated in each stanza.

Despite the strict syllabic count/rhythm, there is no specific form to this poem. The poem is song-like in its rhythm. The poem can be divided into two parts: the first 3 stanzas are related to the poet’s experience as a child and the last 3 stanzas focus on the awakening in the child which signifies the loss of innocence.

**ANALYSIS**

**THE TITLE**

The speaker reflects on and celebrates the joy he experienced during his youth in the countryside. He reflects on the freedom he felt and the beauty that surrounded him. It is a nostalgic poem – the speaker, once an innocent child, is aware of his loss of innocence and fantasy freedom.

In “Fern Hill,” Thomas presents an idyllic view of childhood on a farm, filled with vivid imagery which presents a child’s view of the world. This is contrasted in the final stanzas with the regret of the adult as he recalls the loss of the innocence and splendour of childhood.

**STANZA 1 LINES 1-2**

*Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs / About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,*

*Now* – The speaker is, as an adult, reflecting on his youth.

*bough* – branch

easy – carefree

lilting – singing merrily

*green* – associated with youth, innocence, inexperience and naivety, the child had no worries and no cares, hence the freedom he felt.

The speaker describes his blissful delight when he was a child who enjoyed nature.

He recalls how he enjoyed living in the arms of wild nature, playing under the apple trees.

**LINES 3-4**

*The night above the dingle starry, / Time let me hail and climb*

dingle – valley with forests

*starry* – the night sky was filled with stars. He focuses on its beauty as he is captured by its charm.

Time is personified as a parent that allows him to do things. The reason for this freedom and happiness is that the child was not yet worried about time. Time is personified as the friend and ally of a child, unlike adults who are constantly pressed and tormented by time.

**LINE 5-6**

*Golden in the heydays of his eyes, / And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns*

Gold has connotations of wealth and beauty and Autumn – leaves turning and sunlight and yellow flowers. *Golden* also has connotations of glory.

*heydays* – Prime/best days. These precious childhood days are the golden times during which time was merciful and kind.

*honoured among wagons – he was* honoured by all the inhabitants of the area He was the *"prince of the apple towns"* and the world of that farm was his dominion.

Metaphor – compares himself to a prince. The metaphor continues in line 7.

**LINES 7-9**

*And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves / Trail with daisies and barley* / Down the rivers of the windfall light.

Metaphor – Compares himself to a lord. This place made him feel like royalty.

Windfall – an apple blown down from a tree or a large amount of money arriving unexpectedly (fortune/luck). Metaphor – Light is compared to a river filled with riches.

The landscape around him is rich with flowers, fields of barley and rivers of light. It is indeed a paradise and he felt like he was a prince and a lord ruling this paradise.

**STANZA 2 LINES 10-11**

*And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns / About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home, /*

He continues to revisit his happy childhood in a series of flashbacks. He recalls how naïve, innocent and inexperienced he was then, but also how he lived without any worries or cares. As an adult, he thinks he was *"green"* as a child. Being naive or green is a small cost of being happy and carefree. Unlike children, adults are care- worn, unhappy and struggle daily to make ends meet.

Instead of being famous world-wide, the child was famous among the barns where animals are kept and rural festivities were held.

He is famous among country people and he is master of the animal world.

*farm was home* – he had a sense of belonging. Also, he was oblivious of the adult world.

**LINES 12-14**

*In the sun that is young once only, / Time let me play and be / Golden in the mercy of his means,*

*the sun that is young once only* – Time is personified. We are all at the mercy of time because we cannot stop time.

And as he was young, he felt everything around him was just as young including the sun under which he played freely and merrily. These times are a golden and precious gift that Time gave him out of its kindness and mercy.

**LINES 15-16**

*And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves / Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,*

Metaphor – compares himself to a hunter and herdsman. The child imagines that he was the hero. Sometimes he was a huntsman blowing his horn, going after wild animals and foxes and hunting them the way first human beings did; other times he was a herdsman/ shepherd tending his cattle.

**LINES 17-18**

*And the sabbath rang slowly / In the pebbles of the holy streams.*

*sabbath* – Biblical allusion creates a mood of reverence (deep respect). *rang* – refers to church bells.

*pebbles of the holy streams –* It is as if the very streams sing a song of praise to God (in the sound of the water running over the pebbles) in the beauty and glory of this rural childhood. He felt like worshipping in the temple of nature and the holy altar was the water stream whose pebbles noise felt like hymns in his ears.

**STANZA 3 LINES 19-21**

*All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay / Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air*

Sun – represents the passing of time. Note the unusual word order in line 19 which creates a personification

The child is still speaking, gushing on his past memories. He is still that playing, innocent child who has no cares and no worries. The lovely sun is now running as autumn days are shorter.

The harvest is done. The hay stacks stand in piles as high as house (Simile). The chimneys do not send smoke out in the air, but music that he liked.

**LINES 22-24**

*And playing, lovely and watery / And fire green as grass. / And nightly under the simple stars*

His playing is never interrupted even when he was all drenched in rain and the days are cold. Even the fire looked green his eyes, like the green grass.

**LINES 25-27**

*As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away, All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars / Flying with the ricks, and the horses / Flashing into the dark.*

As the child drifts off to sleep, he imagines that the entire farm is carried away into ‘dreamland’ by the owls whose call is heard in the night.

He heard the singing of birds like the nightjars which made of the stable their homes. In the darkness, the farm is no less noisy than in the day and no less bright as he can see the eyes of horses flashing in the darkness and hear the singing and noises of night life. In short, he felt blessed, happy and free.

At the end of Stanza 3, the child's symbolic sleep ends in a flashing light in the dark. This flash is the light of awareness and signals the loss of paradise, freedom, and innocent bliss.

**STANZA 4 LINES 28-30**

*And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white / With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all / Shining, it was Adam and maiden, /*

*And* – introduces a change. The waking child in Stanza 4 is symbolic of maturity.

*the farm, like a wanderer white –* Personification. He wakes up to the sound of the rooster crowing.

*With the dew* – time has passed. It is now winter. Winter is symbolic of the end of his childhood and innocence.

*Shining* – the light of the morning sun reflects off the dew has settled on the leaves and ground.

He feels that Time has betrayed him. This betrayal is indicated by the placing of the cock on his shoulder. A cock is another name for a rooster and is an allusion to the betrayal of Jesus in the Christian faith. A rooster crows when Jesus is betrayed in the Bible.

The reference to Adam and his maiden refers to the Garden of Eden and creation of Man. He suggests that his time at Fern Hill is comparable to Adam and Eve’s time in the Garden before the loss of innocence. It is idyllic and beautiful and free. He was very happy there. The adult world is not as carefree as that of childhood and the speaker experiences a sense of regret and loss as he moves from one to the other.

**LINES 31-33**

*The sky gathered again / And the sun grew round that very day. / So it must have been after the birth of the simple light*

The sun rises up in the sky.

*sun grew round* – the sun was shining brightly.

*that very day* – he remembers this day as it was of great significance to him. Also symbolic of his growing up; he was no longer a child.

*the birth of the simple light –* Birth of the world/the first light in Eden.

**LINES 34-36**

*In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm / Out of the whinnying green stable / On to the fields of praise.*

*spinning place* – The Earth

*the whinnying green stable –* Onomatopoeia – sound of horse. Brings the scene to life.

As the sun shines, all creatures wake up to glorify nature and praise its beauty and abundance. The farm horses leave their stable with the birth of light and go to the fields to join the rest of the natural world in a prayer or hymn addressed to the farm. This creates a mood of reverence.

**STANZA 5 LINES 37-38**

*And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house / Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,*

He felt honoured/like royalty

*pheasants* – a large bird with a rounded body and long tail, that spends a lot of time on the ground and is often shot for sport and food

He felt as if the foxes, the pheasants and other animals were his friends and they loved him and honoured him as they wandered around the happy and merry house of Fern Hill.

Gay – happy/playful. The house is personified to reflect how the child felt about the house. It was lively and happy and filled with merriment and joys.

*new* – the birth of the world

**LINES 39-40**

*In the sun born over and over, / I ran my heedless ways,*

The speaker recalls with a sense of regret and intense nostalgia that he was "*in the sun born over and over / I ran my heedless ways"* when he was young. He admits that he was *“ heedless”* as a child and how the farm gave him all that he needed and made him feel complete.

**LINES 41-43**

*My wishes raced through the house high hay / And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows /In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs*

His wishes seem to be fulfilled as quickly as the stacks of hay grew high in the house. The sun bathed him with its warmth and light and he felt free looking at the blue sky.

*sky blue trades* – activities. He was too occupied to care that time was passing by and did not realise that his childhood paradise would end.

He felt time is kind and loving and he could hear its morning music and singing.

**LINES 44-45**

*Before the children green and golden /Follow him out of grace*,

*children green and golden* – children who were still young and naïve. They did not have any worry and were in complete harmony with time. The child-speaker talks proudly and happily about his adventures in Fern Hill farm.

grace – indicates a fall from grace or innocence and suggests he has moved from a state of perfect union to an awareness of reality. The embrace of reality brings with it regret and a loss of freedom.

*Follow him –* This is symbolic of Adam and Eve leaving Eden. His carefree world has been left behind.

**STANZA 6 LINES 46-47**

*Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me /Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,*

The speaker returns to the present. The child becomes and adult and leaves behind the innocence of his past.

*Nothing I cared* – emphasises his complete freedom in his childhood.

*lamb* *white days* – symbol of innocence and purity. Emphasises his carefree attitude as a child.

*time would take me –* Time is personified. He is aware of Time even though he is unaware of anything else. Time is guiding him and leading him until he loses the carefree attitude of the child.

*Up to the swallow thronged loft –* A high place full of swallows (birds).

*shadow* – something negative/unpleasant is introduced.

**LINES 48-51**

*In the moon that is always rising, / Nor that riding to sleep* / *I should hear him fly with the high fields / And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.*

He felt that all nights are bright with the moon, which is always rising.

*Nor that riding to sleep* / *I should hear him fly with the high* fields – Literally, even when he is going home after nightfall, he could hear the swallows flying high over the fields which are also high as they sit on the hill.

Figuratively – How he goes to sleep without worries and without cares. All he thinks of is to wait for the morning so that he would have another playful and joyful day.

*And wake to the farm forever fled –* Maturity and the "chains" of adulthood came all too quickly for the speaker and the speaker laments the lost days of his youth. He accepts that once childhood is left behind there is no going back unless the tool of creating is used. Only then can an individual tap into the joy and freedom experienced in childhood and even then, the joy is brief.

**LINES 52-54**

*Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means, / Time held me green and dying / Though I sang in my chains like the sea.*

*Oh* – A cry of regret, sorrow.

This is the turning point at which the child-speaker disappears and adult steps in to tell us about the experience of waking up from the dream of childhood memories: the farm is longer crowded with the laughter and noise of playing children. It becomes "childless"; that is, barren and fallow.

He starts to feel the sting of time and now time is longer kind or gentle, but is leading him to the end which the child was unaware of. Deep inside, he feels he is still that green, naive child, yearning to relive his childhood's pleasures. But he is no longer that child as he has lost his freedom and is now burdened with worries and cares. Time and experience have put him in bonds (chains) and he is their prisoner. The simile "like the sea" shows the vastness of his feelings, but also the depth of his despair.

The lightness, ease and joys of the days of innocence are gone for ever, and never to return. In their place, the speaker, now an adult, is living through the harshness and hardships of the days of experience and awakening

The use of the verb “*sang”* creates hope: The losses can be captured through his memories. The green and golden joy of childhood and the shadowy sorrow of maturity become the joy of art (poetry). In this manner, the loss to time is not total; it is possible to use art to recapture the happiness of innocent youth.

**THEMES**

* **Childhood joy and innocence** – this poem is at its core a celebration of childhood. The speaker was a happy and innocent child and part of a harmonious world. Children experience the specialness and harmony of the world through their freedom and, paradoxically, their security. They believe that they are safe to explore and experience joy. There are no severe restrictions and responsibilities on them.
* **Harmony and the Wonder of Nature** – The speaker’s childhood joy is closely connected to playing outside. The poem suggests that real joy comes from a sense of connection with the natural world. To be young and innocent is to be one with nature. Nature is a place filled with wonder, peace and harmony. As the young speaker explored the landscape, the personified elements of Nature seemed to be his playmates. The speaker plays a role in the environment he visits - he is both hunter and shepherd. (He is not actually killing animals here.) His joy stems from the fact that he is a part of nature and the landscape, rather than apart from it. Adults are incapable of accessing the sense of peace and harmony that comes from being one with Nature.
* **Time** – throughout the poem, time looms like a godlike presence. Time grants the speaker a brief period of childhood happiness. However, time also ensures that nothing lasts forever and that childhood joys comes to an end. Time is ultimately an all-powerful and unstoppable force with ultimate control over humans.
* **The end of childhood grace** – the poem implies that when children grow up, they lost the ‘grace’ of childhood and its joys. The Christian concept of Grace is to experience God’s love. For the speaker, childhood best represents such an experience, and the end of childhood is thus a painful, yet inevitable, fall from Grace. The references to the Garden of Eden parallels childhood as akin to the Garden of Eden. As people age, they lose their Grace, just like Adam and Eve lost theirs. Just as Adam and Eve were kicked out of Eden, the speaker “wakes to the farm forever fled from the childless land”. It is as if one day the speaker woke up, no longer a child, and all the happiness has disappeared from the world.
* **Nostalgia** – The sense of nostalgia is intense in the poem "Fern Hill." The longing to return to a state of innocence and security is a common thread throughout the entire work.
* Regret associated with growing up
* The joys of childhood

**TONE**

* **Reflective tone** throughout the poem. He indicates the transition from child to adult as well as the interactions with Time.
* **The tone is joyful/fervent/emotional/ecstatic/rhapsodic**: it is a hymn of praise to youth and innocence.
* In the **final stanza** the tone changes to one of **melancholy** at the lost and irretrievable days of childhood.
* nostalgic

**ESSAY QUESTION**

In the poem Fern Hill colour is symbolic in the childhood of the speaker.

In an essay of 250-300 words, discuss the symbolism ‘colour’ in the poem [10]

**Suggested Answer for Question A: Essay**

* Colour pays an important role in "Fern Hill,"

The three most important symbols of colour are green, gold and white.

**The colour white:** oThe colour white often represents innocence, and here it captures the role the farm played in the young speaker's innocent perception of the world.

At the beginning of the last stanza, the speaker uses white in a more overtly symbolic manner:

‘**in the lamb white days**’, A lamb is white and in Christianity symbolizes innocence.

The reference to the innocence of Jesus, whose innocence is ultimately sacrificed.

This sacrifice made by Jesus is related to the speaker’s innocence which is eventually sacrificed to make way for adulthood.

**The Colour Green** - symbolizes youthful inexperience.

Green is often used as an idiom to mean inexperienced, comparing a child to a green sapling. In the poem, "green" captures how in experienced children really *are* like sprouts. The speaker was "happy as the grass was green," this is comparing a child's happiness to the green of grass.

At the end of the poem, the speaker says, "Time held me green and dying," which suggests that people begin to sense their own mortality while they're still kids—that, as the speaker implies throughout the poem, being a child is over much too soon.

**The Colour Gold** - symbolizes the joy and magic of childhood.

"Golden”, meanwhile, captures the majesty of childhood.

It first appears in the first stanza: The phrase "prince of the apple towns" gives a sense of how the speaker means for "golden" to be taken. Echoing the majestically wonders of childhood.

It captures the specialness the speaker felt being out in the world as a young child, of feeling like royalty amongst humble things.

Golden also suggests the joy and magic of childhood.

The colours "green white and golden" symbolise how inexperienced, innocent and youthful imagination intertwine together to create childhood’s best memories. **[10]**

**Fern Hill Dylan Thomas**

1. What does the speaker mean by “As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away” (line 24)? (2) *(As the speaker falls asleep, he imagines that the entire farm is being carried away into dreamland with him. The farm “is carried” by the owls.*

1. Describe the tone in the first four stanzas. (2)

*(There is a tone/feeling/atmosphere of joy and happiness. Youth and Nature are celebrated. The speaker is happy and carefree.)*

1. Where and how does the tone alter? Explain your answer. (3)

*(In stanza 4 the speaker mentions that he “awakes” – this is the turning point. He is no longer young and carefree. He reflects on happier times and the nostalgia is apparent. He is aware of his loss of innocence – like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.)*

1. What is the significance of the references to colours? (3)

*(He makes many references to the colours green and golden. Green implies youth and vitality. New grass in Spring, new leaves, rebirth. Gold has connotations of wealth and beauty and Autumn – leaves turning and sunlight and yellow flowers. Golden also has connotations of glory.)*

1. Discuss what Thomas says about time in this poem. (2)

*(Time is personified. It allows the speaker to have this special time in his life. The passage of time is clear throughout the poem and the speaker appreciates Nature at different times of day. The child is oblivious that he has limited time. It is the adult who realises time’s worth.)*

1. What realisation does the speaker have in line 51 when he says, “And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land”? (2)

*(He speaker realises that, as an adult, his childhood is gone. His youth is gone.)*

1. How does the speaker suggest the beauty and innocence of the beginning of the world in stanza 4? (3)
2. *(The reference to Adam and his maiden refers to the Garden of Eden and creation of Man. He suggests that his time at Fern Hill is comparable to Adam and Eve’s time in the Garden BEFORE the loss of innocence. It is idyllic and beautiful and free. He was very happy there.)*
3. What does this poem suggest about Thomas’ view of the relationship between humankind and Nature? (2)

*(There is complete harmony between humankind and Nature. The boy and Nature are never in conflict. They live harmoniously together. Each day is like the creation of Earth – guiltless, relaxed, calm, idyllic.)*