

Fern Hill by Dylan Thomas, 1914 - 1953

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

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

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

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,
The sky gathered again
And the sun grew round that very day.
So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm
Out of the whinnying green stable
On to the fields of praise.

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,
In the sun born over and over,
I ran my heedless ways,
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
Before the children green and golden
Follow him out of grace,

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,
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.
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.

Dylan Thomas "Fern Hill" is six stanzas of praising and then lamenting days the speaker spent at Fern Hill as a youth. And this speaker is stoked about running through the countryside. Throughout the poem, he talks about how happy he was as a youngster and how oblivious he was that youth was passing. But at the end of the poem, the tone shifts dramatically from joy to lamentation. It's almost like singing, "If you're happy and you know it, think again!" What was a carefree bliss for the speaker turns out to be a fleeting joy that he ever can't recapture. What a bummer.

Lines 1-2

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

- Welcome to Fern Hill, where the speaker was once young and carefree.
- He also hung out in his "lilting house." What in the world is a lilting house, you ask? Well, lilting is an old school style of Gaelic singing, but it can refer to anything with a cheerful, happy tone.
- So was the house singing? Well, maybe not literally, but with this personification, the speaker is setting the mood for the rest of the poem. Things are good.
- He's young, happy, and the pastoral scenery is like a mirror of the speaker's joy.

Lines 3-5

The night above the dingle starry,
Time let me hail and climb
Golden in the heydays of his eyes,

- Lines 3-5 look a bit different from the opening lines. They're shorter, but they stick with scene setting like the opening two lines.
- Line 3 tells us that the night sky was full of stars, but the order of the words is a little funny. Why? Well, try rereading the line like this: the night starry above the dingle (and as much as you might snicker at that word, a dingle is just a small valley). By using that word, Thomas keeps the line quick and perky (try inserting valley instead, and you'll see what we mean). It seems like the speaker is as concerned with the sounds of words as he is with what he's describing.

- In that way, the poem's form has started to mirror its content. These lines have a cheerful cadence that's the perfect fit for their cheerful meaning.
- Time enters the poem in line 4 and 5 as if the speaker and Time are BFFs. Thanks to a handy use of personification, these two sound like two peas in a pod—playmates under the apple boughs.
- Time even has "eyes" here. So what does that mean? Maybe that time is keeping watch over the youngster. But it also suggests that Time is happy to see the speaker so young and carefree.
- So the speaker can salute Time, feel "golden" and yet, because we know that Time, being what it is, will change, we have a suspicion that the "heydays" of his eyes won't last forever.

Lines 6-9

And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
 And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
 Trail with daisies and barley
 Down the rivers of the windfall light.

- The poem continues praising the good old days, calling himself a "prince" in line 6. You might think of that as a metaphor of youth and promise.
- Then, he opens line 7 with a slight variation of the fairytale phrase, "once upon a time." Here, he says, "once below a time." It sounds like something is buried under time, sort of like what happens when something dies, right? But also, something like treasure that needs to be recovered.
- And what was happening below this time? The speaker spent his days ruling over the trees and leaves and daisies and barley and rivers, blown by the wind.
- The gist here is that he felt like a young, powerful, world-at-his-fingertips prince. Things were easy, beautiful, and awesome.
- By the end of this first nine-line stanza, a clear rhythm has been established. The sing-songy feel of the poem is impossible to miss.
- But how is Thomas pulling that off? With sound play—that's how.
- We've got tons of vowel rhymes, or assonance, in words like "trees" and "leaves." They don't rhyme perfectly, but the long "e" sound binds them together.

- Same with "daises" and "barley." Then there's consonance in pairs like "Rivers" and "windfall." The "v" in rivers and the "f" in windfall bind the words together by sound.
- But wait, there's more. He also says, "apple towns" which echoes "apple boughs" from the beginning of the stanza.
- Why all the repetition? We think it has something to do with Thomas's talent for music in a poem. His artful use of repetitive sounds and a vaguely iambic meter (hear that daDUM daDUM daDUM underneath the lines?) help Thomas create a sense of unity within the stanzas. This gives the poem, which has no traditional poetic form, a structure all its own. In fact, Thomas peppers every stanza in the poem with these qualities, so keep an eye (or ear) out as you read.

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,

- Here he goes again. We've got repetition up the wazoo in these lines, with some interesting twists to keep us on our toes.
- Much like the "grass was green" in the first stanza, the speaker is green here. And just as he was "easy" in line 1, here he's "carefree." And much like the speaker was happy in line 2, here the yard is happy, which is a handy example of pathetic fallacy, or attributing human feelings and emotions to inanimate objects, like a yard. And just as the house was "lilting" in line 2, so the speaker's "singing" in line 11.
- Whew. That's a whole lot of similar ideas, with a few shakeups here and there. What this tells us is that Thomas isn't just about creating unity within stanzas—he's all about creating unity between stanzas, too. And he's not going to use just sound play to accomplish that goal. He's going to use ideas as well—youthfulness, happiness, carefreeness, singing.

Lines 12-14

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

- Here's our first hint that all this joyful youthfulness won't last. The speaker's romping and frolicking beneath a sun "that is young once only."

- It's another moment of personification that makes the natural world seem somehow closer to the speaker.
- Which is only reinforced when his old buddy Time shows up, to let him play. And Time seems merciful here, as if he's trying to let this young kid have as much fun as possible before that sun, and the speaker, grow old. Still, Time is definitely an authority figure; he's got the power. At least, in this case, he's using his power for good by allowing the kid to play.

Lines 15-18

And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
And the sabbath rang slowly
In the pebbles of the holy streams.

- Okay, it's official. This is the most repetitive poem ever. Now that we've reached the end of the second stanza, we're starting to realize it looks an awful lot like the first.
- But we'll get to that in a minute. First? Content.
- We get more green and gold imagery that describes the speaker: he was "huntsman and herdsman" and basically every animal ever did his bidding, mooing and barking and who knows what else.
- Then the Sabbath enters the poem. It rings, which is odd, but even odder, it rings in the pebbles of the holy streams. The speaker talks about the landscape with such reverence, he believes it to be sacred. And like the rivers of light in the first stanza, this stanza ends with "holy streams."
- Now let's talk form. Did you notice that this stanza seems eerily familiar? Check out the structure of the lines.
- "Now as I was [...]" from line 1 becomes "And as I was [...]" in line 10. "About the lilting house and happy as [...]" (2) becomes "About the happy yard and singing as [...]" (11). "Time let me" from line 4 gets repeated in line 13, and "Golden in the heydays" (5) becomes "Golden in the mercy" (14).
- All that repeated syntax is only reinforced by the repeated imagery here. Greens, golds, rivers, stars—it's all popping up again and again, to create a dreamlike sense of this youth's pastoral world.

- And then there are those sonic repetitions to deal with. The long E's of green, carefree, happy, be, mercy, means, green, and streams. The consonance of "farm was home." The assonance of "sun that is young." The alliteration of "mercy of his means" and "hunter and herdsman" and "clear and cold."

- No matter which way you look (or listen) in "Fern Hill," the repetition is inescapable, adding music and meaning to each line and stanza.

- But the syntax and sounds aren't the only thing that make this stanza look a lot like stanza 1. They both have nine lines, and each of those lines has a certain number of syllables, depending on where it falls in the stanza. For more on that, check out our "Form and Meter" section, and in the meantime, keep an eye out for more syntactic, sonic, and structural repetitions as you make your way through "Fern Hill."

Lines 19-20

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

- The speaker continues to explain what it was like being young at Fern Hill.

- Notice how the syntax, the order of words, is used in this line. The repetition of the phrase "it was" creates a rhythm so the words are actually doing what they describe—growing more excited, more amped up. The speaker is describing long, pleasant, exciting days, and the line is a long, pleasantly rhythmic, excited line.

- Line 20 continues to tell us about the awesome sauce landscape. We have fields that are "high" and chimneys that play "tunes" and then that phrase "it was" yet again. The speaker is so entranced with his memory and description, it's like the landscape has a life of its own.

- And notice how he ends the line on "air." That's not a mistake. In fact, it's a tool poets like to use called enjambment, and this poem's chock full of it.

- What do you think of when you think of air? Something invisible and everywhere, right? Or something your life depends upon. In this sense, the speaker is deeply connected with what gives him life, which makes him seem all the more alive.

Lines 21-23

And playing, lovely and watery

And fire green as grass.

And nightly under the simple stars

- And, and, and. That's anaphora at its best, ladies and gentlemen. Beginning each line with "and" gives Thomas a chance to build momentum, to stack up the pastoral imagery.
- And just what are those images here? Well, things have taken a dreamy turn, and instead of specific descriptions of apple boughs, we get "lovely and watery / And fire green as grass" under "simple stars."
- Using a word like "watery" works for several reasons. First, it ends on that long E sound, which echoes in "lovely," "green," and "nightly." But water, like air, is also a symbol of a life-giving source. And it's fluid, and flowing, just like the lines of the poem, which suggests the passing of time.
- Line 22 brings back the speaker's favorite "green as grass" but this time it's a clause describing fire. Why fire? Possibly because there were fires in the evening, but also because fire is a source of energy and light and warmth. These are all good things, and tonally consistent with the mood of being young and healthy.
- Line 23 moves the poem into nighttime. The stars are "simple" just like the speaker's life back then.
- While this stanza so far is a bit different from the first two, it's clear that the themes, imagery, and sound patterns are much the same.

Lines 24-27

As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,

All the moon long I heard, blessed among the stables, the nightjars

Flying with the ricks, and the horses

Flashing into the dark.

- These lines are the beginning of the end of the day for the speaker. Still, the beauty remains, and yet something different is beginning to happen.
- The owls are "bearing the farm away" as if the landscape itself is leaving. Instead of all the sun long, he says, "all the moon long," meaning, all night long he heard nocturnal birds (nightjars) "flying with the ricks." Ricks are stacks of hay, and they seem to be taking off, too.

Trippy. It's like the farm is alive and is walking away in the night. Even the horses are "flashing" into the dark.

- Imagine looking out your window and watching the trees in your backyard uproot and start walking away. That would be weird, right? Well, this is also a figurative leaving for the speaker. A shift has begun to occur as night appears. The landscape, which brought so much freedom and joy, is beginning to leave.

- Just as the day has ended, the night has begun, and time is passing.

- It's also worth noting that the look of the stanza has changed a bit. The patterns established in the first two stanzas—the syntax, the indentations of the lines, have shifted.

- Now, the final line of the stanza is indented even further than the one before. And the imagery, too, has turned dream-like and strange. This is no longer your stock and standard pastoral poem. Things are getting weird up in here.

Speaker: The speaker of "Fern Hill" reminisces about days he spent on a farm when he was young. He's older now, although it's not clear exactly how old, and spends the whole poem talking about himself when...

Setting: Setting is everything for the speaker of "Fern Hill." The pastoral beauty of the countryside around the farm where he spent his childhood preoccupies the entire poem.

Sound Check: "Fern Hill" is one-part sophisticated hip-hop artist, romancing about the hood where he came from, and one-part forlorn monologue of someone who can't let go of the past.

What's Up With the Title? Fern Hill is the name of the farm where Dylan Thomas spent his childhood summers in Wales. It also just so happens to be the setting of his poem.

Themes :-

Time: Rather than just a clock ticking on the wall, Time in "Fern Hill" is almost like a character. Thomas personifies time throughout the poem, as something with immense power.

Youth: You're only young once, and all those other clichés. For the speaker of "Fern Hill," youth is everything it should be—joyful, carefree, and oh so fleeting. And that's kind of the problem.

...] I was prince of the apple towns

And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves (5-6)

So, the speaker doesn't come out and say, "I was young, once." But, he chooses to describe himself as "prince" and says, "once below a time." The figurative language here immediately sets the scene—he's young, he feels invincible, and he's got it made... for now.

Foolishness and Folly: Normally, the idea of being foolish isn't exactly a good thing. But then again, there's that saying, "ignorance is bliss." And maybe that's more applicable to the speaker of "Fern Hill," who's tell...

Happiness: It's next to impossible not to hear the happiness of the speaker in "Fern Hill." From the first line, through all of the first five stanzas, the speaker is praising his youth as a time of joy.

About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green (2)

The poem begins by the speaker directly stating that he was happy. Happy as grass, he says. Okay, what does that mean? Immediately, the speaker is equating his emotional state with the landscape, as if nature and emotion are intertwined with each other. In other words, he's using his descriptions of nature as a manifestation of his internal being.

Happiness : Quote #2

And I was green and carefree, famous among the barns

About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home (10-11)

Okay, he might as well break into "I'm siiiiiinging in the rain!" here. This guy's happy and he's definitely not afraid to show it. The speaker is happy. The grass is happy. The yard is happy. Happy, happy, happy.

Another way the speaker creates a tone of happiness is through his use of sound play in the poem. Notice how "green" and "carefree" rhyme? The double E in "green" and "carefree" match up with each other. The "y" in happy also has that long E sound. This assonance makes lines echo each other and gives them a light-hearted feel. Imagine a kid smiling at a camera and saying "cheeeeeeeese!" That long E sound works the same way in these lines, and brings to mind smiles and good times.

Happiness : Quote #3

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house

Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long (36-37)

He was so happy back then, it made the whole world glow with good feelings. He's on the top of the world and everything he looks at seems to be as happy as he is. This excess of positive emotion works well to make the poem a song of praise, but also makes the change in emotion at the end that much more dramatic.

Change: If the speaker of "Fern Hill" made one mistake as a youth, it's that he failed to realize that being young doesn't last forever.

Time Quotes

Time let me hail and climb Golden in the heydays of his eyes (4-5)

Time let me hail and climb

Golden in the heydays of his eyes (4-5)

In the beginning of the poem, the speaker personifies time as something with eyes. The speaker felt like he was under the watchful gaze of time. And because he says, "the heydays of his eyes" (5), we know that the speaker believes he's in his prime. Time's prime, that is, as if time was at his best when the speaker was young. Life couldn't have been better.

Time: Quote #2

Time let me play and be

Golden in the mercy of his means (13-14)

Time seems like an awesome guy here, right? The speaker says, "[t]ime let me play and be" as if time is giving him permission to play and just "be." The speaker doesn't have any worries and is just enjoying himself, and it's all thanks to time, who's a kind, benevolent, compassionate figure here. So what happens between now and the end of the poem?

Time: Quote #3

In the first, spinning place [...] (34)

Okay, what in the world is the "first, spinning place?" Well, the speaker doesn't say the word time, but we still think he's referring to time here. It's the beginning of a new day, and the speaker feels refreshed and like the day is brand new. You know that phrase, "every day is a new beginning?" Well, the speaker literally feels like he's waking to a day as new as the first day of time.

Youth Quotes

[...]I was prince of the apple towns And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves (5-6)

Foolishness and Folly Quotes

And I was green and carefree [...] (10)

Happiness Quotes

About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green (2)

Change Quotes

Down the rivers of the windfall light (9)

ring on the tough stuff - there's not just one right answer.