

"Fern Hill" by Dylan Thomas

A Critical Analysis

Capsule summary

The poem opens with the speaker happily recounting spending time outside in a picturesque landscape with green grass, apple trees, and a starry sky where he felt like a "prince." He details his adventures as a youth, recalling how he acted as both a "hunter and herdsman" and saying that time allowed him to play in the sun "once only"—the first hint that this happiness won't last.

Throughout the first three stanzas, the speaker continues to detail his adventures and their landscape. He rules his natural dominion, referring to himself as "prince of the apple towns" and "famous among the barns," and it seems he alone is present in this natural world along with the animals. In the second stanza, he expands on his adventures as a "green and carefree" boy, his greenness (or youth) matching that of the landscape. He repeats the phrases "time let me " and "golden in the ___ of his ___," beginning lines with them just as he did in the first stanza.

In the third stanza, he continues to elaborate on the landscape, getting caught up in his descriptions as he lists thing after magical thing, beginning several lines with "and..." In the fourth stanza, he compares witnessing the coming of the day to Adam and Eve in Eden and God creating the universe.

The next stanza begins the poem's ending tone of regret, alluding to the Pied Piper as the speaker begins, with the phrase "nothing I cared," to characterize himself as "heedless," indicating his later regret. The poet ends the poem lamenting his carelessness and mourning the loss of his

childhood and innocence, beginning the stanza by repeating the phrase "nothing I cared" from the previous stanza.

General analysis

The poem can be divided into two parts: the first three stanzas are related to the poet's experience as a child when he used to spend his summer holidays at his uncle's farm (Fern Hill, it is in Swansea in Wales) but the last three stanzas are about an awakening in the child which signifies the loss of the world of innocence. At the center of this loss of the innocence are the myths of fall of the first human beings (Adam and Eve). The world of innocence (child) as described in the first three stanzas is like the Garden of Eden. This is a world in which the child is in complete union with the nature.

This world of fantasy offers the child an Edenic bliss. The way Thomas describes this world; it appears to be a timeless world without a sense of loss and decay. In the third stanza the poet slowly moves towards the transition between the world of innocence and the world of experience. In the fourth stanza the speaker's sleeping is a symbolic sleeping, which ends a flashing in the dark. This flashing is a kind of awakening as hinted by the first line of the fourth stanza. In this awakening the child (speaker) initiates into the world of maturity. "Sleeping" in the poem is symbolic that refers to the loss of innocence that equates the Adam and Eve, who had slept after a fall from the Grace of God. This initiation of the world of maturity entails the loss of Edenic bliss, innocence, grace and freedom. Moreover poet loses creative imagination and fantasies in which a union with nature was possible.

In the last stanza the poet once again contemplates on the memoirs of his childhood, but this time the awareness, becomes dominant. In the last line

the poet refers to his chained situation in the world of experience. Now he is in chain, green color is withered now. So, this poem is the journey from childhood to manhood when the manhood comes, the man suffers from agony. Now I am not what I was in the past. The use of verb "song" hints that the losses can be captured through art in the last line stanza.

Of course, the poem is intensely nostalgic: but it is written from a point of view which takes into account the fact that the adult has awoken, "to the farm forever fled from the childless land". The farm still exists, in reality: but it no longer belongs to the phantasm world which the child created and lived in. That land seems itself still to exist somewhere, but is childless: and one can never go back to live in it: One has died out of that land. To be green and growing is to die out of it: but during the whole process, he sang in his chains - as the sea does, in the rhythmic control of the tides.

Adult consciousness brings a loss of phantasy freedom. Undeniably, the poem is written from a schizoid feeling about reality: The self can relate with immediacy to an object, which is the object of its own imagination or memory.' When the self 'abandons itself to the real' it will lose its sense of freedom. This applies to both perception and action. The child is self-enclosed in his Eden, and the poem encounters the paradoxes of omnipotence and impotence, freedom and slavery (chains), being 'anyone in phantasy and nothing in reality'. The air in that childhood world is different from the air of Thomas' poems of strangling and constriction: it is the air of freedom, and everything is made of it like 'castles in the air' - it is the 'other air', of morning songs, of chimney tunes, of the child's horns and the bark of foxes. Even the image of Time taking him by the hand is not here bitter or negative: it is as though time is a merciful mother.

Personifying the “lilting” house at the start of the poem sets the stage for the landscape the speaker describes: it is so lively and vivid that it is almost a character itself. Time is similarly personified, becoming almost like a playmate to the young boy. Thomas’s use of the phrase “once below a time” emphasizes the power of time—the speaker is merely a guest in time’s domain—and instantly reminds us of fairy tales beginning “once upon a time,” calling to mind stories of childhood innocence.

The line “in the sun that is young once only” in the second stanza is the first hint that the speaker’s joyful innocence won’t last. Though time “lets” him play, it remains in control. In the second stanza, he also mentions the Sabbath and “holy” water, marking the first of many Christian references that will grow richer as the poem progresses and giving Fern Hill a sacred aura. The colors green and gold, which will become recurring images, also appear.