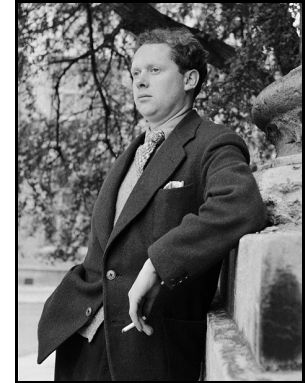


# DYLAN THOMAS

(27 October 1914–9 November 1953)

When Welsh poet Dylan Thomas smashed onto the literary scene at age 19, it looked like a new kind of strength and romantic picturesqueness had been restored to English poetry after the deliberately muted tones of Eliot and his followers. As his poetry became better known, it became clear that he was a master craftsman, yet his reputation for narcissistic and irresponsible behavior always threatened to overshadow his enormous talent. Thomas was most certainly no “boy scout,” but he was absolutely a great poet. His poetry is striking for its musicality, and his images are vividly ordered in a resonant patterned sequence. He emphasized the unity of all life, the continuing *process* of life and death and new life that links the generations to each other—a magical transformation producing unity out of diversity. Thomas’s autobiographical *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* and his radio play *Under Milkwood* reveal a vividness of observation and a combination of violence and tenderness of expression, showing he could also handle prose as excitingly as verse.



Dylan Thomas

Dylan Marlais Thomas (the Welsh pronounce his first name *Dullen*, but he acquiesced to the English *Dillon*) was born at 5 Cwmdonkin Drive in Swansea, Wales, to David John Thomas (1876–1952), a teacher, and Florence Hannah (née Williams) (1882–1958), a seamstress. His lone sibling Nancy (Nancy Marles 1906–1953) was 9 years older. His father, who gave Thomas the name Dylan (translation: “son of the sea”) after the *Mabinogion* character Dylan ail Don, had a first-class honors degree in English from University College, Aberystwyth, and taught English literature at the local grammar school. Dylan spent his childhood in Swansea, with summer trips to Carmarthenshire to visit Fern Hill, a dairy farm owned by his maternal aunt, Ann Jones. In childhood Thomas contracted bronchitis and asthma, with which he struggled throughout his life, and, perhaps as a result, he was copiously indulged by his doting mother. His formal education began at a private school on Mirador Crescent, a few streets away from his home, and later at Swansea Grammar School for boys, where his father taught English. Always an undistinguished student, in 1931, when he was 16, Thomas left school to take a job as a reporter for the *South Wales Daily Post*, leaving under pressure 18 months later. He continued to work in Swansea as a freelance journalist for several years during which time—between 1930 and 1934—he amassed 200 poems in 4 notebooks, having begun writing poetry in notebooks in his last school years. In his free time, he joined an amateur dramatic group, visited the cinema, took walks along Swansea Bay, and frequented Swansea’s pubs.

Thomas was still a teenager when many of his most famous poems were

published (of the 90 poems he eventually published, half were written during these early years). When “Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines” appeared in *The Listener* in 1934, it caught the attention of T. S. Eliot, Geoffrey Grigson, and Stephen Spender, and they published his first poetry volume, *18 Poems* in December 1934. The volume was critically acclaimed, netting him new admirers from the London poetry world and causing excitement because of its visionary qualities and the strange violence of its imagery. In 1936, his next collection *Twenty-five Poems*, published by J. M. Dent, also received much critical praise. In all, he wrote half his poems while living in the family home, before moving to London, all the while developing a reputation for heavy drinking.



D. Thomas, late teens

In early 1936, Thomas met Caitlin Macnamara (1913–1994), a 22-year-old blonde-haired, blue-eyed dancer of Irish descent. She had run away from home and, with the intent of making dance a career, had joined the chorus line at the London Palladium at age 18. Introduced by Augustus John, Caitlin’s lover, she and Thomas met in The Wheatsheaf pub on Rathbone Place in London’s West End. He liked to comment that he and Caitlin were in bed together 10 minutes after they first met, and ever the romantic (!), a drunken Thomas proposed with his head in her lap. Although Caitlin initially continued her relationship with John, she and Thomas courted in the second half of 1936, then married in Penzance, Cornwall, in July 1937. In early 1938 they moved to Wales, renting a cottage in the village of Laugharne, Carmarthenshire, where their first child was born in January 1939. Also in 1939 *The Map of Love* appeared as a collection of 16 poems, along with 7 of the 20 short stories published in magazines since 1934. Although he was appreciated as a popular poet in his lifetime, Thomas found earning a living as a writer difficult, with he and his family surviving hand-to-mouth. Hounded by creditors, he borrowed heavily from friends and acquaintances, even writing letters to random literary figures asking for support, a plan he hoped would lead to long-term regular income. And then there was the alcohol. Caitlin’s autobiographies, *Caitlin Thomas—Leftover Life to Kill* (1957) and *My Life with Dylan Thomas: Double Drink Story* (1997), describe the destructive effect of alcoholism on the poet and to their relationship: she wrote, “Our one and only true love was drink” and “The bar was our altar.” In July 1940 the family left Laugharne and moved to the home of critic John Davenport in Marshfield, Gloucestershire, where Thomas and Davenport collaborated on the satire *The Death of the King’s Canary*, not published due to fears of libel until 1976.

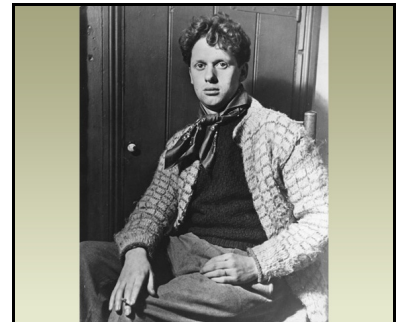


Dylan and Caitlin Thomas

At the outset of World War II, Thomas’s health was too poor to qualify for ready service; it was so bad he was sometimes confined him to bed coughing up

blood and mucus. In February 1941 Swansea was bombed by the Luftwaffe in a terrifying “three nights’ blitz,” and Thomas marked the event with a radio play, *Return Journey Home* (broadcast only much later, in June 1947). In May 1941, he and Caitlin moved to London, leaving their son with his grandmother at Blashford in Hampshire. Thomas eventually found work in 1942 with Strand Films scripting, which provided his first regular income since his teenage reporting stints. In early 1943 he began a relationship with Pamela Glendower, one of several affairs he would have during his marriage, although the affairs generally either ran out of steam or were halted after Caitlin discovered his infidelity. Caitlin gave birth to a daughter in London in March 1943, living in a run-down studio in Chelsea (comprised of a single large room with a curtain to separate the kitchen).

In 1944, with Germany bombing London, Thomas moved the family to a cottage in Blaen Cwm near Llangain, then in September to New Quay in West Wales. The latter move inspired him to write the radio piece *Quite Early One Morning*, which was broadcast by the BBC in August 1945. In the 3 years beginning in October 1945 Thomas would make over 100 broadcasts for the BBC Home Service, being employed for not only his poetry readings, but also his discussions and critiques. This regular job brought him into contact with Louis MacNeice, a congenial drinking companion whose advice he cherished. In September 1946, the BBC began transmitting a high-culture network that, with Thomas’s rich, sonorous voice, led to character parts, including the lead in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* as well as Satan in an adaptation of *Paradise Lost*. Although he had an uneasy relationship with BBC management and his heavy drinking made a staff job impossible, Thomas remained a popular guest on BBC radio talk shows, becoming “in every sense a [national] celebrity.” Nonetheless, in late 1946 Thomas turned up at the home of historian A. J. P. Taylor, homeless and with Caitlin in tow, being permitted to take up residence in the garden summerhouse.



Dylan Thomas, BBC years

The publication of *Deaths and Entrances* in 1946 improved his financial circumstances somewhat. In May 1948 he and his family moved to his final home, the Boat House at Laugharne, purchased for him by recent benefactor Margaret Taylor for £2,500 in April 1949. Thomas acquired a

garage on a cliff ledge 100 yards from the house, turning it into his writing shed, where Caitlin gave birth to their 3rd child in July 1949. Just before moving to Laugharne, Thomas rented “Pelican House” for his parents, opposite his regular drinking place Brown’s Hotel; they lived there from 1949–53, where his father died and the funeral was held.

Thomas’s radio recordings for the BBC during the late 1940s brought him the attention of a greater public, and in 1950



Dylan Thomas, c.1950

he embarked, at the invitation of American poet and literary critic John Brinnin, on a lucrative three-month tour of arts centers and campuses, involving about 40 venues. His readings brought him considerable fame; he was a brilliant reader of his own and others' poems, and many people who do not normally read poetry were drawn to Thomas's by the magic of his own recitations. His readings were also marked by erratic behavior, cementing his legend as the wild bohemian poet. Invited to many parties and functions during the tour, he became drunk on several occasions, going out of his way to shock. Despite a range of wealthy patrons, including Margaret Taylor, Thomas was in 1951 still in financial difficulty, and he wrote several begging letters to notable literary figures, including the likes of T. S. Eliot. Thinking that if Thomas had a permanent address in London, he would be able to gain steady work there, Mrs. Taylor bought a property, 54 Delancey Street, in Camden Town, and in late 1951 Thomas and Caitlin lived in a basement flat there, which Thomas would describe as his "London house of horror."



Dylan Thomas, early 1950s

Despite Taylor's many concerns, Thomas undertook a 2<sup>nd</sup> tour of the US in 1952, this time with Caitlin after she had discovered he had been unfaithful on his earlier trip. The 2<sup>nd</sup> whirlwind tour was intensive, taking in 46 engagements, but the couple continued to drink heavily, and Thomas began to suffer with gout and lung problems. But the trip also resulted in the 1st vinyl recording of his poetry, released in America later that year. One of the works recorded during this time, *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, became his most popular prose work in America (reissued in 2008). In April 1953 Thomas returned alone for a 3<sup>rd</sup> tour of the States. He performed solo a work-in-progress version of *Under Milk Wood* for the first time at Harvard University in May and a week later, with a full cast, at the Poetry Center in New York. He met the deadline only after being locked in a room by Brinnin's assistant, Liz Reitell, and was still editing the script on the afternoon of the performance, its last lines having to be handed to the actors as they were putting on their makeup. Thomas spent the last 9 or 10 days of this tour in New York mostly in the company of Reitell, with whom he had an affair. During this time, while drunk, he fractured his arm falling down a flight of stairs. Early 1953 was a bad time for him in other respects: in just the first few months Thomas's sister died from liver cancer, one of his patrons took an overdose of sleeping pills, three friends died at an early age, and Caitlin had an abortion.

After returning home, he worked on *Under Milk Wood* in Wales before submitting the original manuscript in mid-October 1953. It was copied and returned to Thomas, who lost it in a pub in London and immediately required a duplicate to take to America on another tour of poetry reading and talks, his 4<sup>th</sup>, organized again by Brinnin. Thomas was ill at the time



Dylan Thomas

and in a melancholy mood about the trip, relying on an inhaler to aid his breathing and reportedly suffering from blackouts. Brinnin, who did not travel to New York because of his own writing commitments, had handed responsibility to Liz Reitell, who was eager to see Thomas again for the first time since their three-week romance early in the year. Despite looking awful and feeling worse, Thomas told her he had had a terrible week, had missed her terribly, and wanted to go to bed with her. The saga that then ensued, regarding Thomas's last days, would strain credibility if the subject were not Dylan Thomas (those of you with lurid inclinations can check the narrative on Wikipedia). But, in summary, amid days of historic New York air pollution and after a near-heroic number of sojourns to bars between collapses, Thomas's condition worsened drastically, and he fell into a coma from which he never recovered, dying in New York at noon on 9 November. A post mortem gave the primary cause of death as pneumonia, with pressure on the brain and a fatty liver as contributing factors. Amazingly, despite his heavy drinking, his liver showed no sign of cirrhosis. Thomas died intestate with assets valuing about £100. Following his death, Thomas's body was brought back to Wales for burial in the village churchyard at Laugharne. The procession to the church was filmed, and the wake took place at Brown's Hotel. Over 30 years later in 1994 Caitlin died and was buried alongside him. Thomas's last collection—*Collected Poems, 1934–1952*—published when he was 38, won the Foyle poetry prize.

Thomas's refusal to align with any literary group or movement has made him and his work difficult to categorize. Although influenced by the modern symbolism and surrealism movement, he refused to follow its creed; his verbal style played against strict verse forms. Thomas's early poetry is noted for its verbal density, alliteration, sprung rhythm, and internal rhyme, possibly influenced by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Certainly, Thomas's influences were eclectic. He greatly admired Thomas Hardy, reciting Hardy's work at his readings in America. Other poetic influences included James Joyce, Arthur Rimbaud, and D. H. Lawrence. Thomas himself confided that the poems that had influenced him most were Mother Goose rhymes, which his parents taught him when he was a child: "[B]efore I could read them for myself I had come to love the words of them. The words alone. What the words stood for was of a very secondary importance." Although Thomas disliked Welsh nationalism and fiercely decried any notion of "Welshness" in his poetry, he had a deep connection with Wales and acknowledged returning there when he had difficulty writing. Caitlin Thomas wrote that he worked "in a fanatically narrow groove, . . . of direct hereditary descent in the land of his birth, which he never in thought, and hardly in body, moved out of."

After Thomas's premature death, a critical reaction set in, some critics declaring that he had been overrated as a poet because of the sensational role he played in life. But it is now clear that at his best he was an original writer of great



Dylan Thomas

power and beauty, and he has received the recognition befitting one of Britain's greatest. In Swansea's maritime quarter stand the Dylan Thomas Theatre, home of the Swansea Little Theatre of which Thomas was once a member, and the Dylan Thomas literature center, which hosts the annual Dylan Thomas Festival and where exhibitions and lectures are held year round. Outside the center stands a bronze statue of him by John Doubleday. A small, rock monument to Thomas also stands in an enclosed garden within Cwmdonkin Park, one of his favorite childhood haunts, close to his birthplace. In 1982 a plaque, inscribed with the last two lines of "Fern Hill," was unveiled in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey. Thomas's home in Laugharne, the Boathouse, is now a museum, and his writing shed is also preserved. In 2004 the Dylan Thomas Prize was created in his honor, awarded to the best published writer in English under the age of 30. In 2005 the Dylan Thomas Screenplay Award was established, awarded at the annual Swansea Bay Film Festival.

Thomas saw men and women locked in cycles of growth, love, procreation, new growth, death, and new life—with the beginning of growth also being the first movement toward death, and the beginning of love leading to procreation, new growth, and so in turn to death again and to life again. In his best poems the closely woven imagery (deriving from the Bible, Welsh folklore and preaching, and Freud) is organized to present aspects of this theme. His more open-worked poems of reminiscence and autobiographical motion communicate more immediately to the reader through their fine lyrical feeling and compelling use of simple natural images. Thomas once said of his poetry, "These poems, with all their crudities, doubts, and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God, and I'd be a damn fool if they weren't."