



Dylan Thomas 100

Education Pack

Pupils aged: 10-16

Introduction

2014 marks the centenary of Dylan Thomas’ birth. This education pack celebrates the work of the great Welsh writer who fell in love with words at an early age. It provides ideas for discussion and a range of activities to use with students aged 10 – 16, in both primary and secondary schools.

Through the suggested activities and support materials you can:

- learn about Dylan Thomas and his work as a poet and writer.
- learn about writing poetry, prose and plays using the work of Dylan Thomas as a stimulus
- learn about global citizenship with the writing of Dylan Thomas as a springboard for extended activities.

Our themes can be used as starting points to engage students with Dylan`s writing, as a stimulus for exciting learning or form part of larger cross curricular projects with a partner school, collaborating over a number of subject areas. The possibilities are endless, the choices are yours!

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Front Cover image:Dylan Thomas sculpture in Swansea. Photo by Jon L-Bon © Shutterstock

Background Information

“I wanted to write poetry in the beginning because I had fallen in love with words. The first poems I knew were nursery rhymes and before I could read them for myself I had come to love the words of them. The words alone.” Dylan Thomas

Dylan Marlais Thomas was born on 27th October 1914 at 5 Cwmdonkin Drive, in Swansea, South Wales. He lived a full and controversial life and died at the early age of 39 in New York in 1953. His father was an English teacher and as a child Dylan loved nursery rhymes, comic books and the language of Shakespeare. He started writing poems in a series of note books when he was very young and had his first poem published in the school magazine at the age of 11. Childhood summers were spent largely at his aunt’s farm in Carmarthenshire in rural Wales and these holidays inspired a number of his poems as well as short stories and broadcasts.

Dylan left school at 16 and became a reporter for a local newspaper - The South Wales Daily Post. He left after just a year to concentrate on writing poetry full time and had his first book of poems called 18 Poems published at the age of 20. Other volumes of poetry followed including Twenty- five Poems in 1936 and Deaths and Entrances in 1946.

Although chiefly renowned for poems such as ‘Do not go gentle into that good night,’ ‘Fern Hill.’ and his famous play for voices, ‘Under Milk Wood,’ Dylan also wrote scripts for radio broadcasts and plays, short stories, films and an unfinished novel.

What clearly shines through all of his writing is his imaginative use of imagery and the overriding importance he placed on the rich sounds of the words themselves.



Theme 1 - Portraits of People

Ideas for discussion and activities

Age range: 10-14

Curriculum Links: English, Art and Design

Global themes, skills and outlooks: Identity and belonging, empathy, creative thinking, critical thinking

In this unit children explore techniques used to create interesting characters and explore some of the characters created by Dylan Thomas in his prose and poetry.

The poet Ted Hughes wrote that the trick to producing realistic characters in literature is to use “precise descriptive flashes or recount one or two typical incidents.’ Throughout his prose and poetry, Dylan Thomas does this brilliantly; creating memorable portraits of people, using just a few flashes or incidents which manage to convey something interesting or intriguing about their appearance, personality or way of life.

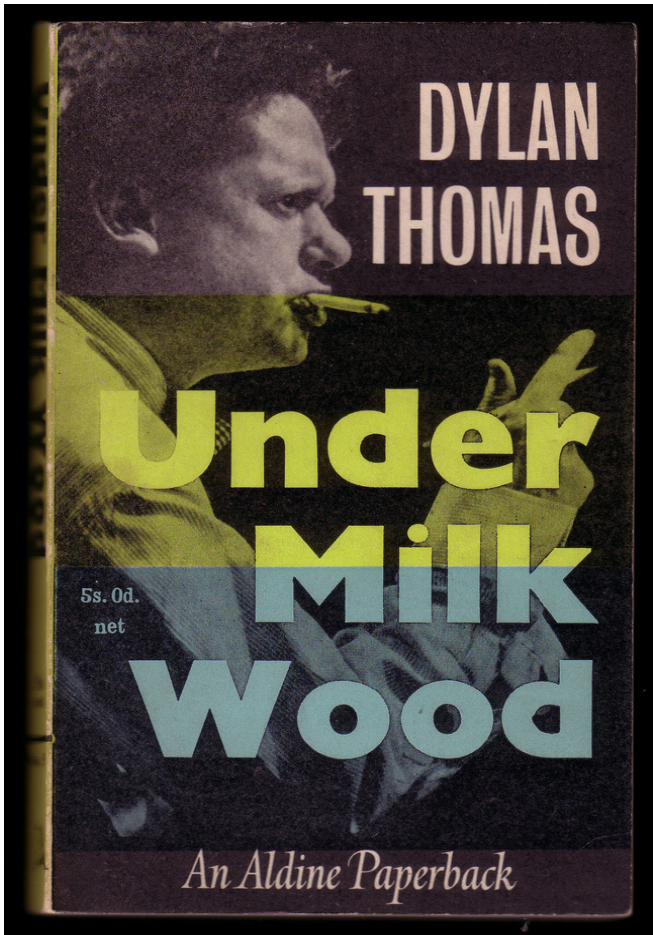
Share with your students some typical examples. These could include introductions to many of the characters in Under Milk Wood, the reactions of Mr and Mrs Prothero to the fire in A Child’s Christmas in Wales or The hunchback in the park from Deaths and Entrances. (These can be found in Appendix A.)

Work in groups to explore the techniques used by Thomas in these extracts which achieve these ‘descriptive flashes’ and individual reactions to the writing and characters. Jot any ideas, questions and thoughts on post it notes and share them with the rest of the class.

Ask your students to choose one of Dylan Thomas’ characters that they find interesting and invent an imaginary biography or diary entry for them.

They could include:

- when and where the character was born
- where they lived
- stories from their youth
- their hopes and dreams for the future.



Under Milk Wood photo by Dave Bleasdale under Creative Commons license.

Theme 1 - Portraits of People

Creating characters

When artists paint a portrait of a subject, they often include symbols or objects to give additional visual clues about aspects of that person’s life. Look at examples from the National Portrait Gallery website (www.npg.org.uk) of paintings of well known figures (www.npg.org.uk) and then ask your students to create a picture or sculpture of their chosen character at a particular moment in time. This might be a clay model of Mrs Prothero banging her gong “announcing ruin like a town crier in Pompeii” or a painting or collage of Captain Cat,” the retired blind seacaptain, asleep in his bunk in the seashelled, ship-in-bottles, shipshape best cabin of Schooner House.”

Ask them to consider how and where the character should appear in their portrait. Will they be standing, sitting or lying down? What might they be wearing or holding that tells us something about their life? What are they thinking or feeling at that moment?

Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear portrait by Vincent Van Gogh exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery, London



Ask your class to each think about someone they know well. It could be a member of their own family or a friend. How would they describe them to someone who has never met them?. Do they have curly or straight hair?. Are they shy or funny? Do they have any particular quirks, habits or sayings? Ask them to write down a list of their distinguishing features. The poet John Hegley for example, describes his three most distinguishing features as :

1. I’m quite funny.
2. I’m very weedy.
3. I’ve got a scar on my heel from where I put my foot in the wheel of my brother’s motorbike.

Ask your pupils to use their notes to produce a piece of creative writing or poetry that vividly brings the person to life in words. Encourage them to use some of the techniques they noted in their discussions about Dylan Thomas’ work and draft and redraft their writing until they are completely happy with their choice of words. Thomas himself worked hard to achieve the creative effects that characterise his writing. The following manuscript from the British Museum/BBC materials A History of the World shows just one of over 250 drafts that he made for his Poem in October, until he was completely satisfied with the result.

Theme 1 - Portraits of People

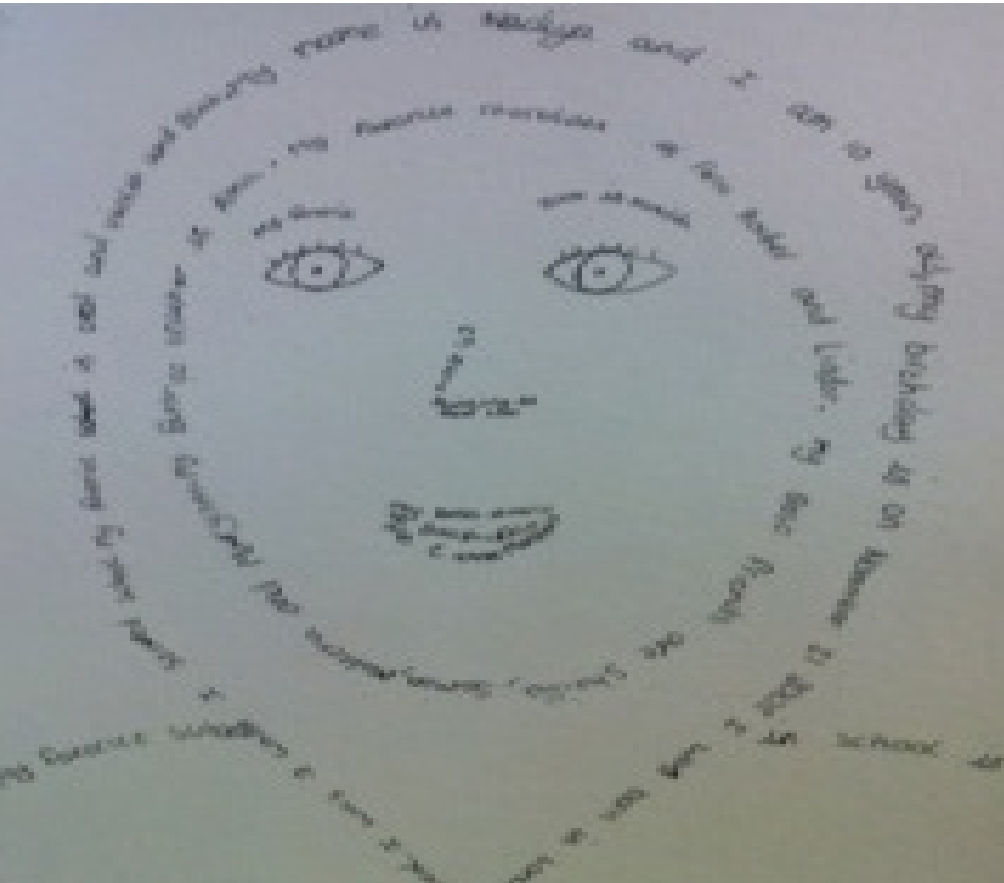
FOLLOW UP ACTIVITES

Dylan Thomas experimented with shape in his work - writing poems in shapes such as diamonds and hourglasses. Perhaps your students could also experiment with shapes and words.

Ask them to bring into school a photograph of the person they wrote about.

Make a simple line drawing of their face, then use words and phrases from their descriptions, to create their subject's facial features, as the children at William Burroughs Primary School in London did in the illustrations below.

From an early age Dylan Thomas avidly kept note books in which he jotted down his ideas and poems. He also used word lists and made up his own rhyming dictionary to help with his writing. Encourage your pupils to keep their own note books and lists of interesting words and phrases. Allow time during the school day to update these and add any thoughts, ideas, quotes or sketches that could form part of their creative work at a later date.



Partner work

If working with a partner school on this theme you could:

- Discuss favourite literary characters and significant writers in both countries
- Exchange biographies, diary entries and photographs of your art work
- Swap poems and descriptions of a person your pupils know well

Theme 2 - Places and sounds

“Poems should be read by the ears and not just the eyes.” Dylan Thomas

Age range: 10-14

Curriculum Links: English, Drama, Art and Design, IT

Global themes, skills and outlooks: Identity and belonging, communicating, collaborating, creative thinking

In this unit children explore a sense of place and sound. They listen to the sounds that words create when they are spoken. They look at the way writers use literary effects to create effective settings and atmospheres, learn about alliteration and rhyme and use these techniques in their own writing.

Reading aloud was an important feature in the life and work of Dylan Thomas. From a very early age his parents read to him and Dylan adored the sounds of words even before he understood their meanings. In later life, he became famous for his readings on the radio and at live events, with audiences enjoying his deep, lilting and dramatic voice.

Ask your students to work in pairs and read aloud the evocative opening paragraphs of Under Milk Wood and the radio broadcast Holiday Memory from Appendix B.. These passages vividly capture the essence of a fictional seaside village on a spring night and the excitement of a summer visit to the seaside.

Encourage your students to try saying the lines in different ways – as a whisper, as a shout, as a piece of gossip - before choosing a way to present it to the rest of the class or record it

Discuss how Dylan Thomas uses language, punctuation, rhythm and distinctive details to capture places that he knew so well. Ask your pupils to pick a particular line or image and explain why they think it is effective. Can they find other similar examples in his work and the work of other well known writers?

A collage of sounds

Encourage your pupils to listen really carefully and make a list of everything they can hear. It may be the wind rustling the leaves in trees, passing traffic, the sound of birdsong, the hum of a fluorescent light or the buzzing of a mosquito. Listen in different places and at different times of day. They could record the sounds and make a collage of sounds or soundscape and then use their list of sounds as a stimulus for writing their own poem. Ask them to think about morning sounds and how they make you feel. What about the sounds you can hear late at night when you are about to sleep? Compose a poem that tells the story of the day through the sounds you hear.

Create an ‘alliterative’ A to Z

Great writers play with the sounds of words to create moods and effects. Dylan Thomas was a master at using literary techniques, such as alliteration, rhyme and repetition to create musical and poetic effects. Whether he was writing poetry, prose or plays, he loved to string words together to create sonic effects.

Encourage your pupils to experiment with some of these effects:

Alliteration is the repetition of the same sounds at the beginning of words close enough together in a sentence to be noticed by the ear. Dylan Thomas’s work is full of alliterative phrases;

In the story Holiday Memory, for example, Boys ‘scramble and scamper’ up ‘stairs three at a time’.

Ask your class to have a look through some of his work and see if you can spot some more examples. Make a collection.



Listen to your heart photo by Olicia Alcock under Creative Commons license.

Theme 2 - Places and sounds



Zebra portrait photo by Safari Jungle under Creative Commons license.

Your own A to Z

Work in small groups and try to create an A to Z of alliterative phrases.

A. Mix apples and apricots in an awesome pie.

B. A chocolate brownie and a big iced bun

C. Six cream cakes and a custard tart.

It doesn't have to be about food. How about some funny animals?

Y. A long haired Yak with a yellow yo-yo.

Z. A zebra zig-zagged through the zoo... zoom!

Encourage your students to have fun with words and use dictionaries to help with ideas. They could also draw some of the fantastic images they create to make an alliterative alphabet picture book for younger children.

FOLLOW UP ACTIVITIES

Arrange to take your students for a walk around interesting parts of your local area and ask them to capture the sights and sounds of everyday places using sketch books and digital cameras. Record interesting details of buildings, shops and people, sounds, smells and, snippets of overheard conversations. Back in the classroom use these notes and images to write a description or poem which really brings the place to life in words. Think about using:

- Alliteration.
- Patterns of words or words that are linked in meaning
- Similes, metaphors or personification to help create vivid images or pictures

Watch the following animated clip made of Under Milk Wood (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRUpdzCF-Hg>) Do your students think this effectively captures the setting of the fictional village of LLareggub. Ask groups to create black and white story boards for different parts of Under Milk Wood or Holiday Memory and if possible make simple animations of them.

Partner work

If working with a partner school on this theme you could:

- Find out how writers from both countries describe places they know well
- Exchange information, photographs, poems and descriptions of your locality
- Make tourist brochures, blogs or films about your own and your partner school's locality
- Exchange pictures of storyboards or animations

Theme 3 - Childhood and Memories

Age range: 10- 14 14-16

Curriculum Links: English, Art and Design, PSHE

Global themes, skills and outlooks: Identity and belonging, empathy, creative thinking, self awareness

In this unit children use their own memories of special events as a starting point for creative writing

Dylan Thomas often wrote about his life, his friends and family and childhood memories of special days and celebrations. In A Child's Christmas in Wales he describes how powerful memories of Christmas are all rolled into one like "a snowball growing whiter and bigger and rounder like a cold and headlong moon bundling down the sky that was our street... I plunge my hands in the snow and bring out whatever I can find: holly, or robins, or pudding, squabbles and carols and oranges and tin whistles and the fire in the front room..."

Ask your pupils to plunge their hands into a snowball of memories and talk about things they remember about special events in their lives. These may include birthdays, holidays, their first day at school, a new pet or learning something new like riding a bike. Perhaps bring in an object or photograph that has significance to you and talk about how it featured in a special occasion. Read A Child's Christmas and ask your pupils to make a list or storyboard of all the main events that happen. Discuss if we remember every single detail of events or are memories sometimes exaggerated or jumbled together into one with photographs and family stories.

Discuss how Dylan Thomas includes realistic details and cadences of speech in his stories and details from his own childhood to make the events he describes seem real. In the short story The Fight, he portrays his younger self sitting in his bedroom by the boiler reading "through my exercise books of poetry with a poem printed in the local

newspaper pasted on the mirror"- all of which is based on real details from his own life.

He also enjoyed playing with language and the senses. This can be seen in the following extract from the radio broadcast Holiday Memory. It sits as a wonderful summer cousin to Dylan's great and most famous winter tale, "A Child's Christmas in Wales"

"I remember the smell of sea and seaweed, wet flesh, wet hair, wet bathing-dresses, the warm smell as of a rabbit field after rain, the smell of pop and splashed sunshades and toffee, the stable-and-straw smell of hot, tossed, tumbled, dug, and trodden sand, the swill-and-gaslamp smell of Saturday night, though the sun shone strong, from the bellying beer-tents, the smell of vinegar on shelled cockles, winkle-smell, shrimp-smell, the dripping-oily backstreet winter-smell of chips in newspapers, the smell of ships from sun-dazed docks round the corner of the sand-hills, the smell of the known and paddled-in sea moving, full of the drowned and herrings, out and away and beyond and further still towards the antipodes that hung their koala-bear and Maoris, kangaroos, and boomerangs, upside down over the backs of stars."

What a sentence! All 131 words of it. It seems to break almost every rule about sentence construction that you may have been taught in school but it is brilliant.

It captures the sights, sounds and smells of a day at the seaside in all its energetic excitement. In this story Dylan's senses appear to be working on overdrive. See it, hear it, smell it, taste it and feel it. We know that Dylan loved the sounds that words made. Count the number of 's' sounds and words he uses to describe the smells of sea, seaweed and ships from sun-dazed docks. You can almost hear the sound of the waves caressing the sand as they gently roll in from the 'two-tongued sea' at Swansea.



Girl with snowball - photo by Romona Haim © Shutterstock

Theme 3 - Childhood and Memories

Ask your pupils to think about a memorable event from their childhood that would make a good setting for a story or poem. It might be a festival such as Christmas, Diwali, Eid or Hanukkah or a family occasion such as a birthday, wedding or holiday. Make a list of the sights, sounds, tastes, smells and feel of the day. Use your collection to create a poem or a short story. Remind your pupils to use their understanding of alliteration and rhyme and play with the words and the sounds that they make.

Think about how repetition can create internal echoes and rhythms within a piece of writing. In Holiday memory Dylan Thomas repeats the phrase I remember to begin a number of paragraphs:

I remember the sea telling lies in a shell held to my ear for a whole, harmonious, hollow minute by a small, wet girl in an enormous bathing suit marked ‘Corporation Property.’

I remember sharing the last of my moist buns with a boy and a lion. Tawny and savage with cruel nails and capricious mouth, the little boy tore and devoured. Wild as seed cake, ferocious as a hearth rug the depressed and verminous lion nibbled like a mouse at his half a bun and hiccupped in the sad dusk of his cage.

I remember a man like an alderman or a bailiff, bowlered and collarless, with a bag of monkey nuts in his hand, crying ‘Ride ‘em cowboy!’ time and time again as he whirled in his chairplane giddily above the upturn ned laughing faces

Try using this refrain to begin each line or paragraph.

FOLLOW UP ACTIVITIES

Dylan Thomas’ writing often features childhood songs and rhymes. Ask your students to collect examples of playground games and rhymes that they and their families played when they were younger. Swap with your partner school if you have one.

Fields of meaning

Older children can be introduced to the idea of ‘semantic fields’. Dylan Thomas created semantic fields as part of the way he created his poetry.

A semantic field is a collection of words that are connected to a common meaning. Simple fields are often defined by subject matter, such as, words to do with our senses or words to do with time. Digging deeper we see that semantic fields are often used metaphorically. For example, sports writers often use the semantic field of war, conflict and violence to frame their stories. Football teams ‘battle’ it out, a goal in extra time is called a ‘killer punch’.

Growing as a poet

Metaphor is an important part of the poetic toolkit. Words or phrases used to describe one thing are applied to another, to create associations and layers of meaning. In the work of Dylan Thomas we see creative use of semantic fields and metaphor to explore ideas and feelings. In ‘Do not go gentle into that good Night’, for example, we see the complimentary fields of light/dark used to explore life/death. ‘Life’ uses a semantic field of words such as ‘light, burn, day, lightening, bright, sun, blaze and meteors’. Death is identified with words like ‘night, dark and blind’. The poem also collects ‘wise men, wild men, good men and grave men’ as counterpoints to the most important man in the poem, his father.

Before beginning to write their poetry, invite children to construct a collection of words organised into semantic fields. Encourage them to think hard about how their collection of words might be used metaphorically to explore complex ideas and feelings. For example, how might a semantic field about ‘fire and fireworks’ be used to explore feelings of ‘joy’? How might a semantic field about ‘weather’ be used to explore ideas about ‘renewal’ in a poem about New Years Eve?

Partner work

If working with a partner school on this theme you could:

- Exchange information about the special days and festivals that are celebrated in both countries .Collect pictures and information about these events
- Exchange playground rhymes and games popular in both communities
- Send copies of your poems or short stories for your partner school to read and illustrate

Theme 4 - Exploring Feelings and Emotions, Language and Form

Age range: 13-16

Curriculum Links: English, PSHE ,Art and Design

Global themes, skills and outlooks: Identity and belonging, empathy, creative thinking, critical thinking

In this unit children explore how poetry can be used to express emotions and learn about different poetic forms.

Rage and blaze like meteors

Poetry often deals with deeply felt emotions – sometimes exploring feelings of joy, love and happiness and at others more difficult emotions like loss, grief and anger.

Dylan Thomas was very influenced by the times in which he lived including the time spent in London and Swansea during the Blitz in WW2. The titles of some of his poems in Deaths and Entrances such as “A Refusal to Mourn at the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London” and “Among those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred” give an idea of some of the difficult subject matter Dylan was exploring.

Everybody has feelings and exploring them through the arts can help us cope with these emotions. Reading the work of others can develop empathy and help to show that underneath our differences there is much that every human feels.

Note: Teachers will need to be sensitive when introducing some of the work of Dylan Thomas with younger children as it often deals with issues that are emotionally charged.

One of Dylan’s most famous poems deals with death and in particular, the impending death of his father.



Highgate Cemetery, photo by Lameya Chaudhury Photography

Do not go gentle into that good night,

Old age should burn and rave at close of day;

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,

Because their words had forked no lightning they

Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright

Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,

And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,

Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight

Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,

Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

Do not go gentle into that good night.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Theme 4 - Exploring Feelings and Emotions, Language and Form



Moodboard photo by Rav Vin Nair under Creative Commons License

Thinking about the emotions in the poem

In our lives we all have to face loss at some time. It might be the loss of a grandparent or parent or someone else we love. In this poem Dylan laments his father's loss of health and strength. He encourages him to fight against 'the dying of the light' and to cling to life even though death is inevitable.

The poem might also be seen as an encouragement to us all to seize the moment and make the most of the opportunities life offers. It is the raw emotion and the urgent tone, however, that have made this poem one of the most widely read works of poetry in the world.

Look at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1fTlIsUGks> to hear the actor Anthony Hopkins read it.

Mood boards

Discuss the feelings that we all share as human beings. What are the things that bring us happiness and joy? What things bring us a sense of sorrow and loss? What makes us angry and frustrated? Ask your pupils to collect images from newspapers, magazines and the web that reflect these emotions then use these words and images to create 'mood boards', combining images and words in a collage.

Theme 4 - Exploring Feelings and Emotions, Language and Form

Poetic Forms

Despite the emotional content of the poem, Dylan has chosen a very formal poetic form to contain his highly charged feelings. The contrast between the strict form and high emotion seems to add power to the poem. The form is called a Villanelle. A Villanelle has 6 stanzas or verses. The first 5 verses are three lines long while the 6th verse is 4 lines. That makes 19 lines in total.

The first and third lines of the 1st verse recur throughout the poem. Line 1 (Do not go gentle into that good night) is found at the end of verse 2 and 4. Line 3 (Rage, rage against the dying of the light) appears at the end of verse 3 and 5. Both lines are joined to complete the poem at the end of verse 6.

Finally you may have noticed there are only 2 end-rhymes used throughout the entire poem. Rhyme one is night, light, right, bright, flight, sight, and height. Rhyme two is day, they, bay, way, gay and pray.

It is quite a feat to use such a strict form to express such raw emotion. Other poets also use this form. See the example called One Art by Elizabeth Bishop in Appendix D.

Another strict poetic form that originates from Japanese culture is the Haiku. Traditional haiku are often concerned with nature and consist of three lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables respectively. Count the syllables in the following Haiku by Owen Sheers.

Calendar

Autumn

- A spider has danced (5)
- A fingerprint in the space (7)
- Between two branches. (5)

Spring

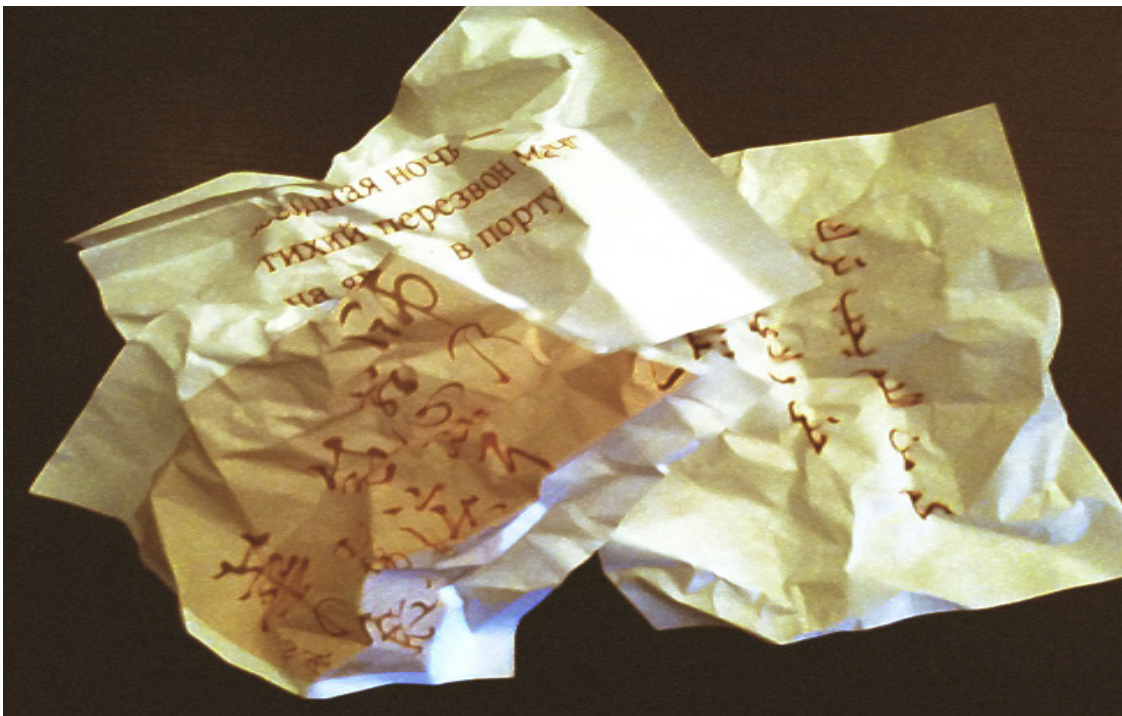
- Swallows crotchet and
- Minim the telephone wires,
- Sing volts down the line.

Writing Haiku requires discipline and can create simple but beautiful images. Find out more about Haiku here <http://www.haiku-poetry.org/what-is-haiku.html> Challenge your pupils to have a go at writing different poetic forms. They could begin with a haiku and then try a villanelle.

Partner work

If working with a partner school on this theme you could:

- Exchange your poetry anthologies about families and poems in different forms
- Find out about poetry forms commonly used in different cultures



Haiku photo by Don Alridger under Creative Commons License

Theme 5 - A little ‘Welsh Air’

Age Range: 12-16

Curriculum Links: English, History, Art and design

Global Themes, skills and outlooks: Identity and belonging, fairness and equality, empathy, critical thinking

Learning opportunities

In this unit we learn about how identity is often shaped by place and history. We explore how we can, like all artists, be inspired and influenced by the work of others.

Setting the scene

Dylan Thomas is one of Wales’s most famous poets and writers however, he did not speak Welsh and wrote in English. In spite of this, his work is rooted in the people and geography of Wales; from the streets and seafront of Swansea⁹ to the small fishing village of Laugharne¹⁰ and on to the hilly farms of Carmarthenshire,¹¹ the Welsh landscape and people permeate much of his writing.

We know that Dylan had encountered the work of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hopkins, was born in England but spent time in Wales where he learned Welsh and Welsh poetry. When writing about his own poetry Hopkins wrote to a friend saying “The chiming of consonants I got in part from the Welsh, which is very rich in sound and imagery.”



Welsh flag photo by National Assembly under Creative Commons License

Hopkins was influenced by some of the sonic artistry of Welsh poetry and adopted some features in his English poems. “I was fascinated with cynghanedd ” writes Hopkins. Cynghanedd is the name given to particular forms of Welsh poetry. Hopkins interpreted cynghanedd as “consonant-chime”, that is, musical sounds made by combinations of consonants, like the sound of bells. Hopkins borrowed and applied his love of chiming sounds to his own remarkable work. And this is what some readers recognize as the “Welsh air” in his English poetry.

Dylan Thomas was not often forthcoming in attributing his direct influences but it is easy to hear the connections between the rhythms, rhymes and chiming sounds that both Hopkins and Thomas use. Similarly, both poets like to create poems that work more like impressionist paintings rather than photographs. Both seem acutely aware of the power of sound and words to evoke images and moods from which deeper meanings emerge.

If some of the poems of Dylan Thomas appear elusive, don’t worry, read them aloud again and enjoy the sounds and the words and allow the images and meaning to surface slowly. Dylan Thomas said that no technical analysis of poetry can ever adequately explain the mysterious power of poetry. He felt that the best craftsmanship always leave space in the works of the poem, so that something that is not ‘explicitly visible can creep, crawl, flash, or thunder in.’¹²

9 Return Journey from Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog

10 Under Milk Wood – a play for voices

11 Fern Hill – a poem from Deaths and Entrances

12 Brian Arkins National University of Ireland, Galway

Theme 5 - A little ‘Welsh Air’

Activities

Impressionist poems

Read the two poems in Appendix E that describe the movements of birds, a falcon and a hawk, as they soar and hover. Hopkins poem is called The Windhover and Thomas’ is called St John’s hill. Both poets describe the scenes, Hopkins at dawn and Thomas at Dusk, and use the flight of the birds to consider other themes.

Hopkins, in the mastery of the falcon’s flight, sees the hand of God in the beauty of nature. Thomas, in the hover and swoop of the hunting hawk as it attacks the playful sparrows, ponders the fragility of life. St John’s hill is a small promontory that sits across the bay from The Boat House at Laugharne where Dylan lived only a few years after the end of the second world war.

After reading the poems and talking about your response to them, take a look at some of the technical aspects, especially the use of alliteration and rhyme. Maybe take some coloured highlighter pens and highlight the alliterative ‘chimes’ in one colour. (For example, you might draw attention to the D sounds in line two of the Windhover or the S sounds in line seven and eight of St John’s Hill) Look for the end-rhymes and the internal rhymes and mark with a different colour. Discuss how the sounds and rhythms of the poems add to the feelings the poets are exploring.

Now it is time to have a go at writing your own poem. Here a few starting points.

From paint to poems

Gather some examples of impressionist paintings. Use them as a stimulus for some impressionist poems. Try to reflect the mood of the painting in the words. ‘Suggest’ and ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’. We are trying to create atmospheres rather than accurate journalism. Leave some space for ideas to ‘creep, crawl, flash, or thunder in.’

Adding some ‘Welsh Air’ to a poem

Use some of the techniques that Thomas and Hopkins used to create rhythms and sonic effects.



Woman with a Parasol - Madame Monet and her son. 1875 © Claude

Monet. Photo by Sally under Creative Commons license.

Theme 6 - Nightingales in an alien tongue

Age range : 10-16

Curriculum links: English, History, Languages,

Global themes, skills and outlooks: Identity and belonging, fairness and equality, positive sense of identity

Learning opportunities

In this unit we learn a little about the Welsh language and consider why Dylan Thomas’s father chose not to teach his son Welsh. We learn about ‘The Blue Books’ and how they triggered a revival of the Welsh Language in schools. We learn why Celtic writers like Dylan Thomas are sometimes described as ‘nightingales in an alien tongue

Background information on the Welsh Language

Welsh is a Celtic language and is one of Europe’s oldest living languages. Although everyone in Wales is fluent in English, Welsh is still used everyday by about 20% of the population. The Welsh people are keen to keep the language alive so all official literature is published in Welsh as well as in English. If you visit Wales you will see that all road signs are in both English and Welsh. Today all Welsh children also learn the language at school but this was not always the case. There were times when some people sought to discourage the speaking of Welsh in schools.



Cardiff © Mat Wright

The mid 19th Century was a turbulent period in Welsh history. Popular risings, such as the Rebecca Riots⁹ and the Chartist Marches,¹⁰ broke out across the country. The Chartists were demanding that all men, not just landowners, should be allowed to vote in elections to Parliament.

The Blue Books

In 1846 a parliamentary report was commissioned on the role of Welsh in education. The three English commissioners who undertook the report found the provision of education in Wales to be extremely poor. The commissioners saw the Welsh language as a drawback and concluded that conditions would only improve with the introduction of English. When the report was published it caused uproar in Wales and was known as the ‘Treachery of the Blue Books’.¹¹ Owen Sheers, describes the story of The Blue Books in a poem in Appendix F.

During this period the use of English was sometimes enforced through the use of the ‘Welsh Not or Note’.¹² The Welsh Not was a means of forcing Welsh children to speak English at school. A stick or plaque was given to any child heard speaking Welsh during school. It was then handed on to whoever next spoke the language. At the end of lessons, the child left with the Welsh Not was punished.

Through the 19th and early 20th centuries the English language spread across South Wales. It became the tongue of working speech and for some was seen as the key to social advancement. The parents of Dylan Thomas were products of this period. Dylan’s father and mother were Welsh speakers, however, his father refused to teach him Welsh as he saw English as the most important language of advancement.

So while Dylan spoke no Welsh, it is in the echoing rhythms and phrasings, his choice of metaphor and odd coupling of words that many readers hear the lilt that is associated with the greatest Celtic writers. Read out loud the poem Fern Hill again. Listen and look out for sounds that chime and the poetic coupling of words, such as ‘lilting house’, ‘night above the dingle starry’, ‘rivers of the windfall light’ and ‘sang in my chains like the sea’. Its phrases like these that led to the description of Celtic writers as ‘Nightingales in an alien tongue’.

9 http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/wales/posts/the_rebecca_riots

10 http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/themes/society/politics_newport_rising.shtml

11 <http://www.llgc.org.uk/index.php?id=thebluebooks>

12 http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/themes/society/language_education.shtml

Theme 6 - Nightingales in an alien tongue

Activities

Cultural cousins

Discuss the benefits of bilingualism. People often talk about the economic and employment benefits. Explore some of the cultural and artistic benefits. Discuss why we might want to protect endangered languages in the same way we work to protect endangered animals?

Languages are often enriched by the adoption and assimilations of words. Make a collection of words that have been adopted from other places and cultures. Here is a list of words regularly used in English that have Indian (Sanskrit) roots:

Avatar	Bangle
Crimson	Catamaran
Dinghy	Guru
Jungle	Loot
Mantra	Nirvana
Shampoo	Sugar

Here’s another list of words used in English that have their roots in Wales.

Avon	Dad
Bow	Druid
Bard	Lawn
Corgi	Penguin

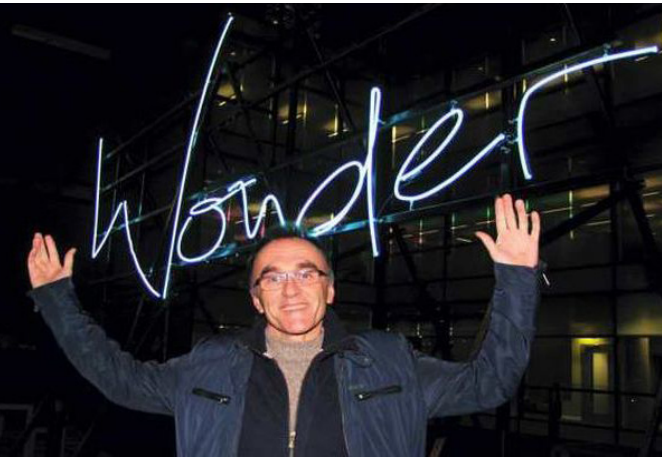
Can your pupils find other words that English has borrowed from different languages? Ask your partner school if they know of any words that come from their language or English words that they use and add to your display?

Modern English has not only assimilated words from other European languages, but from all over the world. On a map of the world post word-flags showing the origins of words that have been adopted into the English language.

Write a poem in English using key words that have their roots in other languages. With a little research you’ll be surprised how easy it is to do. Owing to the assimilation of words from many other languages throughout history, modern English contains a very large vocabulary, often with irregular spelling.

Follow up activities

Danny Boyle, Director of the 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony recently unveiled a neon artwork showing his favourite word, Wonder. In an interview he said this word makes him think of the phrase The Isles of Wonder, from Shakespeare’s play The Tempest. This was the title of the Opening Ceremony and reminds him that “Wonder should continue to run through all our lives”



Ask your class to discuss their favourite words or phrases with a partner, then choose one of these and write it beautifully on the shape of a leaf. Decorate the leaf in a style of their choice and then use these leaves to create a tree of your class favourite words. See examples from schools in Slovakia in Appendix G.

Alternatively you could create pieces of art work incorporating your favourite words or phrases using a variety of techniques and materials. You could draw or paint on paper or fabric, use calligraphy, batik, or collage techniques or create an image of a word in the style of pop artists like Roy Lichtenstein. Photograph your creations and share with your partner school if you have one.

Theme 6 - Nightingales in an alien tongue



Dylan Thomas Boathouse - photo by Peter Broster under Creative Commons license

‘There’s no place like home’

Many of us feel strong ties with the place of our birth. If we move away our feelings for home often grow stronger. We often have nostalgic memories for childhood and simpler times. A famous song from Wales has the line ‘We’ll kiss away each hour of hiraeth, when you come home again to Wales’. Hiraeth is a Welsh word that has no direct English translation. It is a mix of longing, yearning, nostalgia, wistfulness, or an earnest desire for the Wales of the past.

In spite of the time Dylan spent in London and New York you can hear the ‘hiraeth’ permeate much of his writing.

What better way to finish our exploration of Dylan Thomas than with a wistful look of someone thinking about home? In Under Milk Wood we meet Eli Jenkins – the local reverend, poet and preacher of the town of Llareggub. Each morning he opens his door, looks out on the day and speaks to his Town.

Dear Gwalia!⁹ I know there are

Towns lovelier than ours,

And fairer hills and loftier far,

And groves more full of flowers,

And boskier woods more blithe with spring

And bright with birds' adorning,

And sweeter bards than I to sing

Their praise this beauteous morning.

9 Gwalia is an ancient Welsh name for Wales

By mountains where King Arthur dreams,

By Penmaenmawr defiant,

Llaregyb Hill a molehill seems,

A pygmy to a giant.

A tiny dingle is Milk Wood

By Golden Grove 'neath Grongar,

But let me choose and oh! I should

Love all my life and longer

To stroll among our trees and stray

In Goosegog Lane, on Donkey Down,

And hear the Dewi sing all day,

And never, never leave the town.

Theme 6 - Nightingales in an alien tongue



Antigua, Guatemala - photo by Pedro Sezlekey under Creative Commons license.

Activity

Think about home. Think about your village, town or city and the landscape of your childhood. You may still be living in the place of your birth or you may have moved town, even countries. Work in groups to collect 10 objects that sum up your home locality. These may include photographs, newspaper articles and pieces of music. Create a presentation about how and why these objects are important or special to the locality.

Think about a sense of belonging. Think about the people and places that matter to you. What do you love about them?

Make a list of specific places, parks, streets, rivers, buildings and the feelings that they evoke in you. Look at Eli Jenkins’s poem, maybe read Dylan’s poem **Fern Hill** again.

Try to use all you’ve learned about words, poetry and prose to write a beautiful poem about your home. Make and illustrate a class book called ‘There’s no place like home’.

Partner work

If working with a partner school on this theme you could:

- Exchange your boxes of artefacts and presentations about your locality
- Share your poems called ‘There’s no place like home’

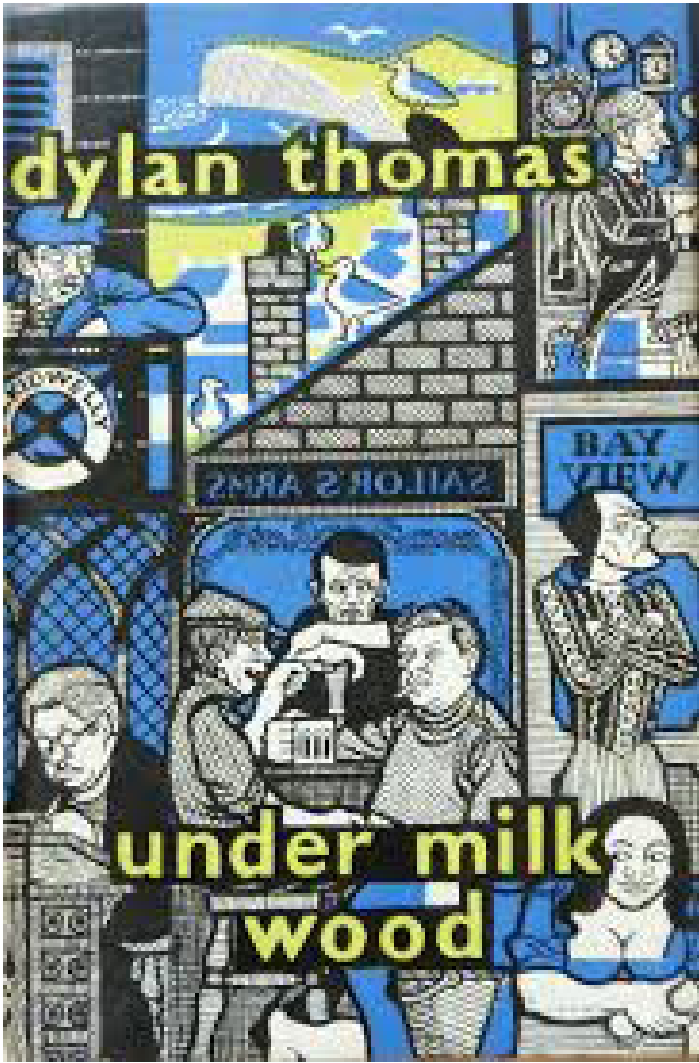
Appendix A

In Under Milk Wood we are introduced to the characters as they begin their morning rituals.

Mrs Gomorra Pritchard... in her iceberg-white holly laundered crinoline nightgown under virtuous polar sheets in her spruced and scoured dust-defying bedroom in trim Bay View, a house for paying guests at the top of the town.

Mr Pugh climbing the stairs in the school house with a cup of tea for his acid tongued wife who is ‘sweet as a razor ‘and even nags the salt cellar!

He whispers on the stairs:
Here’s your arsenic dear
And your weedkiller biscuit
I’ve throttled your parakeet
I’ve spat in the vases
I’ve put cheese in the mouseholes. Here’s your...(Door creaks open)
...nice cup of tea dear



The Hunchback in the Park

The hunchback in the park

A solitary mister

Propped between trees and water

From the opening of the garden lock

That lets the trees and water enter

Until the Sunday sombre bell at dark

Eating bread from a newspaper

Drinking water from the chained cup

That the children filled with gravel

In the fountain basin where I sailed my ship

Slept at night in a dog kennel

But nobody chained him up.

Like the park birds he came early

Like the water he sat down

And Mister they called Hey mister

The truant boys from the town

Running when he had heard them clearly

On out of sound

Past lake and rockery

Laughing when he shook his paper

Hunchbacked in mockery

Through the loud zoo of the willow groves

Dodging the park keeper

With his stick that picked up leaves.

And the old dog sleeper

Alone between nurses and swans

While the boys among willows

Made the tigers jump out of their eyes

To roar on the rockery stones

And the groves were blue with sailors

Made all day until bell time

A woman figure without fault

Straight as a young elm

Straight and tall from his crooked bones

That she might stand in the night

After the locks and chains

All night in the unmade park

After the railings and shrubberies

The birds the grass the trees the lake

And the wild boys innocent as strawberries

Had followed the hunchback

To his kennel in the dark.

Dylan Thomas

Appendix B

To begin at the beginning:

It is Spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent and the hunched, courtiers'-and- rabbits' wood limping invisible down to the sloeback, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea. The houses are blind as moles (though moles see fine to-night in the snouting, velvet dingles) or blind as Captain Cat there in the muffled middle by the pump and the town clock, the shops in mourning, the Welfare Hall in widows' weeds. And all the people of the lulled and dumbfound town are sleeping now.

Hush, the babies are sleeping, the farmers, the fishers, the tradesmen and pensioners, cobbler, schoolteacher, postman and publican, the undertaker and the fancy woman, drunkard, dressmaker, preacher, policeman, the webfoot cocklewomen and the tidy wives. Young girls lie bedded soft or glide in their dreams, with rings and trousseaux, bridesmaided by glow-worms down the aisles of the organplaying wood. The boys are dreaming wicked or of the bucking ranches of the night and the jollyrogered sea. And the anthracite statues of the horses sleep in the fields, and the cows in the byres, and the dogs in the wet-nosed yards; and the cats nap in the slant corners or lope sly, streaking and needling, on the one cloud of the roofs.

You can hear the dew falling, and the hushed town breathing.

Only your eyes are unclosed to see the black and folded town fast, and slow, asleep.



Ice cream © Guzelian

Holiday Memory

August Bank Holiday. A tune on an ice – cream cornet. A slap of sea and a tickle of sand. A fanfare of sunshades opening. A whince and whinny of bathers dancing into deceptive waters. A tuck of dresses. A rolling of trousers. A compromise of paddlers. A sunburn of girls and a lark of boys. A silent hullabaloo of balloons.

I remember the sea telling lies in a shell held to my ear for a whole, harmonious, hollow minute by a small, wet girl in an enormous bathing suit marked 'Corporation Property.'

I remember sharing the last of my moist buns with a boy and a lion. Tawny and savage with cruel nails and capricious mouth, the little boy tore and devoured. Wild as seed cake, ferocious as a hearth rug the depressed and verminous lion nibbled like a mouse at his half a bun and hiccupped in the sad dusk of his cage.

I remember a man like an alderman or a bailiff, bowlered and collarless, with a bag of monkey nuts in his hand, crying 'Ride 'em cowboy!' time and time again as he whirled in his chairplane giddily above the upturned laughing faces

Appendix C

An extract from **Little Father** by **Li-Young Lee**.

I buried my father in my heart.

Now he grows in me, my strange son,

my little root who won't drink milk,

little pale foot sunk in unheard-of night,

little clock spring newly wet

in the fire, little grape, parent to the future

wine, a son the fruit of his own son,

little father I ransom with my life.

An extract from **Not Yet My Mother** by **Owen Sheers**.

Yesterday I found a photo

Of you at seventeen,

Holding a horse and smiling,

Not yet my mother.

The blown trees were still in the background

And the sky was grained by the old film stock,

But what caught me was your face,

Which was mine.

Appendix D

One Art by **Elizabeth Bishop**.

The art of losing isn't hard to master;

so many things seem filled with the intent

to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster

of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.

The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:

places, and names, and where it was you meant

to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or

next-to-last, of three loved houses went.

The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,

some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.

I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture

I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident

the art of losing's not too hard to master

though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

Appendix E

An extract from: **The Windhover** by **Gerard Manley Hopkins**.

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in
his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl
and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing.

An extract from: **Over Sir John's hill** by **Dylan Thomas**.

Over Sir John's hill
The hawk on fire hangs still:
In a hoisted cloud, at drop of dusk, he pulls to his claws
And gallows, up the rays of his eyes the small birds of the bay
And the shrill child's play
Wars
Of the sparrows and such who swansing, dusk, in wrangling
hedges.
And blithely they squawk
To fiery tyburn over the wrestle of elms until
The flash the noosed hawk
Crashes, and slowly the fishing holy stalking heron
In the river Towy below bows his tilted headstone.

Appendix F

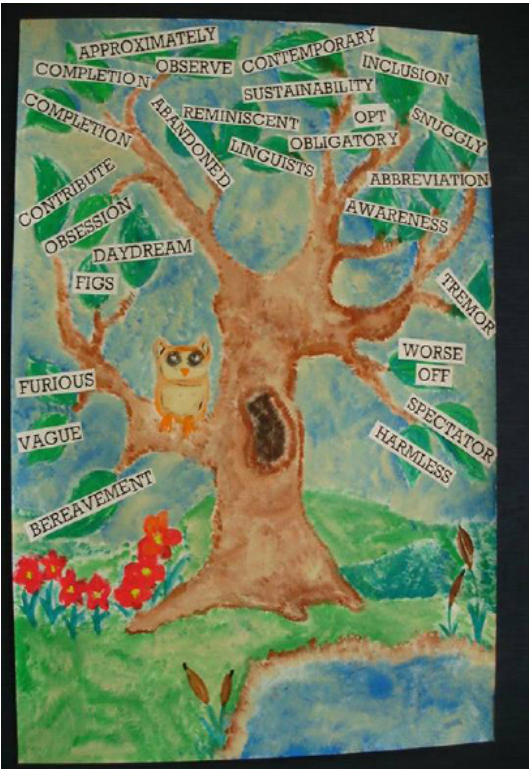
An extract: **The Blue Book** by **Owen Sheers**.

Lingen, Symons and Johnson,
Their names give them away,
Holding thumb-cornered text books,
Not a word of Welsh between them.
Page or man.

They found their God spoken in words
That ran unnaturally in their ears,
And they wrote their decree.
Rather silence than these corrupt tongues,
The words of the father shall not be passed on to the sons.

Appendix G

Words trees from schools in Slovakia



Additional Resources

The following website has information, workshops and competitions taking place to mark the centenary of Dylan Thomas' birth

<http://www.developingdylan100.co.uk/>

Literature Wales resources and information about the centenary of Dylan Thomas' birth can be found at :

<http://www.developingdylan100.co.uk/>

Radio 4 Great Lives celebrates the life of Dylan Thomas at

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/sites/dylan-thomas/>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/dylan_thomas/ has information for younger children

Poetry in the Making by Ted Hughes contains ideas and poems to help teachers teach the art of poetry

<http://www.childrenslaureate.org.uk/previous-laureates/michael-rosen/michael-rosen-poetry-video-tips/> Watch poet Michael Rosen's tips on creating a poetry friendly classroom

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2009/jun/02/john-hegley-creativity> Deckchairs Don't Fly by John Hegley is an article by poet John Hegley about inspiring children to write poetry

http://www.npg.org.uk/assets/files/pdf/teachers-notes/NPGTeachersNotes_PracticePortraiture.pdf contains information about teaching portraiture

Schoolsonline has information and resources for other joint curriculum projects . If you do not have a partner school but would like to find one and set up an online collaboration space, further information can be found at : <http://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/partner-with-a-school/finding-the-right-partner>

Dylan 100 Education Pack written by Alison Willmott and Gareth Mills

The Design Studio for Creative Learning