A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a

SUMMARY

Not until the end of the world—when the darkness that creates and destroys all people, animals, and plants silently brings forth the last dawn, and the sea that lunges like a harnessed animal falls still, and I'm about to die and return to the sacred earth (including its water, crops, etc.)—will I utter the smallest sound of prayer, or cry into the smallest fold of a funeral suit, to grieve this child's extraordinary death by fire.

I won't defile the immense human tragedy of her death by preaching some serious moral lesson. Nor will I desecrate the sanctity of life by writing yet another tribute to lost childhood innocence.

This London girl is now buried with our oldest ancestors. She's covered in long worms and the timeless soil of Mother Earth, hidden underground beside the flowing Thames River, which does not grieve. The first death one experiences (or the world's first death) is final and encompasses all others.

THEMES

THE TRAGEDY OF A CHILD'S DEATH

"A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" is an unusual kind of elegy. Rather than grieve its subject, it pointedly *avoids* grieving. The poem's speaker "Refus[es] to Mourn" a young victim of a World War II air raid until the world ends or until the hour of his own death. The speaker isn't unmoved by the girl's death; instead, he holds back deep emotion as a gesture of respect, signaling that none of the conventional ways of mourning could be adequate in the face such a profound loss.

The death in "A Refusal to Mourn" is tragic not only because it's violent and senseless but because it's a "child's death." The poem implies that childhood innocence is precious and its loss terribly poignant. The speaker describes the tragedy itself as "the majesty and burning of the child's death" and as "the mankind of her going." Far from minimizing the death, these phrases portray it as something stunning and immense, as if the girl were a martyr. The word "majesty" accords the girl dignity even in her victimhood. In calling her "London's daughter," the speaker also conveys a parental or protective feeling toward the girl.

Thus, the speaker's "Refusal to Mourn" is really an attempt to *honor* the tragedy—or not *dishonor* it with a trite, conventional response. That is, this is really a refusal of *shallow* or *inadequate* mourning. The speaker suggests that even to cry ("sow my salt seed") or speak in hushed tones ("let pray the shadow of a sound") would be inappropriate to the scale of this horror. And turning it into moralistic or sentimental writing would be even worse. Using the girl's death as an opportunity to pronounce "a grave truth"—that is, a serious moral lesson—would be like "murder[ing]" her all over again. Using it to fuel an "Elegy of innocence and youth" would be like "blasphem[y]" (that is, sacrilege).

Indeed, the speaker treats this subject as so sensitive that it's almost sacred. He views the child's "going" as a blow to all "mankind"—or as tragically representative of the human experience—so he won't "blaspheme" it with a solemn, pretentious elegy. He doesn't even dare to cry ("sow my salt seed"), as if he doesn't have the right to.

In short, the speaker is deeply affected by the girl's death, and by the destruction of "innocence": he's not refusing to mourn it so much as refusing to sentimentalize or exploit it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

THE NATURAL CYCLE OF LIFE AND DEATH

The speaker's "Refusal to Mourn" the child is partly an attempt to emulate the "unmourning" quality of nature. Despite the horror of the event, the speaker recognizes that death is universal; even the most shocking death is part of a natural cycle, the poem implies, whereby the living return to nature and join the dead who came before them. Indeed, the speaker acknowledges that he is part of that process; he, too, is vulnerable and mortal.

In struggling to remain stoic, the speaker is also trying to keep this tragedy in perspective—to understand it in the context of a natural and generational cycle. In describing the child as buried by the "unmourning water" of the "Thames" River, the speaker suggests that nature joins him (or vice versa) in refusing to mourn the tragedy. Even a senseless death, the poem implies, is part of the natural flow of things, a consequence of humanity's shared mortality. (The phrase "the mankind of her going" evokes the same idea: that death is part of the collective human experience.)

The speaker also describes this lost "daughter" as buried among "the dark veins of her mother," a phrase that invokes both Mother Earth and the girl's human family. Again, death is imagined as part of nature and the cycle of generations. The soil she's buried in is "beyond age," a reminder that she has now left or transcended youth; death unites the young and old of all times and places.

The speaker recognizes that this life-and-death cycle includes himself as well as the rest of humankind. He acknowledges that he, too, "must" someday die and rejoin nature ("enter again [...] the water bead / And the synagogue of the ear of corn"). For now, the child has experienced a transformation the speaker can't fully understand, but he knows he *will* understand it eventually, as will every living creature.

The poem ends by claiming, "After the first death, there is no other." This ambiguous phrase echoes an earlier one: "Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter." The "first death," then, might mean the first significant loss in one's own life, or it might mean the first human (or mortal) ever to die. Either way, the ending seems intended to justify the speaker's "Refusal to Mourn": it implies that all deaths are tragic and inevitable, so the first grief encompasses every grief after. As soon as we mourn one person, we mourn all—including ourselves.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-9
- Lines 14-15
- Lines 19-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Never until the ...
... last light breaking

The poem begins with an intense rush of language, one that doesn't stop or even pause until the end of line 13. These opening lines are heavily enjambed and contain no caesuras, so they seem to pour out in a surge of emotion.

What kind of emotion? The title frames the poem as an adamant "Refusal." A "Child" has died "by Fire," and the speaker is "Refus[ing] to Mourn" the loss. Already, this conceit is surprising and unsettling: who wouldn't grieve the death of a child? Is the speaker completely heartless? To begin answering these questions, it's necessary to understand the historical context conveyed by the title:

- The poem was first published in the UK toward the end of World War II (1939-1945). At that time, a death "by Fire" in "London" would have implied a death by fire*bombing*, since Nazi Germany had heavily bombed London during the war.
- As such, the poet is responding to what were then recent events, and attempting to process a single loss within a broader national tragedy. The "Child" doesn't seem to be someone the poet/speaker knew, but rather someone he's learned about in the news.

Again, however, despite his stated "Refusal," these opening lines sound impassioned. Their vivid imagery and dramatic metaphors conjure up an apocalyptic scenario:

> Never until the mankind making
> Bird beast and flower
> Fathering and all humbling darkness
> Tells with silence the last light breaking [...]

In other words, the speaker will keep up the "Refusal" in the title "until" the end of the world—until the "darkness" that creates and destroys ("Father[s]" and "humbl[es]") all creatures brings forth the final, eerily quiet dawn ("Tells with silence the last light breaking"). This doesn't sound like the kind of thing people say when they're emotionless! Instead, the speaker seems to be stoically—and just barely—holding back a flood of grief. Indeed, the death of this single "Child" has affected him so much that he's imagining a biblical-sounding apocalypse. Perhaps her death, and the war surrounding it, feels like an omen of doom.

LINES 5-9

And the still ...
... ear of corn

The poet/speaker lays down more conditions for his future "Mourn[ing]." First, he says he won't grieve the child's death until "the still hour / Is come of the sea tumbling in harness." That is, he won't grieve until the ocean—whose waves usually lunge forward and pull back like a harnessed animal—has fallen completely still. Again, this sounds like a description of the apocalypse, one that perhaps draws on imagery from the biblical Book of Revelation (e.g., angels "holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea").

Then, the speaker says he won't grieve until his *own* death, which he imagines coinciding with the apocalypse. (Alternatively, this could imply that his own death will represent a personal apocalypse; for example, it'll be the "last" time the "light" of day breaks for *him*.) Through a pair of vivid metaphors, he envisions his body returning to nature when he dies:

> And I must enter again the round
> Zion of the water bead
> And the synagogue of the ear of corn [...]

"Zion," originally a name for Jerusalem, can allude to the concept of an ideal homeland for the Jewish people, or to differing Jewish and Christian concepts of an afterlife or heaven. Here, the term implies that the most ordinary "water bead" in nature will become the body's sacred place of rest. Similarly, "the ear of corn"—ordinary crops or vegetation—will

become the body's "synagogue," or temple.

The poet doesn't seem to believe in a transcendent afterlife; instead, he suggests that the earth itself is holy and will receive us when we die. Only when that "hour" of death comes for *him*, he insists, will he be ready to mourn the child's passing.

LINES 10-13

Shall I let ...
... the child's death.

Lines 10-13 complete the long sentence begun in line 1. Not until the apocalypse and the hour of his own death has come, according to the speaker, "Shall he let pray the shadow of a sound" on the dead child's behalf. In other words, he won't utter the slightest whisper of prayer, or other words or "sound[s]" of grief. Nor will he cry—"sow [his] salt seed / In the least valley of sackcloth"—in "mourn[ing]" over "The majesty and burning of the child's death." Extraordinary as this death is, he claims he won't grieve it until the end of his life and/or the end of the world.

The word "sackcloth" here alludes to the ancient Israelites' custom of wearing rough fabric (sackcloth) in penitence or mourning. The term is often found in the phrase "sackcloth and ashes," as sprinkling oneself with ash was part of the same custom. Here, the allusion emphasizes the speaker's refusal to mourn: it's a hyperbolic way of saying that he won't shed a single tear into the smallest fold ("least valley") of a mourning outfit. He won't commemorate this death through any kind of ritual at all.

Yet an irony creeps in here, because clearly, he's *already* memorializing the child's death in a poem. And while "majesty and burning" is a startling, unsettling description of a child's death, it also seems to grant her death a kind of terrible dignity, as though she were a martyr. Suddenly, the poem is implying almost the opposite of what it's saying. It seems this shocking tragedy has moved the poet/speaker to write a grand tribute—only without calling it mourning. The gentle /sh/, /s/, and /m/ alliteration in these lines ("Shall"/"shadow," "sound"/"sow"/"salt seed"/"sackcloth," "mourn"/"majesty") even *sounds* hushed and mournful.

The period at the end of line 13 ("The majesty [...] death.") is the first real pause in the poem; the poem has contained no caesuras or end-stopping punctuation until this point. The speaker has invoked the apocalypse, their own future death, and the child's death in one headlong rush of emotion. In fact, like life itself, the long sentence in lines 1-13 ends with "death."

LINES 14-18

I shall not ...
... innocence and youth.

Lines 14-18 offer something like an explanation for the speaker's "Refusal to Mourn." The speaker seems to feel that mourning—or at least traditional forms of mourning—would actually dishonor "the child's death." He expresses this idea indirectly, through metaphor and allusion:

> I shall not murder
> The mankind of her going with a grave truth
> Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
> With any further
> Elegy of innocence and youth.

Again, the speaker is using hyperbole to make a point. To turn her death into a "grave truth"—the kind a poetic elegy might normally deliver—would feel like "murder[ing]" her all over again. Her "going" (death) feels as though it embodies the tragedy of, or should resonate with, all "mankind." It can't be reduced to some cheesy moral. In fact, the poet doesn't want to write a conventional "Elegy" at all—some sentimental tribute to the dead child's "innocence and youth." No "further" tributes of that kind are needed, he implies, because there have been too many already. (Remember, Thomas wrote the poem during the deadliest war in history.) To add one more to the pile would feel like "blasphem[y]": it would seem to desecrate "the stations of the breath," meaning the sanctity and tragedy of life itself. (This phrase alludes to the Stations of the Cross, a traditional set of images portraying the day of Christ's crucifixion.)

Put all this together with the complex statement in lines 1-13, and it seems as if the speaker feels *unequipped* for traditional mourning. He can't truly know what the dead child has been through until he dies himself, and as a poet, he can't provide a "grave truth" or conventional "Elegy" that would moralize or redeem her loss. The honorable thing seems to be to *refuse* traditional mourning, while acknowledging her death through a different kind of poetry.

LINES 19-23

Deep with the ...
... the riding Thames.

Lines 19-23 mark a sudden shift. Previously, the speaker has announced the terms of his response to the child's death, resisting any kind of traditional mourning. Now, in the final stanza, the poem re-focuses on the child herself.

The stanza begins musically, with pronounced alliteration:

> Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,
> Robed in the long friends,

Together with the assonance of "dead"/"friends" and "daughter"/"long," these repeated /d/s and /l/s make the language sound as lyrical as a nursery rhyme or song. These lines even sound a little like an eerie lullaby, sung for a girl who's entered the permanent sleep of death. In fact, the phrase "London's daughter" conveys a kind of parental warmth toward

the lost child, while suggesting that she is the "daughter" of the whole city—her whole community mourns her.

Now that she's buried underground, she has joined "the first dead," as in the oldest human ancestors. She's accompanied by worms, or "long friends," which seem to "Robe[]" or cover her. The combination of macabre detail and poignantly simple, childlike phrasing makes for an especially haunting image.

The following lines reveal that the girl is buried beside the "Thames" River (which flows through London), in the timeless "grains" and "dark veins" of the soil. The poet personifies the soil as the girl's "mother"—alluding to Mother Earth—and personifies the flowing river as an "unmourning," steadily "riding" creature. This girl has now returned to the earth and water, the way the speaker imagined himself doing in lines 7-9. Her individual life has ended, and she's dropped back into the larger cycle of nature and the generations. Nature doesn't mourn for her, and the speaker, despite his obvious emotion, seems to be striving for the same impersonal calm.

The assonance ("grains"/"age") and internal rhyme ("grains"/"veins") of line 21 adds further lyricism to the stanza. Notice, too, how most of the lines in this stanza are end-stopped, in contrast with the heavy enjambment of earlier stanzas. These pauses slow the pace of the language in keeping with the poet's hushed, somber tribute.

LINE 24

After the first ... is no other.

Line 24 ends the poem with a ringing, yet ambiguous statement: "After the first death, there is no other." The statement seems designed to be a little mystical, but its context offers clues as to what it might mean.

Most obviously, "the first death" echoes the phrase "the first dead" in line 19, which seems to mean the first humans ever to die. In this context, "After the first death, there is no other" could mean that all deaths, old and new, are basically equivalent. All are tragic in their way, and all do the same thing to the body. All are part of the same perpetual cycle of generations. In a sense, then, as soon as we've mourned one death, we've mourned all of them.

"After the first death, there is no other" could also mean that one death is all we get. In other words, death is final: there's no afterlife, series of reincarnations, etc. Alternatively, it could suggest that one death is all we *have* to go through: we're reborn into some form of eternal life. (The poem envisions death as a return to nature, so arguably, both of these interpretations could apply to that philosophy.)

Finally, "the first death" could mean "the first significant death [of another person] that we experience while we're alive." The speaker could be implying that, once we've grieved for the first time, subsequent losses just become part of that same ongoing grief. (Again, the same could be true of humanity as a whole.)

Whatever it means to the reader, the statement seems intended to justify the speaker's "Refusal to Mourn." It has a stoic tone, hinting that the speaker knows grief already and sees no point in grieving further—or grieving *more*. Ironically, this statement closes a poem that honors the dead in solemn, intricate, almost reverential language: what most readers would consider a poem of mourning.

SYMBOLS

WATER AND CORN

The "water bead" and "ear of corn" in lines 7-9 are synecdoches for water and land/vegetation in general, or nature as a whole. There's also plenty of traditional symbolism attached to both: for example, water is associated with cleanliness, purity, and holiness (e.g., via baptism). Corn is a staple food associated with human and animal sustenance in general.

The speaker builds on this symbolism in imagining that, when he dies, his body will go back to the water and corn as if entering "Zion" (i.e., the afterlife/heaven) or a "synagogue" (temple). In other words, the earth (including its plants, streams, etc.) will receive our bodies as if it were a sacred home. Once absorbed into the land, our bodies will go on to sustain others, and the natural cycle will continue. The speaker seems to believe that the afterlife consists precisely of this return to nature.

Though it's a less obvious symbol, the "water" in lines 22-23 ("the unmourning water / Of the riding Thames) also seems to pick up on these symbolic overtones. The "Child" is buried beside the flowing water of the Thames River, so she, too, has gone back to the earth and its natural cycles.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** "And I must enter again the round / Zion of the water bead / And the synagogue of the ear of corn"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem is packed with alliteration, which contributes to its grand, musical style. Listen to all the alliterative words in the first stanza alone:

Never until the **m**ankind **m**aking
Bird **b**east and **f**lower
Fathering and all humbling darkness
Tells with **s**ilence the **l**ast **l**ight breaking
And the **s**till hour

Is come of the sea tumbling in harness [...]

This lush mix of sounds—plosive /b/s, fricative /f/s, liquid /ls, and sibilant /s/s—immediately lends drama and emotional power to the language. Combined with the heavy enjambment, it's almost like an outpouring of song on behalf of the "Child." The alliteration also sounds insistent and emphatic, as the speaker supposedly "Refus[es] to Mourn" in the face of a great tragedy. The broader sibilance of the passage ("darkness," "silence," "harness," etc.) adds to the effect, casting a somber atmosphere over the poem.

Readers can hear this insistent quality in lines 14-16 also, as the speaker expresses a kind of pious outrage at the thought of inappropriate mourning:

I shall not murder
The mankind of her going with a grave truth
Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath [...]

The alliteration softens in the final stanza, as the tone switches from vehement to hushed and sober. Still, it remains strong through lines 19-20:

Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,
Robed in the long friends,

Combined with assonance ("dead"/"friends," "daughter"/long"), these /d/ and /l/ sounds make the language almost as dense as a tongue-twister and as musical as a nursery rhyme. The poem begins to sound like macabre children's verse as it mourns a child gone too soon.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "mankind making"
- **Line 2:** "Bird beast," "flower"
- **Line 3:** "Fathering"
- **Line 4:** "silence," "last light"
- **Line 5:** "still"
- **Line 6:** "sea"
- **Line 10:** "Shall," "shadow," "sound"
- **Line 11:** "sow," "salt seed"
- **Line 12:** "mourn"
- **Line 13:** "majesty"
- **Line 14:** "murder"
- **Line 15:** "mankind," "going," "grave"
- **Line 16:** "blaspheme," "breath"
- **Line 19:** "Deep," "dead," "lies London's," "daughter"
- **Line 20:** "long"

IRONY

There's a complex irony at the heart of the poem. The title frames it as "A Refusal to Mourn," but it's clearly a kind of elegy for the "Child" who died "by Fire." The speaker claims that, until he dies or the world ends, he won't "let pray the shadow of a sound [...] to mourn [...] the child's death." But this poem (which Thomas read aloud on many occasions) would seem to count as a "sound," and it certainly *memorializes* the girl's death.

Similarly, the speaker refuses to dishonor her life ("blaspheme down the stations of the breath") by writing an "Elegy of innocence and youth." But, again, the speaker seems to be having it both ways. A somber poem about the death of a child is, almost by definition, an elegy for lost youth and innocence.

There's a point to these seeming contradictions, of course. It's not that the speaker isn't mourning at all: it's that the speaker doesn't want to mourn in a traditional or simplistic way, using literary conventions that would obscure the true meaning of the child's death. The poem's hyperbolic phrasing also suggests that the speaker is protesting a little too much. In other words, the speaker is effectively saying, "I will not shed *one tear* over this tragedy until doomsday"—but, ironically, the overstatement conveys to the reader how sad the speaker really is. That is, he's making a powerful effort to rein in a powerful emotion.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-13:** "Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound / Or sow my salt seed / In the least valley of sackcloth to mourn / The majesty and burning of the child's death."
- **Lines 16-18:** "Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath / With any further / Elegy of innocence and youth."

ALLUSION

The poem alludes to several concepts from the Jewish and Christian faith traditions. In the first stanza, the reference to the "darkness" that "make[s]" all of earth's creatures—"mankind," the "beast[s]," etc.—vaguely invokes the creation story in the Book of Genesis. Similarly, "the last light breaking" and the "still [...] sea" seems to invoke the idea of apocalypse. Perhaps Thomas has in mind the biblical Book of Revelation, in which the sun goes dark, the winds over the earth and sea fall still, and so on (see, e.g., Rev 6:12 and 7:1).

However, these lines *could* refer to any number of creation and doomsday stories, from any number of traditions. The speaker invokes the Judeo-Christian tradition more specifically in the following stanzas, imagining dying and re-entering "the round / Zion of the water bead." This alludes to the biblical name for Jerusalem and, metaphorically, the Jewish concept of the afterlife. "Zion" can also refer to heaven or the City of God in the Christian tradition. (But Thomas's take on this idea is arguably more pagan: he's imagining that his body will be reabsorbed into nature.)

Next, the phrase "blaspheme down the stations of the breath" (line 16) alludes to the Christian concept of the Stations of the

Cross. This is a series of traditional images, popular in Western religious and ecclesiastical art, depicting events before, during, and after the Crucifixion. Some of the images are based on specific biblical passages, others are not. The metaphor "stations of the breath" suggests that life itself—symbolized by "breath"—is both holy and full of suffering, like the suffering of Christ.

In general, the poem uses spiritually charged language that sometimes crystallizes into a clear religious reference. This language solemnizes and dignifies the girl's death without necessarily expressing a particular faith.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "Never until the mankind making / Bird beast and flower / Fathering and all humbling darkness"
- **Line 4:** "Tells with silence the last light breaking"
- **Lines 7-8:** "And I must enter again the round / Zion of the water bead"
- **Line 16:** "Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem is heavily enjambed until the final stanza, which, notably, contains only one enjambment.

The only clearly end-stopped lines in the first three stanzas are lines 13 and 18, which end with periods. Lines 6, 9, and 15 are grammatically end-stopped (their phrases are syntactically complete), but Thomas chooses to omit the commas that would normally mark the ends of these clauses. It's as if he's trying to make the poem look even *more* enjambed than it otherwise would be. The first punctuated pause of any kind (there are no caesuras in these stanzas, either) comes at the end of line 13, which is also the end of the poem's first long sentence.

As a result, the language seems to pour out and tumble down the page. It conjures up a rush of imagery and conveys a surge of intense emotion, barely held in check by the loose meter and line breaks. In other words, enjambment helps set the impassioned tone of the poet's "Refusal."

In the final stanza, the tone becomes a little quieter. End-stopping (lines 19-21 and 23-24) and caesuras (lines 21 and 24) stem the poem's flow somewhat, as if the emotional climax has passed and the speaker is winding down. The slower pace feels appropriate—and, despite the title, mournful—as the speaker describes the girl's burial site and reflects on death.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "making / Bird"
- **Lines 2-3:** "flower / Fathering"
- **Lines 3-4:** "darkness / Tells"
- **Lines 4-5:** "breaking / And"
- **Lines 5-6:** "hour / Is"
- **Lines 7-8:** "round / Zion"
- **Lines 10-11:** "sound / Or"
- **Lines 11-12:** "seed / In"
- **Lines 12-13:** "mourn / The"
- **Lines 14-15:** "murder / The"
- **Lines 16-17:** "breath / With"
- **Lines 17-18:** "further / Elegy"
- **Lines 22-23:** "water / Of"

METAPHOR

Like most Dylan Thomas poems, "A Refusal to Mourn" is full of richly metaphorical language. This style makes the poem feel both vibrant and intricate, full of subtle connotations that might escape the reader on first reading.

Lines 1-3, for example, describe the "mankind making / Bird beast and flower / Fathering and all humbling darkness." The words "making," "Fathering," and "humbling" metaphorically suggest that the darkness *creates* and *destroys* all creatures; in other words, everything on Earth came from the darkness or void and will return to the same.

The language here is vaguely biblical (it evokes the Book of Genesis, for example), and many of the poem's other metaphors have religious or spiritual overtones, too. The speaker compares a water bead to"Zion," meaning the afterlife or heaven in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and corn to a "synagogue," meaning a Jewish temple. That is, the speaker views nature itself—the water and land—as a sacred place to which the body returns after death.

Not every metaphor is solemnly spiritual, however. Line 20 compares the worms in the child's grave to "long friends"—exactly the way a child might imagine them. "The riding Thames" (23), which compares the flowing Thames River to someone "riding" along in a vehicle or on horseback, also sounds a bit magical or mythical, perhaps reflecting the childlike worldview of the now-deceased girl.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Line 6
- Lines 7-12
- Lines 14-16
- Line 20
- Line 21
- Line 23

VOCABULARY

Mankind making (Lines 1-3) - Indicates that the "darkness" of

night (line 3) brings forth humankind, just as it brings forth the dawn—that it "Father[s]" (gives life to) birds and beasts, etc.

All humbling (Line 3) - Indicates that the same "darkness" that gives rise to all life also destroys all life in the end, as if "humbling" it or bringing it low.

The still hour (Lines 5-6) - In other words, the moment of the apocalypse (when all life will supposedly die, the sea will fall still, etc.)

Zion (Lines 7-8) - Originally the name of a hill in Jerusalem, "Zion" now has a variety of connotations. It can be a synonym for the biblical Land of Israel; it can also refer to the symbolic or aspirational homeland of the Jewish people, the ideal society imagined in the Jewish tradition, or the Jewish conception of the afterlife. In other spiritual traditions, it can connote various kinds of utopia or heaven. Thomas is using the word metaphorically here.

Synagogue (Line 9) - A Jewish temple or house of worship. Here used metaphorically to suggest that the "corn" (like the "water bead" in the previous line) is sacred.

Salt seed (Lines 11-12) - A metaphor for tears (which one "sow[s]" by letting them fall).

Sackcloth (Line 12) - A coarse fabric worn by the ancient Israelites as a symbol of mourning or repentance. (Often paired with *ashes*, with which the mourner or penitent would dust themselves.) Here, the word suggests mourning wear or funeral attire in general.

Her going (Lines 14-15) - The child's death.

Blaspheme (Line 16) - To commit blasphemy against; dishonor or desecrate.

The stations of the breath (Line 16) - Alludes to "the stations of the cross," a series of traditional images representing Christ's experience on the day of the Crucifixion. Thomas's metaphor suggests that life in general ("the breath") is full of trials and suffering.

Elegy (Lines 17-18) - A poem of mourning or sober reflection. (This poem is an elegy, despite its supposed "Refusal to Mourn.")

The long friends (Line 20) - A metaphor for worms in the grave, which "Robe[]" or cover the dead body.

Her mother (Line 21) - An apparent reference to Mother Earth (the "veins" of the earth being underground water channels, mineral deposits, etc.).

Thames (Lines 22-23) - The Thames River in England. ("Riding" here is a metaphor for "flowing.")

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Despite the speaker's refusal to mourn, the poem is still an elegy: a somber, reflective poem about someone who has died. The speaker says that "any further / Elegy of innocence and youth" would be akin to blasphemy—an insult to the tragedy of the child's death. And yet, the poem by its very existence memorializes the girl and somberly reflects on lost youth and innocence. The speaker is trying to have it both ways, and this irony is meant to prove a point: the speaker clearly does mourn the child's death, but is trying to do so in a way that feels meaningful rather than shallow and trite.

The poem itself, meanwhile, consists of four sestets, or six-line stanzas. These sestets are written in a loose accentual meter, with a rhyme scheme of ABCABC. Accentual meter (which is based on the number of stresses, but not the number of syllables, per line) is often found in children's poetry and folk verse. This makes it an apt choice for a poem (albeit a very dark one) about a "Child." It's a bit looser than *accentual-syllabic meter*, which does factor in the syllable count per line.

The style of this poem is also characteristic of Thomas's style in general, which is highly intuitive and willing to bend formal patterns where necessary. His language is intensely rhythmic, almost like a preacher's, but its music is varied and flexible, as if driven by passion more than technical rules. Notice that this poem is flexible with rhyme as well as line length: most of the poem's rhymes are exact, but a few are imperfect (e.g., "darkness"/"harness").

METER

The poem uses a version of accentual meter, meaning that its line lengths are determined by the number of stressed syllables they contain but not by their overall syllable count, which remains flexible. For example, the first line of each stanza contains four strong stresses, even as the overall syllable count varies (as does the placement of stresses):

> Never until the mankind making [...]
> And I must enter again the round [...]
> The majesty and burning of the child's death. [...]
> Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,

(Note that it's possible to scan "mankind" as containing two stresses; this is a minor variation on the pattern, however.) Typically, the first line of each stanza contains four stresses, the second line contains three, the third contains four, the fourth contains four, the fifth contains two, and the sixth contains four. Even these rules have some exceptions: for instance, the final line of the final stanza has five stresses rather than four: "After the first death, there is no other."

The resulting pattern is a mix of consistency and flexibility. The rhythm remains controlled, yet rough and powerful, as if the poet's passion is swelling and pushing against the poem's formal constraints. (A bit like the "sea tumbling in harness" in line 6!) To put it another way, the loose metrical form holds the passion *barely* in check, just as the speaker barely manages to contain his emotion (the "salt seed" of tears, etc.).

RHYME SCHEME

Each stanza in the poem follows the rhyme scheme ABCABC:

[...] making A
[...] flower B
[...] darkness C
[...] breaking A
[...] hour B
[...] harness C

Because there are new rhyme sounds introduced in each stanza, one might think of the full rhyme scheme as ABCABC DEFDEF GHIGHI JKLJKL.

The pattern is consistent, but the rhymes themselves vary in terms of their exactness. Most are full rhymes ("making"/"breaking," "flower"/"hour," etc.), but a few are imperfect ("darkness"/"harness," "murder"/"further," "friends"/"Thames"). Like the rough accentual meter, these variations add some flexibility and spontaneity to the poem's structure. It's as if the speaker is trying to keep his language tightly controlled (due to his supposed "Refusal to Mourn"), but is too impassioned to follow some rigid pattern to the letter.

SPEAKER

The poem has a first-person speaker, an "I" who is clearly the poet himself.

This poet/speaker, who has learned about a girl's "Death" by "Fire," self-consciously discusses how he will and will not respond to the tragedy. For example, he will not "Mourn" the girl (at least not in a traditional way) or write a conventional "Elegy" (poetic lament) about lost "innocence and youth." He won't even cry ("sow my salt seed"), at least until the hour of his own death (when he will re-"enter" nature and, perhaps, understand what the girl's gone through).

Thomas doesn't identify the girl he's referring to, apart from specifying that she lived in "London." However, in writing this elegy, he was responding to wartime news. He published the poem toward the end of the Second World War, during which Germany had repeatedly firebombed London and other UK cities. (Thomas's own home city of Swansea, Wales had been heavily bombed in 1941.) For the poem's original readers, then, the phrase "Death, by Fire [...] in London" would have immediately evoked this national ordeal.

SETTING

The poem's setting is mentioned in its title: "London." The city also appears in line 19: "Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter."

Though the poem doesn't spell out the significance of its setting, its context would have been clear to its first readers. "A Refusal to Mourn" is one of several World War II-era poems Dylan Thomas wrote about Nazi Germany's air raids on the UK. (All of these poems appear in his 1946 volume *Death and Entrances*; others include "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" and "Among those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred.") The most infamous raids, collectively known as the Blitz, occurred in 1940-41; the Nazis also conducted a series of bombings and rocket attacks in 1944-45, closer to the poem's composition date. Together, these raids killed thousands of civilians, with London suffering the heaviest losses.

In other words, while "Death, by Fire" could theoretically refer to any fire, the poem's overall context implies that the "Child" was killed in a fire*bombing*. In memorializing her death, the poet was honoring one of many victims of a national tragedy.

Another important setting in the poem is nature or the earth itself. The speaker imagines returning to the "water" and "corn"—in other words, to the earth—when their own eventual death comes (lines 7-9). The speaker also vividly describes the young girl's burial site by the "Thames" River in England, including the worms ("long friends") and soil ("grains" and "veins") of her grave (lines 20-23). These haunting details stress the *physicality* of death and envision it specifically as a return to the environment from which we come.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) was part of the second generation of modernists. This group of 20th-century writers (which included figures like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound) sought new forms of expression, leaving behind the formal conventions of the 19th century to write daring, expansive, psychologically acute poetry in never-before-tried shapes.

Thomas was something of a prodigy. He published many of his intense, idiosyncratic poems when he was just a teenager. While his stylistic inventiveness places him among the modernists, his pantheistic feelings about nature and his passionate sincerity also mark him as a descendent of 19th-century Romantic poets like William Blake and John Keats (both of whom he read enthusiastically). He also admired his contemporaries W.B. Yeats and W.H. Auden, who, like him, often wrote of the "mystery" behind everyday life (though in very different ways).

"A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" was originally published in London's *Horizon* magazine in 1945, alongside another famous Dylan Thomas poem, "Fern Hill." It then appeared in Thomas's acclaimed volume *Deaths and Entrances* (1946), which also contains such classics as "In my craft or sullen art" and "Poem in October." This book features three other war poems: the title poem, "Ceremony After a Fire Raid," and "Among those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dylan Thomas finished the poem in 1945, the year World War II (1939-1945) came to an end. This bloody, destructive war hit close to home for Thomas: Swansea, his beloved Welsh hometown, was badly damaged by German air raids. Thomas was appalled not only by that great loss but also by the rise of fascism across Europe in the 1930s and '40s. A passionate leftist, he even wrote comical anti-fascist propaganda films for the UK government during the war.

Though his poetry usually isn't directly political, his war poems in *Deaths and Entrances* memorialize some of the victims of Germany's air raids on the UK. The most famous such bombing campaign, known as the Blitz, occurred in 1940-1941 and killed over 40,000 civilians, nearly half of them in London. A "Baby Blitz" followed in 1944, killing around 1,500 civilians. The Nazis also attacked London with pilotless V-1 and V-2 rockets toward the end of the war, resulting in thousands more civilian casualties and additional fire damage. Thomas's wartime elegies, then, sought to process a deadly and traumatic phase in his country's history. More broadly, the apocalyptic imagery of "A Refusal to Mourn"—which seems to encompass the tragedy of all "mankind" (see lines 1-6 and 15)—reflects the massive upheaval wrought by the deadliest conflict in human history.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life — Read a brief biography of Dylan Thomas at Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/dylan-thomas)
- More About Thomas — A Thomas biography and exhibition at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/dylan-thomas)
- London and the "Baby Blitz" — Read about Nazi Germany's bombings of London during 1944-45, the period in which Thomas wrote the poem. (https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/features/blitz-stories/london-the-baby-blitz-and-v-weapons-1941-1945/#:~:text=From%20January%20to%20M
- A Reading of "A Refusal" — Listen to Dylan Thomas read the poem aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGtY7TERahQ)
- Thomas on Poetry and Cinema — Watch a video of one of Dylan Thomas's final public appearances. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyavcLn2_uo)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER DYLAN THOMAS POEMS

- Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night
- Fern Hill
- Poem in October

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Allen, Austin. "*A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 16 Nov 2022. Web. 23 Nov 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Allen, Austin. "*A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London.*" LitCharts LLC, November 16, 2022. Retrieved November 23, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/dylan-thomas/a-refusal-to-mourn-the-death-by-fire-of-a-child-in-london.