In My Craft or Sullen Art

SUMMARY

Practicing my discipline or unsociable art form in the quiet of evening, when the moon is the only restless thing and lovers hold each other in bed as if nursing their sorrows, I work in the beautiful light—not to advance my career or get rich, or to show off and charm audiences in fancy venues, but for the ordinary reward of touching those lovers' inmost hearts.

It isn't for snobby people who reject what the moon represents (passion, etc.) that I write on these pages, which are temporary as ocean spray. Nor do I write to please grand, dead authors, with their classic songs about nature and God. I write for those lovers, who seem to embrace the sorrows of all ages and who don't give me acclaim or money—or even pay attention to my discipline or art form.

THEMES

POETRY, EMOTION, AND CONNECTION

"In My Craft or Sullen Art" is what critics sometimes call an *ars poetica*: a poem that explains or illustrates how the poet thinks about their art. Dylan Thomas's poem argues that true poetry speaks to the ordinary feelings of ordinary people—and of "lovers" in particular. The speaker (whom readers can take to be Thomas himself) seeks both to stir and to express the passions of lovers' "most secret heart[s]," including their "griefs." He feels that expressing emotional truths, and thus making a potential emotional connection, should be a poet's or artist's top priority.

The speaker writes for "the common wages / of [lovers'] most secret heart." In other words, he's writing to communicate and evoke everyday emotion. He writes about "common" experience, stressing that poetry isn't limited to specific highbrow or rare subjects; it can and should be used to capture something within lots of people's hearts.

Moreover, he's writing for not a select audience but for "lovers" everywhere, lying in bed "With all their griefs in their arms." This broad language suggests that he writes for anyone and everyone feeling love and/or grief—in fact, anyone capable of feeling deeply. Later, he describes these lovers lying with "their arms / Round the griefs of the ages." Again, he suggests that he hopes both to express age-old feelings and to reach people who feel them throughout "the ages." He hopes to do the kind of work that can be appreciated by sensitive souls in every era.

The poem implies that this is what poetry should try to do above all: understand and touch ordinary people's hearts. The poet shrugs off all other kinds of "praise" and "wages," implying that poetry isn't about prestige, money, etc.: it's about making an enduring emotional connection. He emphasizes that he does *not* write for "the proud man apart / From the raging moon"—that is, for people uninterested in making such connections themselves.

What's more, he strives to connect with "the lovers" even as he himself works alone. He practices his art "in the still night / When only the moon rages." That is, he works in silence and (presumably) solitude, not embracing a lover himself. And the lovers for whom he writes offer him no material reward, either; for the moment, at least, they don't even "heed [his] craft or art" (to pay attention to his words). Instead, writing something that *would* speak to them if they *did* "heed" him is its own reward. The poet works to earn the "wages" of their inmost "heart," even if these metaphorical "wages" (of appreciation) aren't paid directly or immediately. He describes even the "pages" he writes on as "spindrift," implying that they're as trivial and fleeting as ocean spray. In other words, even writing materials, published books, etc. are temporary things; they're just a means to an end. All he cares about is plugging in to timeless emotions: the love and "griefs of the ages."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

ARTISTIC PURITY VS. WORLDLY AMBITION

For the poet of "In My Craft or Sullen Art," his art is "sullen" in the sense that it's stubbornly rebelling against something. He rejects all worldly and commercial "ambition," insisting that he doesn't write for money, praise, or even literary glory (measured by comparison with "the towering dead"). Instead, he dedicates his work to average, passionate people who may never even pay attention to it. This, the poem implies, is what any true artist does; to do otherwise would be to sell out.

The poet proudly proclaims that he doesn't write for money, praise, or applause; he isn't motivated by traditional career ambitions. He asserts that he doesn't write "for ambition or bread"—to advance his career or meet his material needs. ("Bread" here stands in for food in general; it can also be slang for "money.") Nor does he want "the strut and trade of charms / On the ivory stages." In other words, he's not trying to show off or charm audiences in fancy venues.

He doesn't even seek the approval of intellectuals, or the imagined approval of prestigious predecessors. He claims not

to write for "the proud man apart / From the raging moon," perhaps meaning critics or thinkers who detach themselves from the emotional side of art. Nor is he trying to meet the standards of "the towering dead / With their nightingales and psalms": that is, famous poets and prophets who have written before him. He isn't interested in literary prestige or the inheritance of a grand tradition.

In short, he believes that poetry should be an emotional and spiritual pursuit, not a professional, commercial, egocentric, or strictly intellectual one. He rejects worldly vanity and aims to meet the standards of ordinary readers, not people who might pay him or boost his career.

In real life, Thomas was a famous and very public poet, so he's articulating a set of priorities here, not rejecting the professional world altogether. He's not literally implying that artists shouldn't sell their work or build a career; he's implying that career success shouldn't be the *goal* of their art.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

In my craft ...
... in their arms,

Lines 1-5 begin to establish the poem's voice and setting. The speaker is an artist reflecting on his "craft" or "art," which he pursues in the silence of nighttime. Since there is no additional or alternative explanation, it makes sense to assume that the speaker is Dylan Thomas himself, reflecting on the art of poetry. A poem that reflects on the poet's art is called an *ars poetica* (Latin for "Art of Poetry"), after a famous poem of that name by the ancient Roman writer Horace.

Thomas wavers slightly between calling poetry a "craft" and an "art," implying that it might be either or both. A "craft" sounds slightly less prestigious than an "art"; though it implies skill, it's a word often associated with homemade or hand-made goods. This initial ambiguity sets up a tension that runs throughout the poem: Thomas takes his poetry seriously, but resists taking it *too* seriously or coming off as pompous. He wants to keep his poetry humble and honest, not chase literary prestige. In short, he seems to aspire to the humility (but not the amateurishness) of a craftsman, as well as the seriousness (but not the elitism) of an artist.

Thomas also describes his art with a curious adjective: "sullen." This word usually means sulky or resentful, but its meaning here is somewhat mysterious—and likely metaphorical. In light of the lines that follow, it might imply that poets "Exercise[]" (i.e., practice) their art away from the rest of humanity, as if sulking in their rooms. In other words, while "lovers lie abed," poets stay up all "night," writing in solitude. "Sullen" also hints that Thomas's art is *rebelling* against something. The rest of the stanza will provide some clues as to what that might be.

The poet practices his art while "only the moon rages," somewhere in the sky above. This detail seems highly symbolic: the moon is conventionally associated with passion, romance, poetry, and the like. Its "rag[ing]" might indicate something about its appearance; perhaps the moon is reddish (red being the traditional color of anger) or surrounded by stormy weather. But the verb "rages" might also be meant to personify the moon and to project some of the poet's own feelings onto it. In the "still[ness]" of the "night," that is, the poet wrestles with raging, tumultuous emotions, which seem to find a mirror in the moon overhead.

Meanwhile, the "lovers" of the world rest quietly "abed" (in bed). Here, Thomas turns a potentially sensual image into a sad one. Rather than making love or sharing pillow talk, these couples, according to Thomas, "lie [...] With all their griefs in their arms." In other words, they lie together in deep, brooding sorrow, metaphorically clutching their "griefs" as tightly as they embrace each other. Unhappy as they are, these lovers seem to provide a starting point for the poet's "art."

LINES 6-9

I labour by ...
... the ivory stages

Lines 6-9 continue, but do not finish, the sentence begun in line 1. In fact, each of the poem's stanzas consists of a single long sentence, which pours and tumbles through a series of heavily enjambed lines toward the full stop at the end of the final line. This structure gives the language a surging, passionate quality, which Thomas nevertheless reins in expertly with rhyme and meter. (Remember, this is a poem that proclaims his view of poetry—it's a perfect opportunity to show off his craftsmanship.)

Having established a nighttime setting, Thomas announces that he's hard at work, but that he's *not* working for money or fame. Poetry, for him, isn't about achieving career "ambition[s]" or simply earning his daily "bread." Nor is it an opportunity to "strut" his "charms" on "ivory stages"—that is, perform in fancy venues and charm high-class audiences. It's not cynically transactional in that way; it's not a mere "trade" or an exercise in vanity. (Few, if any, stages are literally made of ivory, which is an extremely expensive material, so the metaphor "ivory stages" captures the kind of ludicrous elitism he's determined to avoid.)

So if Thomas isn't seeking money, celebrity, or prestige, what *is* he writing for? The last two lines of the stanza begin to answer that question.

LINES 10-11

But for the ...
... most secret heart.

Lines 10-11 conclude the poem's long first sentence. At last, Thomas reveals what he *does* hope to gain by writing poetry.

True to form, he explains through a metaphor. Having invoked the "lovers" of the world in lines 4-5, he now asserts that he's working "for the common wages / Of their most secret heart." In other words, through his poetry, he hopes to win over the inmost hearts of lovers everywhere. He hopes their hearts will pay him "wages" in the form of appreciation, admiration, gratitude—or perhaps any kind of sincere emotional response. (For example, they might feel more passion as "lovers" or take comfort for their "griefs.") Such wages are "common" in the sense that emotions themselves are commonplace, and also in the sense that they belong to ordinary people, not just the fortunate few. Only the elite can confer money or prestige on poets, but anyone with a "heart" can pay poets the tribute of heartfelt appreciation.

Beneath the ornate language of this first stanza, then, lies a simple idea. Thomas claims that he isn't pursuing his art for riches, fame, praise, or career advancement. If he can touch the hearts of his readers—at least, those who experience authentic love and grief—that's all the reward he needs.

LINES 12-16

Not for the ...
... nightingales and psalms

In the previous stanza, Thomas described the audience he writes for: "lovers" everywhere. Now, in lines 12-16, Thomas specifies who he's *not* writing for.

First, he's not writing "for the proud man apart / From the raging moon." This is another metaphor, and a slightly ambiguous one. It relies on the symbolism attached to the moon, which traditionally represents love, passion, and/or irrationality (as in a term like "moonstruck"). Here, Thomas associates it with "raging" passion. So the "proud man" who stands "apart" from the moon isn't literally hiding from the moonlight; he's detaching himself from the passionate side of life—what Thomas might call the poetic side of life. He's "proud" as in haughty. (Notice how the enjambment in lines 12-13 sets the word "apart" apart from the word "From," wittily emphasizing the man's *apartness* or aloofness.)

Perhaps this figure represents the kind of intellectual who reads only with his mind, not with his heart (a pompous critic or strict rationalist, for example). Or maybe he represents the kind of person who doesn't like poetry at all. Regardless, Thomas has no use for him as he writes on his "spindrift pages"—that is, pages as fragile and fleeting as ocean spray. (Besides casting Thomas's poetry in a humble light, this metaphor subtly suggests that his poetry *is* influenced by the moon, since the moon's gravity sways the ocean tides.)

Next, Thomas specifies that he isn't writing "for the towering dead / With their nightingales and psalms." Here, his meaning relies heavily on allusion. For any reader of English poetry, "nightingales" will immediately evoke one of the most famous poems in the language: John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819), a classic of the British Romantic movement. Meanwhile, "psalms" (worship songs or poems) evokes the biblical Book of Psalms. Thomas doesn't mean that he dislikes Keats, the writers of the Psalms, or other "dead" authors. He acknowledges their "towering" talent and stature; indeed, his own work is clearly influenced by the language of the Bible and the Romantic poets. He simply means that he isn't writing *for* these dead figures—trying to measure up to the standards of the past. That would be another way of reducing his poetry to an intellectual exercise. Instead, as he makes clear in the following lines, he's writing for the living.

LINES 17-20

But for the ...
... craft or art.

In the closing lines of the poem, Thomas repeats the point he made in the previous stanza. He's not writing for aloof intellectuals or dead poets; he's writing for the "lovers" who can appreciate him in the present. He's hoping to move their hearts and maybe even assuage their "griefs."

But with the repetition comes significant variations. Whereas the first stanza described the lovers as holding "all their griefs in their arms," for example, lines 17-18 describe them as having "their arms / Round the griefs of the ages." Suddenly, their sorrow is not just personal but timeless. Implicitly, then, the poet's task is a daunting one: he isn't just hoping to soothe lovers' individual griefs but the pain that lovers have felt since time immemorial. He's hoping to speak to, and for, "the ages."

And whereas he said earlier that he seeks the "wages" of the lovers' "most secret heart," lines 19-20 qualify this mission statement with a final touch of irony. The poet acknowledges that these lovers, his imagined audience, don't actually "pay" him any "praise or wages." They don't even "heed"—pay attention to or take instruction from—his "craft or art" of poetry.

So what's the point of his art? While it's possible that Thomas is claiming poetry is futile, the care he's put into this poem suggests that he sees *some* value in it. More likely, these closing lines are suggesting that lovers don't "heed" his poetry *yet*. After all, he's writing in solitary silence, and they're asleep or nursing their sorrows in bed. So in practicing his "craft or art," he's taking a leap of faith. He's "labour[ing]" for the "wages" of appreciation that *might* come, eventually, if he does his job well. He's writing a message that others may or may not receive or understand.

This kind of humble mission, the poem implies, is what all good poetry (or all good art) attempts. True poets don't seek fame and fortune; they seek to connect with average readers—including readers who don't yet know their poetry exists.

SYMBOLS

THE RAGING MOON

The moon is a traditional symbol of many things, including love, passion, irrationality, and poetry. The poet seems to link "the moon" above him with all these things. He calls it a "raging" moon—perhaps it's a fierce red color, or surrounded by storm clouds—so it's clearly meant to represent some form of passion. That passion, in turn, informs the work of the poet, who's writing for passionate "lovers" everywhere.

The poet also specifies that he's *not* writing for "the proud man" who sets himself "apart / From the raging moon." This man seems to exemplify the type of analytical reader who cuts himself from emotion: perhaps a "proud" (haughty) intellectual or critic. Thomas doesn't care what people like that think of his work; he wants to engage readers' "heart[s]" as much as, or more than, their rational minds.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "Exercised in the still night / When only the moon rages"
- **Lines 12-13:** "Not for the proud man apart / From the raging moon I write"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Along with meter and rhyme, alliteration helps make the poem's language musical and memorable. In this poem about poetry, Thomas seems to be not only sharing his view of his art form but demonstrating the kind of verbal music he's capable of making. This is a lyrical poem for "lovers," so it's full of beautiful sounds. Look at lines 4-6, for example:

> And the lovers lie abed
> With all their griefs in their arms,
> I labour by singing light [...]

The repeated /l/ sounds are lush and melodious, appropriate for a song-like poem written "by singing light."

Similarly, the /r/ alliteration in "raging" and "write" (line 13) adds emphasis to the language, drawing out the passionate emotion of the line. Later in the stanza, /p/ alliteration and long /a/ assonance combine in "pay no praise" (line 19). This double emphasis underscores the poet's proud disdain for ordinary, worldly rewards, such as audience "praise" and monetary wages. (A comparable effect occurs earlier, in line 7, as /b/ consonance lays extra stress on the claim that the poet doesn't work "for ambition or bread.")

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "lovers lie"
- **Line 6:** "labour," "light"
- **Line 13:** "raging," "write"
- **Line 19:** "pay," "praise"

REPETITION

Repetition is integral to the poem's structure. Many key words and phrases repeat, with slight variations, across the poem's two stanzas: "my craft or [...] art"; "the moon rages"/"the raging moon"; "the lovers"; "griefs"; "their arms"; "wages." Taken together, these phrases pretty much sum up the poem's core themes: the art of poetry; passion, love, and grief; and the *rewards* of poetry. On one level, then, repetition helps underline home the poet's ideas.

The heavy use of repetition and variation also gives the poem an intricate, song-like structure. Not surprisingly, it shows off the author's "craft" and "art[istry]": his ability to orchestrate recurring sounds and images into a harmonious whole. Notice, for example, the pleasing near-symmetry between the first and last lines: "In my craft or sullen art [...] Nor heed my craft or art." This repetition brings the poem full circle, but it also adds a slight ironic twist: Thomas has spent the whole poem explaining that he writes for the world's "lovers," but he ultimately admits that his intended audience isn't aware of him. They don't hear or "heed" a word he says, at least in the short term.

This closing variation, in turn, helps illuminate the earlier word "sullen," and the meaning of the poem as a whole. Poets who write for lovers typically do so in solitude; they must communicate love, grief, and other intimate emotions without being in anyone's "arms." They may seem to be sullenly avoiding humanity, yet they're actually seeking a profound, intimate connection—whether or not anyone is paying attention.

Thomas also repeats a number of phrases at the beginnings of lines: "Not for" (lines 7 and 12), "But for" (lines 10 and 17), and "Nor" (lines 15 and 20). This effect is similar to anaphora, although the repeated phrases don't occur in successive lines or clauses. It adds to the poem's powerful, propulsive rhythm while underlining the distinctions Thomas is drawing: he writes *not for* this reason, *nor* that reason, *but for* human connection alone.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "my craft or," "art"
- **Line 3:** "the moon rages"
- **Line 4:** "the lovers"
- **Line 5:** "griefs," "their arms"
- **Line 7:** "Not for"
- **Line 10:** "But for," "wages"
- **Line 12:** "Not for"
- **Line 13:** "the raging moon"
- **Line 15:** "Nor"
- **Line 17:** "But for," "the lovers," "their arms"
- **Line 18:** "griefs"
- **Line 19:** "wages"
- **Line 20:** "Nor," "my craft or art"

ALLUSION

The poem makes two prominent allusions in lines 15-16. The poet states that he does *not* write for an imagined audience of great, "dead" writers:

> Nor for the towering dead
> With their nightingales and psalms [...]

There is one extremely famous nightingale in the history of English poetry: the bird John Keats (1795-1821) writes about in his "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819). Likewise, "psalms" most directly invokes the biblical Book of Psalms, though it can also refer to songs and poems of worship more generally.

Keats and the other British Romantic poets were major influences on Dylan Thomas, and the rich language of the King James Bible can often be heard in Thomas's rhythms and phrases. But he seems to be resisting their influence a little here, or at least specifying that his work isn't *for* the poets and psalmists who influenced him. In other words, it's not a purely literary exercise or an artificial communion with the dead.

Effectively, "nightingales and psalms" condenses the prestige literature of the past into a single phrase. Thomas acknowledges the "towering" brilliance of the writers who created this literature, but insists that he isn't trying to meet their standards. They are "dead" and gone; meanwhile, he's writing for the living, for the "lovers."

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "Nor for the towering dead / With their nightingales and psalms"

METAPHOR

The poem is the poet's reflection on his own "art," so it's no surprise that it showcases his skill with metaphor. After all, this device is central to the poet's craft.

Nearly every line here contains figurative language of some kind. Lines 3 and 13, for example, imagine the moon as a "raging" creature. This could be read as personification (although people aren't the only creatures who rage!). Regardless, the phrase seems to project some of the poet's stormy feelings onto the moon above—which may also look "raging" in other ways (red in color, surrounded by turbulent clouds, etc.). In turn, the moon stands as a symbol of passion, romance, and so on: all that the "proud" and skeptical reader of poetry stands "apart" from.

In lines 4-5 and 17-18, the poet again plays with a metaphor twice over. He imagines the world's lovers in bed, first "With all their griefs in their arms," then with "their arms / Round the griefs of the ages." In the first case, the metaphor suggests that the lovers are holding on to their griefs as tightly as they're holding on to each other. (Also, perhaps, that love and grief are inextricable; to have a lover or partner is to know both intimately.) The second time, the metaphor suggests that the lovers, in some sense, are holding on to *all the world's* griefs. They embody the sorrows of all "the ages"; they share an intimacy and a pain that is timeless.

And the metaphors keep coming! Thomas rejects "the strut and trade of charms"—swaggering, cynical displays of charisma—"On the ivory stages," a metaphor for the kind of fancy venues where a sellout artist might perform. Instead, he seeks what he calls "the common wages" of the lovers' "most secret heart." This is a metaphor for the appreciation and admiration of ordinary, passionate people whose deepest selves respond to his poetry.

He also refers metaphorically to the "towering dead"—famous, deceased authors whose reputations loom as large as giants—and compares his own "pages" to "spindrift," or sea spray. This last metaphor suggests that his own poetry may be trivial and fleeting compared to the great poetry of the past. He doesn't care about literary immortality, though: all he cares about is forging an authentic human connection in his own time.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Line 3
- Lines 4-5
- Line 6
- Lines 8-9
- Lines 10-11
- Lines 12-13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Lines 17-18

ENJAMBMENT

The poem is heavily enjambed throughout. It also omits end-stopping punctuation in several places where, by the standard

rules of grammar, it would normally occur. (For example, a comma would normally fall at the end of line 1.) Only four lines in the poem are end-stopped with punctuation (lines 5, 11, 18, and 20), and two of these lines conclude their respective stanzas.

As a result of all these effects, the poem's short lines seem to "fall" down the page until they reach the periods at the end of each stanza (the only periods in the poem). It's more of a controlled fall than a free fall: along with the commas in lines 5 and 18, the poem's meter and rhyme scheme hold its language in check to some degree. Still, the enjambments and omitted punctuation create a surging, tumbling, lyrical flow of language—the kind Thomas was famous for.

Enjambment also helps emphasize a few key words and phrases, such as "common wages" (line 10). This thematically important phrase, which describes the poet's goal, draws a little extra emphasis from its placement just before the line break. The pause of the line break—a pause that wouldn't occur if the phrase were written in prose—also sets up the surprise of the following line, which reveals that these aren't literal wages but the metaphorical wages of the "heart." And in a particularly witty effect, the enjambment in lines 12-13 illustrates the meaning of the words it divides: it sets "apart" apart from "From"!

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "abed / With"
- **Lines 7-8:** "bread / Or"
- **Lines 8-9:** "charms / On"
- **Lines 10-11:** "wages / Of"
- **Lines 12-13:** "apart / From"
- **Lines 13-14:** "write / On"
- **Lines 15-16:** "dead / With"
- **Lines 17-18:** "arms / Round"

VOCABULARY

Sullen (Line 1) - Sulky or gloomy. The poet's "art," poetry, is "sullen" in the sense that it's pursued apart from other people (as if by someone sulking in their room), and also in the sense that it rebels against worldly "ambition."

Exercised (Line 2) - Practiced; applied. (The poet is "Exercis[ing]," or practicing, his art in the nighttime silence.)

Abed (Line 4) - Old-fashioned synonym for "in bed."

Bread (Line 7) - A symbolic way of referring to food or sustenance in general; can also be slang for "money."

Strut and trade of charms (Lines 8-9) - A metaphorical description of showy, tawdry performances meant to charm audiences in a superficial way.

Ivory stages (Lines 8-9) - A metaphor for fancy performance venues (not necessarily made of literal ivory!).

Spindrift (Line 14) - Sea spray. Here, a metaphor suggesting the "pages" are trivial, fragile, and temporary.

Psalms (Lines 15-16) - Hymns or songs of worship, as in the biblical Book of Psalms.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem contains two rhymed, single-sentence stanzas, one with eleven lines and the other with nine. There's no traditional name for this form; it's one that Thomas improvised. Its repetitions lend the poem a noticeable, though imperfect, balance and symmetry. It makes the language highly musical but also allows for some roughness and freedom in that music. Overall, then, the form suits a poem that's not trying to obey literary conventions (please "the towering dead / With their nightingales and psalms"), but *is* trying to comfort or enchant the "secret heart[s]" of "lovers."

The poem's genre does have a traditional name. It's an *ars poetica* (Latin: "art of poetry"): a poem in which the writer reflects on the nature of their art form, or on the aims and values they bring to it.

METER

The poem uses a loose, three-beat accentual meter. This means that each line contains three (or sometimes four) strong stresses, but the placement of those stresses (and the overall number of syllables) varies from line to line. Look at lines 1-4, for example:

> In my craft or sullen art
> Exercised in the still night
> When only the moon rages
> And the lovers lie abed [...]

The placement of stresses shifts around, and the syllable count varies in later lines (some have seven syllables, others six). But the number of stresses remains pretty constant.

The flexible rhythm keeps the poem lyrical, yet loose. This is a song fit for "lovers" on a moonlit night, but not one that's strictly wedded to rules or traditions (the "towering" poets who came before).

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's complete rhyme scheme is ABCDEBDECCA ABCDEECCA.

Notice that this scheme is identical across stanzas, except for the "missing" B and D rhymes in the middle of the second

stanza. The scheme also begins and ends each stanza with the same rhyme sound ("art"/"heart"/"apart"/"art"), lending the poem an extra touch of symmetry. Indeed, the poem's first and last lines are very similar and end with the same word ("In my craft or sullen art," "Nor heed my craft or art"). These effects bring each stanza, and the poem as a whole, full circle, like a song that circles back to the root note of a chord. The song-like structure suits this poem for "lovers" written by "singing light" (i.e., evening light that seems to inspire music).

All the rhymes in the poem are full rhymes; even "psalms," in Thomas's Welsh accent, makes a full rhyme with "arms" (lines 16-17). Again, this effect makes the poem more musically rich and heightens its intense, romantic mood.

SPEAKER

The speaker is a writer explaining why and for whom he writes. It's fair to equate the speaker with Dylan Thomas himself, and to read "In My Craft or Sullen Art" as an *ars poetica*: a poem that reflects on poetry.

The speaker is proud, idealistic, and self-assured, though the irony in the last line undercuts his self-assurance a little. He insists that he doesn't write for intellectual clout or material gain but to touch the "heart[s]" of passionate, suffering people. His imagined audience is the world's "lovers," who experience intense "griefs" as well as intense romance. At the same time, he knows this imagined audience isn't paying attention to ("heed[ing]") his poetry, at least not yet. He presents himself as so little concerned with "praise or wages" that he's eager to write for lovers who are totally oblivious to him, just on the chance they'll appreciate him someday.

SETTING

The poem's setting is wherever the poet is writing the poem! It might be anywhere indoors or even outdoors, but the time is the middle of the night—an hour "When only the moon rages" and everything else is "still." An indoor setting is more likely, of course: the "singing light" he works by probably refers to some light source in his home, not just the light of the moon.

As he writes, the poet's imagination travels elsewhere, to the beds of "lovers" around the world. He imagines these passionate people—who do not imagine him in return nor think about the work he's doing—as a kind of ideal audience for his poetry. If he can ultimately reach *them* in some way, his efforts will have been worth it.

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 modes of poetic expression, abandoning or reworking the conventions of 19th-century verse to write daring, expansive, psychologically acute poetry in a wide range of experimental forms.

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 descendant 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).

"In My Craft or Sullen Art" appears in Thomas's acclaimed volume *Deaths and Entrances* (1946), which also contains such frequently anthologized classics as "Poem in October" and "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dylan Thomas published *Deaths and Entrances* in 1946, a year after World War II (1939-1945) came to an end. Most of the poems in the volume, including "In My Craft or Sullen Art," were written during wartime. 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.

Deaths and Entrances contains several war poems that memorialize victims of Germany's air raids on the UK. However, Thomas's poetry usually isn't directly political. "In My Craft or Sullen Art," for example, doesn't refer to historical or topical events. Its focus on grief may be partly a response to the prevailing mood of wartime, but the war doesn't feature in the poem. Even the reference to the "towering dead" (lines 15-16) evokes *literary* history rather than the political or social kind. Instead, the poem makes clear that Thomas writes for "the ages" (line 18). He hopes to elicit and evoke timeless human emotions—the love, sorrow, and other passions that unite all eras.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Dylan Thomas read "In My Craft or Sullen Art." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tiw3uOT2eUc)
- A Thomas Biography — Read about the poet's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/dylan-thomas)
- More on the Ars Poetica — Learn more about the genre tradition Thomas's poem is part of. (https://poets.org/glossary/ars-poetica)
- A Dylan Thomas Doc — Watch a BBC film about the life of the poet. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HotlHkMJD4Q)
- More on the Poet — A brief Thomas biography at Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/dylan-thomas)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER DYLAN THOMAS POEMS

- A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London
- Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night
- Fern Hill
- Poem in October
- The force that through the green fuse drives the flower

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