Poem in October

SUMMARY

The speaker tells the story of his thirtieth birthday. He woke up that morning to the sounds of the harbor, the nearby woods, and the seashore (spotted with mussel pools and overseen by priestly herons). The morning seemed to call him out with the repetitive, prayer-like sounds of the water, the calls of birds, and the sound of boats knocking against the fishermen's dock. He felt as if he had to go outside right that moment into the quiet, early-morning town.

His birthday, he says, started with the sounds of all the sea birds and forest birds carrying his name above the farmland and its white horses. He got up and walked out into the rain, feeling as if all the days of his life were showering down on him. It was high tide; the speaker saw a hunting heron dive into the water as he followed the path out of town. When the gates closed behind him, the people of the town were just starting to wake up.

Out in the countryside, the speaker saw a flock of larks flying by in a massive cloud, heard blackbirds singing in the bushes, and felt an unexpectedly summery October sunlight as he climbed a hill. This gentle warmth and sweet birdsong came as a surprise: the speaker had wandered up above the rain and cold wind of the woods further down below him.

From this height, he could see faint rain falling over the tiny, faraway harbor, the church (which, wet with seawater, looked about as small as a snail, with its towers forming the snail's horns), and the castle (which looked brown as an owl). Out where he was, though, past the edge of town and beneath the cloud of larks, he felt as if he had stepped into the blossoming gardens of spring and summer. Up here, he felt ready to gaze in wonder at the landscape all day—but then the weather changed.

The clouds rolled away from the sweet countryside and into the distance, and the changed blue sky was full of glorious summery sunlight, as if the very air were full of ripe fruit. In that moment of change, the speaker felt as if he were reliving long-ago mornings from his childhood—days when he used to go out walking with his mother through beams of sunlight that seemed to teach mysterious lessons, and through sacred forest groves...

...and through fields he saw afresh as if he were only a little baby. Feeling again as he did when he was a child, it was as if his tears and his heart were his boyhood self's again. These very woods, rivers, and shores were where, as a boy in the long-lost past, he whispered his deepest joys to the trees, the stones, and the fishes. The mystery of life was still alive for him then, singing in the waters and the birds.

On this hilltop, feeling all these remembered feelings, he could have spent his whole day in wonder—but then the weather changed. He felt the living joy of his long-lost childhood self still there underneath the hot sunlight. It was his thirtieth birthday; he stood there in what felt like midday in summer, even though the leaves on the trees in the town below were turning their autumnal red. He prayed: "May I still find my deepest, truest feelings here on this hilltop a year from now."

THEMES

THE RHYTHM OF LIFE AND THE BEAUTY OF AGING

"Poem in October" tells the story of the speaker's thirtieth birthday. On that day, he remembers, he felt both as if he were making a journey toward "heaven"—that is, his eventual death—and as if time had turned backward. Wandering through a well-known and beloved country landscape, it was as if all his childhood joy had returned to him. Aging, this poem suggests, doesn't just mean growing older, accepting change, and leaving the past behind. It also means revisiting and rediscovering the past, getting ever more familiar with what matters to you the most, and becoming a truer and richer version of the person you've always been.

The morning of his thirtieth birthday, the speaker says, feels like the start of his "thirtieth year to heaven": a stop on the journey toward the end of life. The soft autumnal landscape around him, with its "pale rain" and "mists," reflects his sense that he's getting older and leaving his youth behind. Just as the arrival of autumn means that summer is ending, hitting one's thirties means that one is on the way to middle age. A mature man now, the speaker feels ready to "marvel" at the loveliness of the countryside in autumn and enjoy reflecting on "a shower of all [his] days"—words that suggest he can appreciate this stage of his life for what it is, rather than mourning his lost youth or regretting that time keeps on relentlessly passing.

But just when the speaker has settled in to "marvel [his] birthday away," something unexpected happens: "the weather turn[s] around." As he climbs a high hill, he emerges from autumn clouds into a rush of "summery" sunlight that seems to turn the calendar backward—and with it, his life. The sunlit landscape puts him right back in the middle of his happy boyhood, calling up the "joy of the long dead child" in him: faraway "forgotten mornings" when he walked through summer forests with his mother, listening to "legends" and basking in the beautiful "mystery" of life. That "long dead child," the poem suggests, isn't dead at all. Even as the speaker gets

older, his joyful younger self's "heart" and "tears" are still inside him, ready to reemerge.

This renewed contact with his childhood self fills the speaker with deep joy. Feeling that the emotions of his youth are still with him makes him excited to look forward to his *next* stages in life: he concludes the poem by praying that his "heart's truth" might "still be sung / On this high hill in a year's turning." Aging, the poem thus suggests, isn't merely a one-way journey toward death. It's a rich, meandering, cumulative process, and one in which the "heart's truth," first felt in childhood, is an eternal touchstone.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-70

HUMANITY, NATURE, AND SPIRITUALITY

The speaker of "Poem in October" finds joy, meaning, and renewal in his connection with the natural world. On the morning of his birthday, he feels as if he's being summoned out into the countryside by the calls of "larks" and "rooks," the lapping waves, and the winds. All of nature seems to reflect what's going on inside him, showing him that his life is connected to the life of the whole world. To this speaker, being alive means being part of nature, interwoven with its rhythms—and this connection is a source of "wonder," awe, and "mystery."

The speaker marks his thirtieth birthday by going on a long walk out in the countryside, where he feels connected to nature in more ways than one. Besides "marvel[ing]" at the plain loveliness of birdsong and ripening autumn fruit, he feels as if his own life is following the rhythm of the seasons. The autumn "mists" and "pale rain" remind him that he's getting older, leaving his youth behind. But when the "weather turn[s] around" and a blaze of "summery" sunlight breaks through the autumn clouds, he feels as if he's a child again, enjoying the summer woods with the same sense of "wonder" he felt when he was little.

In other words, the speaker's whole life is intertwined with the rhythms of nature: when the young summery sun comes out, his young summery self comes out, too. Understanding that he's intimately connected with the world around him, the speaker feels a surge of delight that the "mystery" of existence is "alive" in him as much as it's in "the water and singing birds." Humanity, this poem suggests, is mysteriously woven together with all of nature and all of life—and the moments in which people recognize this are profoundly moving and meaningful.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-70

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

It was my ...
... Priested shore

"Poem in October" begins with these solemn and joyful words:

It was my thirtieth year to heaven

That's a pretty dramatic way to say "it was my thirtieth birthday." Every birthday, this line suggests, is just a milestone on the way to death—and who knows how many more years it will take to get there?

To this speaker, the idea is an uplifting one. He's not just ticking off the days until he's dead. He's a pilgrim on the road to heaven. His sense of life as a mysterious, sublime, and thrilling pilgrimage will animate this whole poem: he'll spend the morning of his thirtieth birthday on a walk that mirrors that lifelong heavenward journey.

Even at the moment he wakes up, the speaker feels there's something special in the air this morning. Even as he lies in bed, he can see the landscape around his home in his mind's eye: his "hearing" of the "harbour," the "neighbour wood," and the "mussel pooled" and "heron / Priested shore" lays those landmarks out for him (and for the reader!) as vividly as if he were a bird flying above the whole scene. (Not coincidentally, the speaker seems to be describing Dylan Thomas's native Wales; this speaker has more than a little in common with his author.)

The speaker's instant familiarity with the landscape already suggests that he loves this place—and his language suggests he sees it as sacred. When he describes the shore as "heron priested," he's not only evoking the stern, stiff-legged, priestly dignity of herons (though he's certainly doing that). He's also hinting that nature is innately holy. The "shore" here becomes the herons' church; just by living their lives, these birds preach a wordless sermon.

The speaker will make his journey into this landscape in seven stanzas of free verse. While the poem won't use any regular rhyme scheme or meter, it will still take on a regular, pulsing shape: each stanza uses a predictable pattern of longer and shorter lines, evoking both the hilly landscape the speaker will soon climb into and the larger rhythm of life he'll explore.

LINES 5-10

...
... and set forth.

Even in the first few lines, readers can gather that the speaker feels the natural world is sacred. That impression only gets stronger in the rest of the first stanza. The "morning" now

comes to life and "beckon[s]" the speaker out of bed with the sound of "water praying"—moments of personification that again suggest that the world's ordinary goings-on have an inherently holy consciousness:

- The idea that the waters of the shoreline are "praying" evokes the constant rhythmic rush of the waves *and* suggests that the ever-moving ocean creates a kind of eternal prayer, like the rotations of a Tibetan prayer wheel or the old Christian practice of perpetual prayer.
- The world, in this speaker's view, is thus in a state of constant worship.

It's not only the praying waves but the ordinary sounds of the "call of seagull and rook" and the "knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall" that "beckon" him. Perhaps the fact that today is the speaker's birthday makes these normal sounds feel fresh and newborn, too. The speaker seems to be greeting the world as if for the first time; the holy and the everyday knock against each other, even overlap.

All the sounds he can hear from his bed give him a sense of urgency. The "morning," he says, demands that he go out into the "still sleeping" world—words that could equally suggest that:

- the world is "still" asleep in the sense that it hasn't woken up yet;
- and that it's "still," quiet and unmoving, in its sleep.

Either way, the speaker seems to be answering a special birthday call, responding to a "beckon" that the rest of the sleepy "town" can't hear.

Listen to the interweaving sounds in these last few lines:

> Myself to **set** foot
> That **se**cond
> In the **s**till **s**leeping town and **set** forth.

The diacope on the word "set" underscores the hushed sibilance of "**s**et," "**s**econd," "**s**till," and "**s**leeping" and the gentle /eh/ assonance of "s**e**t" and "s**e**cond." Notice the alliterative connection between "**set** **f**oot" and "**set** **f**orth," too! Echoes like these will give the whole poem its euphony.

There might not be a rhyme scheme here, but assonant slant rhymes—for instance, between "The morning b**eck**on" in line 5 and "That s**eco**nd" in line 9—raise the ghost of one. Those harmonious but subtle patterns of sound fit right in with the speaker's sense that some mysterious connective life force links him to the early-morning world.

LINES 11-16

> *My birthday ...*
> *... all my days.*

As the speaker "set[s] forth" into his birthday dawn, he gets swept up in a bird's-eye view of the countryside he's walking into—or, rather, he gets swept up into visions of birds. The "water- / Birds and the birds of the winged trees," he says, are "flying [his] name" over the sweep of "farms" below.

The boundaries between the speaker, the birds, and the landscape blur in these lines:

- When the speaker describes the "winged trees," for instance, his metaphor suggests both that the windblown trees look as if they have wings *and* that the many birds who live in those trees lend them *their* wings: bird and tree are closely related.
- And if the birds are "flying [the speaker's] name" over the landscape, then his name, his identity, is wrapped up in the birds' flight. Celebrating the landscape, he feels as if the landscape is celebrating him right back.

There's no clear distinction between his feelings and the world around him, in other words: he feels as if he's part of what he sees.

That idea deepens when the speaker says that he:

> [...] rose
> In rainy autumn
> And walked abroad in a shower of all my days.

The rain on this "rainy autumn" day becomes a "shower" of time. As the speaker walks through the rain, he feels as if every day of his past is falling around him.

Besides strengthening the connection between the speaker's life and the natural world, this metaphor evokes the reflective, nostalgic side of the speaker's birthday feelings. If his past feels like a "shower of all [his] days," then each individual day falls quickly and irrecoverably: he can't count the days of his life any more than he could count raindrops. His past surrounds him like the weather does, and it somehow *is* the weather.

LINES 17-20

> *High tide and ...*
> *... the town awoke.*

Now, the speaker walks into the landscape he heard on awaking in the poem's first lines. At the shore, whose "praying" waters and priestly herons he imagined earlier, it's "high tide," and those same herons are hunting, diving into the water as the speaker makes his way "over the border" of the town and out into the countryside.

Take a look at the way the speaker uses enjambment at the end of the second stanza:

> High tide and the heron dived when I took the road
> Over the border
> And the gates
> Of the town closed as the town awoke.

Here, the speaker's thoughts step over line breaks just as the speaker steps "over the border" and through the "gates."

In fact, border-crossing becomes a persistent idea in these lines: the heron pierces the surface of the water, the speaker leaves town. Symbolically speaking, the speaker is crossing borders in more ways than one. Remember, today is his birthday, and his reflective metaphor describing "all his days" as an autumnal rain shower might suggest he feels he's leaving the summer of his life behind, moving into the "autumn" of middle age. He's stepping across the border that separates youth from older age at the same time as he steps across the border that separates town from country.

For that matter, he's stepping over the border between himself and the wide world! He's already shown how closely connected he feels to the landscape: the birds were "flying [his] name" over the countryside like a banner just a few lines ago, and the rain and the "days" of his life seemed to be almost the same thing.

Paradoxically, though, his border-crossing here separates him from the world even as it connects him more deeply. He's leaving behind the collective, shared life of the "town" (which is only just beginning to "aw[a]ke" as he departs) and entering his own private, intensely personal experience of the day.

LINES 21-25

A springful ...
... the hill's shoulder,

Leaving the sleeping town behind, the speaker heads out into the countryside and begins to climb a hill, drinking in the view as he goes. Again, he pays special attention to flocks of birds: a "springful of larks" forms a joyously "rolling cloud" (or perhaps soars through a literal cloud), and bushes are "brimming with whistling / Blackbirds." Again, nature takes as much delight in the speaker's birthday morning as the speaker does. These singing, dancing birds create a sense of wild abundance and celebration.

So does the speaker's polysyndeton:

> A springful of larks in a rolling
> Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with whistling
> Blackbirds and the sun of October

Those connecting "ands" suggest the speaker sees all this natural beauty as an embarrassment of riches. Larks and blackbirds and the autumn sun—it's almost too much delight to take.

The speaker especially relishes that sunlight. Listen to the way enjambments evoke his pleasure here:

> [...] and the sun of October
> Summery
> On the hill's shoulder,

The lone word "summery" gets a slow, meditative line all to itself, as if the speaker has paused to soak up an unseasonable beam of sunshine as it breaks through the "rainy autumn" sky.

Readers might also want to pause here, noting that the speaker is encountering both the spring (in the form of that "springful of larks") and the summer here in October. Something about this magical morning seems to turn the seasons back. Keep an eye out for border-crossings between seasons as the speaker continues his climb up the "hill's shoulder."

LINES 26-30

Here were fond ...
... faraway under me.

Climbing the hill above his town, the speaker pauses to notice joyful gatherings of birds and a "summery" beam of sunlight—surprising for October in Wales! In fact, that sunlight and birdsong strike him so much that he marvels at them again now: these "fond climates" and "sweet singers," he observes, have arrived "suddenly" and unexpectedly on this hillside.

In fact, it seems he's climbed right out of the autumn and into the summer. Down below him, he can still hear:

> [...] the rain wringing
> Wind blow cold
> In the wood faraway under me.

It's as if he's entered a private, magical world by getting up early and making this climb. In the everyday world below, it's a rainy autumn day; up where the speaker is, summer has returned—or perhaps never left.

Take a moment here to notice the innovative way Dylan Thomas uses language in this passage:

- In a moment of striking figurative language, he describes the "rain wringing"—words that at once suggest that the clouds are dripping like a wrung washcloth and (punnily) that the rain is *ringing*, making little bell-like *dings* as it bounces off the roofs below.
- In the next line, he plays with grammar. Conventionally, one would say "wind blowing cold" here rather than "Wind blow cold." But by cutting

that "-ing," the speaker creates a dramatic sound effect. Each of those monosyllabic words hits like a separate gust of wind, stressing the /w/ of "wind" (which will link up musically with the /w/ of "wood faraway" in the next line) and the assonant /oh/ of "blow cold."

All this vivid experimental language marks this poem out as a Modernist work. Like his contemporaries T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Thomas used language like a musician, choosing his words for sound as much as sense.

LINES 31-37

Pale rain ...
... lark full cloud.

From up on his sunlit hillside, the speaker can look down into the rainy countryside below him as if he were peering into another world. He's climbed so high that the landscape he walked through earlier is "dwindling," shrinking down, until the church is only "the size of a snail."

The imagery the speaker uses here suggests that he sees this miniaturized landscape with a combination of fondness and wonder:

> Pale rain over the dwindling harbour
> And over the sea wet church the size of a snail
> With its horns through mist and the castle
> Brown as owls

Just pause for a moment and take in that image of the church. It's not merely the "size of a snail," it's a dead ringer for one. Both its drizzled-on, sea-spattered wetness and its towers (which make the speaker think of a snail's "horns," its eyestalks) fit the role—and, what's more, they invite the reader to complete the picture, imagining stones the moist browny-grey of a snail's flesh and shell. These few words manage to paint a precise picture of a church and a snail at exactly the same time.

A whole ancient, warlike "castle," meanwhile, becomes almost cozy when the speaker describes it as "brown as owls." Notice how exact that simile is: the castle isn't just as brown as *an* owl, it's brown as owls in general, or as a family of owls bunched side by side on a branch. Round /ow/ assonance knits the words close together.

From up on his hillside perch, then, the speaker is looking back at civilization and mostly seeing it in terms of nature. The church becomes a snail, the castle is owl-brown: buildings that represent big ideas of Religion and History become so many little creatures, inching across the landscape.

Up here "beyond the border," the speaker is seeing even ancient buildings as passing, mortal beings. Things look different from where he stands; he's crossed over into a wider perspective (aptly symbolized by that hill, which raises him above the everyday world and lets him see differently).

Perhaps he's even made a step toward the "heaven" he described journeying toward back in the poem's first line. Up here, he says, "all the gardens of spring and summer" are still "blooming." It's almost as if he's climbed into paradise, a place of eternal "summery" sunshine—and a place from which even the most imposing human structures look little, even sweet.

LINES 38-45

...
... and red currants

The speaker has climbed high enough above the town that he feels altogether separate from it: its drizzly October weather and its grand buildings alike look so distant they might as well belong to another world. In other words, the speaker's thirtieth birthday has offered him a moment of altered perspective: a step over the "border" of his everyday life, and a secret gift of "summery" sunlight and soaring birds.

As his rich language has shown, the speaker is more than happy to simply settle in and enjoy this bounty. Up here on his hillside, he says, he could easily "marvel / My birthday / Away," spending the whole day just wondering at the wide view and the unexpected pleasure of light and warmth.

But as it happens, there's even more "marvel" to come. All of a sudden, the speaker remembers, "the weather turned around."

This turn in the weather is a turning point in the poem, too. The speaker carries the moment of change across stanzas:

> [...] but the weather turned around.
> It turned away from the blithe country
> And down the other air [...]

That moment of diacope works like a musical motif, suggesting through right-up-close repetition that this turning is an important one. As the clouds pull back from the "blithe country" (that is, the gentle, happy land) where the speaker stands and roll away from the countryside below, the "blue altered sky" brings "a wonder of summer" to the whole landscape. No longer, in other words, is that regained summer confined just to the speaker's hilltop. Now the summer spreads as far as he can see.

The moment is so surprising and beautiful that the speaker has a moment of synesthesia. The sunlight that "stream[s]" down now seems full of "apples / Pears and red currants"—autumn fruits that he can taste or smell in the warm light. The sun of summer and the bounty of autumn unite in this moment: it's the best of both worlds.

LINES 46-52

And I saw ...
... moved in mine.

With the unexpected "wonder of summer" sunlight "stream[ing]" over the countryside below him, the speaker feels his connection with the world with a new intensity. As the seasons seem to turn backward, so does his life. In this "turning," he feels his own childhood *re*turning—"so clearly," he marvels, that what seemed long "forgotten" becomes as immediate as the present.

The vision of sunlight breaking over the countryside below flashes him back to the days when he used to "walk[] with his mother" through what felt like an enchanted landscape. Using the third person, he describes his young self at a little distance, remembering "a child[]" making his way through:

> [...] the parables
> Of sun light
> And the legends of the green chapels

The spiritual metaphors he uses here recall his earlier visions of praying waters and priestly herons:

- The "sun light" streams down in "parables"—instructive allegorical stories, often with a religious message. Its beams, in other words, seem to *speak* to the child, communicating some mysterious wisdom.
- And the woods become "green chapels," soaring, holy spaces haunted by "legends," full of magic.

His childhood, then, was rich with the same kind of vision he's experiencing today: he once moved through a summertime world that felt sacred through and through.

He feels, too, the spirit of the "twice told fields of infancy"—words that suggest that *remembering* childhood so intensely is its own kind of transporting spiritual experience:

- If these "fields" are "twice told," then perhaps the speaker has experienced them (and expressed something about them) twice over: first in his childhood, and again right now.
- But the first time he experienced these fields was in "infancy"—babyhood. In other words, the first time he "told" these fields, he couldn't really tell anyone anything! ("Infant" comes from root words meaning "unable to speak.")
- Then again, this landscape seems to talk to the speaker all the time (as in those "parables" of sunlight). Perhaps the fields *themselves* "told" the speaker something when he was just a baby—something that the speaker is telling the reader now.

All through this poem, the speaker has been crossing borders between worlds. Now, he suggests that *communication* is another kind of border-crossing. The landscape told the speaker something as a child that rushes back to him now—and that he must tell again, here in this poem.

The experience is so moving that the speaker feels his childhood self's presence in his adult body. Listen to the ringing parallelism here:

> [...] his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved
> in mine.

Notice that, even at this emotional peak, the speaker maintains a little distance between his childhood and adult selves. His joy here doesn't come from the sense that he *is* a little boy again; to simply revert to childhood would mean losing the "shower of all [his] days," all his years of growth and wisdom and progress toward "heaven." Rather, he's moved and astonished to find that he can feel *with* his childhood self, reaching across the border of the seasons and the years. His child-self isn't *all* he is, but it's still *part* of who he is. The child-self and his experiences are still vibrantly alive in the speaker, never truly "forgotten."

The poem's structure elegantly reflects this idea of continuity and border-crossing here:

> And the legends of the green chapels
> And the twice told fields of infancy
> That his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved
> in mine.

The polysyndeton here carries a rush of sunlit emotion right over a stanza break, sweeping the reader along just as memories transport the speaker.

LINES 53-60

> *These were ...*
> *... water and singingbirds.*

The selfsame world the speaker sees around him now, he goes on, connects him to the boy he once was—or, as he phrases it, "a boy," putting a little distance between his past and present selves again. "These," he says, were the very "woods the river and sea" where:

> [...] a boy
> In the listening
> Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his
> joy
> To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.

Again, language crosses boundaries here: the speaker's childhood self felt able to communicate with the whole world. (Notice how polysyndeton again suggests a feeling of wide-open abundance and possibility: "the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.")

Even as he revisits this "joy[ful]" communion, the speaker maintains that careful distance between his past and his present. The memories he's speaking of, he says, belong to the "listening / Summertime of the dead." Perhaps the speaker is simply saying that, back then, he felt the summer world was listening to him; perhaps he's also saying that, paradoxically, this "dead" time is still "listening" receptively to him.

Part of what's miraculous about the experience the speaker is having now, in other words, is the way that it makes a path between the living, present moment and the dead world of the past:

- The speaker isn't turning back the clock here, not exactly; he's not having a Peter Pan moment, feeling as if he's never stopped being the boy he once was (or as if he'd like to transform into that boy again).
- The joy of border-crossing, after all, requires a border! What thrills the speaker here is the sense that he and his boyhood self can meet in the middle.
- That's because a way of being that came easily to him in his childhood—a feeling of natural connection to the world's life-force, a sense that nature could hear him "whisper[ing]"—is still present, still alive in him, even if his boyhood self and his adult self are in a sense two different people.

In fact, even the rush of memories he's having now *shows* that this way of being is still with him. Back then, he says, he felt that "the mystery / Sang alive" in nature; clearly, he's communing with exactly that "mystery" now, feeling a living connection to the world and to his past. (After all, this whole passage began when "the weather turned around": the weather's movement and his emotional movement were one and the same.)

Earlier in the poem, the speaker described leaving the "still sleeping town," using the word "still" to evoke both quiet and continuity. Look how he uses the word again now:

> And the mystery
> Sang alive
> Still in the water and singingbirds.

That singing mystery was still present when the speaker was a child; perhaps it was also still, quiet, a paradoxical silent song running through the world around him.

LINES 61-67

And there ...
... with October blood.

The speaker's experience on his thirtieth birthday has been about a lifelong "mystery": a sense that the speaker and the world around him are intimately connected, that he can cross borders between himself and everything else that lives. Now, with the help of the turning weather, he's crossed a border between his present self and his childhood self, too, finding that his old ability to communicate with a sacred, enchanted world is still alive within him.

In other words, even the boundary between the living present and the dead past is permeable—and what *makes* it permeable is the ongoing, sacred "mystery" of the living world. The speaker first felt the "truth" of that mystery when he was a child—and when he feels it now, he knows it can't die.

As the poem comes to its climax, it's thus only fitting that the speaker repeats himself:

> And there could I marvel my birthday
> Away but the weather turned around. And the true
> Joy of the long dead child sang burning
> In the sun.
> It was my thirtieth
> Year to heaven [...]

These echoes of earlier lines mimic the movement of the speaker's life. The poem's language here "turn[s] around" just as the weather did—and in doing so, it reminds readers that the speaker's mystical rush of memory has happened in just a few minutes of one day.

The "child" he once was, he insists again here, is "long dead." But that child's "joy" is not; it's as fresh and lively as it ever was, still "burning in the sun." Those words might equally suggest that the speaker's old joy has come out to bask in the summery sunlight, and that it lives *in* the sun—that it's part of that vast deathless energy.

Again, the past and the present don't collapse into one thing here; they interweave and coexist. Even as the "summer noon" spreads over the countryside, the "town below" the speaker is still "leaved with October blood"—a metaphor that suggests the autumn leaves make it look as if the year is bleeding out, dying.

Remember, all through this poem, the speaker has been recording his journey toward "heaven"; he knows that every moment of his life moves him toward death. But the image of "summer noon" and "autumn blood" coexisting symbolically suggests that nothing is ever completely lost. The "mystery" of life is the same now as it was when the speaker was a boy, still alive, still present in the "water and singingbirds."

LINES 68-70

> ...
> *... a year's turning.*

The speaker's symbolic climb up a hill has given a wide perspective on his life, letting him commune with the world around him, his childhood self, and the "mystery" he first knew when he was a boy. As the poem closes, he reaches out a hand to his future self, too, making this closing prayer:

O may my heart's truth
Still be sung
On this high hill in a year's turning.

That "year's turning" suggests both a forward motion and a backward one:

- The speaker knows that the wheel of the seasons will roll on, always going forward—and hopes that he'll have more birthdays like this one on his journey toward "heaven."
- But just as the weather "turn[s] around," the year may also sometimes turn back, reminding the speaker that his "heart's truth" is never dead—and that the "heaven" he's moving toward may also have rather a lot in common with the "true / Joy" he feels in these moments of connection.

Life's joy and its mystery, to this speaker, are one and the same—and they might be easiest to perceive at border crossings, where one season, age, person turns into another. Perhaps it's for this reason that the speaker's "heart's truth" must be "sung" in this very poem: here on the border between music and speech, the speaker also reaches across the border between himself and the reader, communicating a "truth" as old and burning as the sun.

SYMBOLS

SUMMER AND AUTUMN

Summer and autumn symbolize the speaker's youth and his coming middle age, respectively. These ideas might feel pretty familiar: readers only need to look to two of Shakespeare's most famous poems to see that summer and autumn have played these symbolic roles in poetry for a long time.

This speaker, however, does something novel with his seasonal symbolism. Rather than mourning that his youthful summer is over and he's heading into the drizzly autumn of middle age (or even embracing that change, as Keats did), this speaker experiences a flashback to his summery youth when sunlight breaks through the autumn clouds; as far as he's concerned, the "long dead" boy in him is really still there in his "heart." A person's seasons of life, this speaker feels, can roll backwards as well as forwards: the summer is still present even in the autumn of life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-16:** "And I rose / In rainy autumn / And walked abroad in a shower of all my days."
- **Lines 21-25:** " A springful of larks in a rolling / Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with whistling / Blackbirds and the sun of October / Summery / On the hill's shoulder,"
- **Line 40:** "the weather turned around."
- **Lines 41-45:** " It turned away from the blithe country / And down the other air and the blue altered sky / Streamed again a wonder of summer / With apples / Pears and red currants"
- **Lines 53-57:** "These were the woods the river and sea / Where a boy / In the listening / Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy / To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide."
- **Lines 62-64:** "the weather turned around. And the true / Joy of the long dead child sang burning / In the sun."
- **Lines 66-67:** "stood there then in the summer noon / Though the town below lay leaved with October blood."

BORDERS AND GATES

When the speaker crosses the "border" that separates the town from the countryside (and closes the "gate") behind him, he's also symbolically crossing a number of other boundaries: between youth and middle age, the past and the present, and civilization and nature.

When the speaker wakes up on his thirtieth birthday, he feels he has to leave town "that second" and "set forth" for a nearby hillside. Stepping outside the bustle of everyday life in his little village, he's also stepping into a direct encounter with nature—and thus with his childhood self, whose "true joy" he feels in the summery sunlight that breaks through the autumn clouds. Even as he steps over the border between the first and second halves of his life, he also steps backward into the past.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-20:** "High tide and the heron dived when I took the road / Over the border / And the gates / Of the town closed as the town awoke."
- **Lines 35-37:** "But all the gardens / Of spring and summer were blooming in the tall tales / Beyond the border and under the lark full cloud."

CLIMBING THE HILL

The speaker's meditative climb up a hill symbolizes his growing wisdom.

Hills are common symbols for fresh perspectives and deeper understandings. From high on a hillside, one can see the big picture: for instance, the speaker gets a view of his entire hometown, with its "sea wet church" and "castle." Things that might seem huge and looming right up close look small and

almost endearing from above.

The speaker's birthday hill-climb thus suggests that he's stepping back to see his whole *life* from above—and to realize that his boyhood self is still part of the picture, even though he might not always recognize this in his day-to-day.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 25:** "the hill's shoulder,"
- **Line 30:** "the wood faraway under me."
- **Lines 31-33:** " Pale rain over the dwindling harbour / And over the sea wet church the size of a snail / With its horns through mist"
- **Lines 66-70:** "stood there then in the summer noon / Though the town below lay leaved with October blood. / O may my heart's truth / Still be sung / On this high hill in a year's turning."

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

Rich repetitions allow the poem's language to mirror the speaker's deep belief that all life is part of one big, rhythmic cycle.

Perhaps the most striking repetitions are the full lines that reappear across the poem. The speaker begins and ends his tale with the words "it was my thirtieth year to heaven," a line that plays with time in two different ways:

- On the one hand, the phrasing "my thirtieth year to heaven" suggests that the speaker sees his life as a journey toward death. He might not know when he's going to reach "heaven," but he knows he's made thirty years of progress in that direction!
- On the other, by repeating the phrase at the beginning and towards the end of the poem, the speaker reminds readers that the whole mystical experience he describes in this poem, which soars through his past, his present, and his hopes for what he'll be doing in "a year's turning," takes place in one small spot of time: his thirtieth birthday.
- This repetition suggests that, while time can't turn backward, it's also not just a straight line!

The poem's other full-line repetition does something similar. From his perch up on a hill, the speaker declares:

> There could I marvel
> My birthday
> Away but the weather turned around.

The same words appear at the beginning of the final stanza. Again, there's a repeated image of standing still to "marvel" the time away connected with an image of "turn[ing] around": when the weather turns, so will the speaker's experience of his life, until he feels as if he's living his boyhood feelings again. In both these repeated lines, then, time moves forward, stands still, and turns around, all at once!

Other repetitions show how joyfully overwhelmed the speaker feels by the abundant beauty around him. Take a look at his polysyndeton as he describes waking up on his birthday:

> Woke to my hearing from harbour **and** neighbour wood
> **And** the mussel pooled **and** the heron
> Priested shore

All those "ands" make it feel as if the speaker can't stop finding something new to delight in everywhere he looks. This isn't just a laundry list of nearby interesting landmarks, but a moment of rediscovery: the speaker notices each of these features of the landscape carefully, one by one.

The word "and" plays an important role all through this poem, in fact. Many lines begin with the word, creating a thread of anaphora that subtly suggests the continuity and odd mystical logic of the speaker's experience: he wakes up **and** feels that the world is beautiful **and** walks out **and** watches the sun come out **and** feels transported back to his childhood. The speaker's "ands" evoke both the momentum of this meaningful day and the speaker's sense of glorious abundance. His "heart's truth," the poem's repetitions suggest, will never burn out; there's always another "and" coming.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "It was my thirtieth year to heaven"
- **Line 2:** "and"
- **Line 3:** "And," "and"
- **Line 7:** "And"
- **Lines 11-12:** "the water- / Birds and the birds of the winged trees"
- **Line 14:** "And"
- **Line 16:** "And"
- **Line 19:** "And"
- **Line 20:** "the town closed as the town awoke."
- **Line 22:** "and"
- **Line 23:** "and"
- **Lines 38-40:** " There could I marvel / My birthday / Away but the weather turned around."
- **Line 41:** " It turned"
- **Line 42:** "And"
- **Line 46:** "And"
- **Line 50:** "And"
- **Line 51:** "And"
- **Line 58:** "And"

- **Lines 61-62:** " And there could I marvel my birthday / Away but the weather turned around."
- **Lines 65-66:** "It was my thirtieth / Year to heaven"

ENJAMBMENT

Frequent enjambments help to evoke the speaker's movement through his day, shaping both his literal journey and his emotional one.

Sometimes, an enjambment mimics the action the speaker is describing. For instance, take a look at what happens as he leaves town and heads into the countryside:

> High tide and the heron dived when I took the road
> Over the border

This idea crosses "over the border" of the line break just as the speaker crosses from town to countryside (and, by symbolic extension, from youth to middle age).

In the very next stanza, when the speaker has left the town behind him, he gets so caught up in the beauty of the day that his thoughts leap every line break they encounter:

> A springful of larks in a rolling
> Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with
> whistling
> Blackbirds and the sun of October
> Summery
> On the hill's shoulder,

All those swift enjambments (plus the bountiful polyptoton—every one of these ideas is joined together with another "and") suggest that the speaker's impressions of the countryside roll over him like water: as he makes his unhurried journey, one beauty after another presents itself to his eye, so quickly that they seem like one big unfurling picture rather than separate sights.

At the same time, enjambment also creates pockets of space around particular words, asking readers to pause and relish them, not just to rush on. Here, the word "summery"—a word that will become pretty symbolically important later on!—falls in the middle of a sentence. But it also rests on a line of its own, asking readers to pause and relish it as the speaker relishes the unexpected sunlight on his face.

There's a similar slow-down when the speaker describes how he felt in his boyhood:

> And the mystery
> Sang alive
> Still in the water and singingbirds.

Here, short lines get their own airy moments in the spotlight. The "mystery" hangs there quietly for a moment. Then, readers come to the idea that it "sang alive"—words that suggest a vibrant burst of liveliness in the quiet of the forest. Only then does the word "Still" come along. Because it's separated from "sang alive," that "still" might be read in two ways:

- The speaker could mean that the mystery was **still** singing to him then,
- or that the mystery "sang alive" but was also **still**, calm and motionless, within the "water and singingbirds."

Here, enjambment creates a rich paradox: the "mystery" the speaker feels in nature contains both ever-moving, musical life and an eternal stillness.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "heron / Priested"
- **Lines 11-12:** "water- / Birds"
- **Lines 12-13:** "name / Above"
- **Lines 17-18:** "road / Over"
- **Lines 21-22:** "rolling / Cloud"
- **Lines 22-23:** "whistling / Blackbirds"
- **Lines 23-25:** "October / Summery / On"
- **Lines 26-27:** "suddenly / Come"
- **Lines 27-28:** "listened / To"
- **Lines 29-30:** "cold / In"
- **Lines 33-34:** "castle / Brown"
- **Lines 35-36:** "gardens / Of"
- **Lines 36-37:** "tales / Beyond"
- **Lines 38-39:** "marvel / My"
- **Lines 39-40:** "birthday / Away"
- **Lines 42-43:** "sky / Streamed"
- **Lines 46-47:** "child's / Forgotten"
- **Lines 47-48:** "mother / Through"
- **Lines 48-49:** "parables / Of"
- **Lines 53-54:** "sea / Where"
- **Lines 54-55:** "boy / In"
- **Lines 55-56:** "listening / Summertime"
- **Lines 58-59:** "mystery / Sang"
- **Lines 59-60:** "alive / Still"
- **Lines 61-62:** "birthday / Away"
- **Lines 62-63:** "true / Joy"
- **Lines 63-64:** "burning / In"
- **Lines 65-66:** "thirtieth / Year"
- **Lines 68-69:** "truth / Still"
- **Lines 69-70:** "sung / On"

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors evoke the speaker's deep spiritual connection with the natural world.

To this speaker, everything that happens in the world around him is intertwined with his own life. When he heads out for his birthday walk, he feels as if the "birds of the winged trees" are "flying [his] name" over the countryside, as if they were carrying flags in their claws. This metaphor suggests that the speaker's name somehow *is* the birds or their flight: he identifies with them!

But it's not just that he's a special guy the birds love. Those birds also fly from "winged trees"—a complex metaphor that suggests:

- Blowing around in the October breeze, the trees look as if they have wings.
- The trees are bursting with birds, for whom those "wing[s]" are a synecdoche.
- And—last but not least—that the birds and the trees somehow *share* wingedness, just as the speaker and the birds share an identity.

In other words, this metaphor creates a web of connections between the speaker, birds, and tree: all of them participate in each other's lives and take on each other's identities.

Similarly, when the speaker describes "walk[ing] abroad in a shower of all my days," he connects his sense of where he is in life now with the gentle October drizzle. Looking back at his life so far feels to him a lot like walking through this "shower" of rain: there are too many days to count individually, they just create a kind of atmospheric haze. Once again, speaker and nature reflect each other here.

So far, these images have flowed along gently; the speaker communes with the natural world as easily as he breathes. But when an unexpected wash of "summery" sunlight takes him back to his childhood, things get a little bit more intense. Back then, his metaphors suggest, he felt the world's sacredness with a different kind of intensity:

> And I saw in the turning so clearly a child's
> Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother
> Through the parables
> Of sun light
> And the legends of the green chapels

In his youth, these lines suggest, the whole world felt holy as a church. Those "parables" of sunlight allude to the tradition of using allegorical storytelling to communicate spiritual or religious messages (for instance, in the famous Christian parables of the mustard seed or the prodigal son). The sun, in other words, had something to *teach* the young speaker, and he knew it. For that matter, the woods were "green chapels," self-evidently sacred spaces.

The speaker's adult feelings about nature, the poem suggests, aren't always as ecstatic as his childhood feelings were; back then, he was closer to the sacred. But on his birthday walk, he discovers that the "summer noon" of his young self is still present in him. From his hilltop, the speaker sees that the "town below [lies] leaved with October blood"—a metaphor that compares red autumn leaves to the spilled blood of the dying year. He knows, too, that he's closer to the fading autumn of his life than the vibrant summer. However, his awestruck younger self travels with him still.

(Note that the speaker also uses a whole lot of personification—see the "Personification" entry for more about that!)

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "the birds of the winged trees flying my name / Above the farms and the white horses"
- **Line 16:** "a shower of all my days."
- **Lines 48-49:** "the parables / Of sun light"
- **Line 50:** "the green chapels"
- **Line 67:** "Though the town below lay leaved with October blood."

PERSONIFICATION

Personifying the creatures and the landscape around him, the speaker suggests that the whole world is animated by the same spirit: a town or a heron are as full of personality and life as the speaker himself.

In the first stanza, for instance, the speaker describes his first view of the morning seashore as if it were a visit to a church. The shore is "heron / Priested"—presided over by solemn priestlike herons—and full of the sounds of "water praying." Besides animating herons and waters with intentions and personality, these moments of personification suggest that nature is holy, and knows it. These descriptions are also just plain vivid, accurately evoking the stillness and dignity of herons and the repetitive chanting sound of waves rolling in.

The speaker's whole town is alive, too. When he wakes up, the town is "still sleeping"; it only "aw[akes]" when he's closing its "gates" behind him as he makes his way into the countryside. There's something cozy about this image; it's as if the speaker has crept out of bed and left a loved one dozing there. But there's also a sense that the speaker is leaving civilization behind. For a few hours this morning, the collective life of the town will go on without him while he communes with nature and his own soul.

In fact, for this speaker, there's not too much difference between nature and the soul. When he was a child, he remembers, he used to feel that "the mystery" of life "sang alive [...] in the water and singingbirds." That singing mystery feels like the life force of the whole world, *and* like the life force of the young speaker himself: back then, he says, he knew that nature could both hear and share "the truth of his joy."

The poem's moments of personification thus give shape to one of Dylan Thomas's most profound convictions: that everything and everyone in the world shares a single glorious life force.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "heron / Priested shore"
- **Line 6:** "water praying"
- **Line 10:** "the still sleeping town"
- **Lines 19-20:** "the gates / Of the town closed as the town awoke"
- **Line 25:** "the hill's shoulder,"
- **Line 26:** "fond climates"
- **Lines 58-60:** "And the mystery / Sang alive / Still in the water and singingbirds."

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery connects the speaker's inner world to the landscape around him.

Many of the moments the speaker describes here suggest his sheer pleasure in the everyday sights and sounds of the countryside. Something as simple as the "knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall" of the harbor strikes him as notable and important: those boats may be there just about every morning, making the same hollow sound as the waves bump them against the dock, but today the speaker feels alert to the beauty of the ordinary.

There's a similar sense of attentive delight in the speaker's vision of a "springful of larks in a rolling cloud" and bushes "brimming with whistling / Blackbirds." Here, readers might notice, the speaker pays special attention to the sights and sounds of huge flocks of birds—images that harmonize with his feeling that his life is part of a bigger collective life. These pictures of birds moving in a "rolling cloud" or "whistling" together suggest dance and song, joyful collaborations.

The deeper the speaker moves into the countryside, the more he's able to see human civilization as one small piece of the wider natural world:

- High on his hill, he looks back to see his whole town "dwindling," seeming to get smaller by the second as he watches. Under "pale rain," he sees the "sea wet church" looking only about as big as a "snail," its towers forming the snail's "horns" (or eyestalks)—in other words, it's just another little creature making its way across the landscape, not an imposing outpost of the Church.
- A castle, meanwhile, is "brown as owls," a simile that makes an ancient fortress sound almost cozy. Note that it's "brown as owls," not brown as *an owl*: it's as if the castle reminds the speaker of a little owl family, huddled together on a branch.
- These images suggest that, from his high-up vantage point, the speaker can see even these significant buildings—reminders of humanity's complex (and combative) history—with a gentle fondness. They're just another part of the rhythm of life.

Notice, too, that the town below the speaker is gently soaked in "pale rain." Up on the hill, though, there's "summery" sunlight and a "blue altered sky" that makes the speaker feel as if the whole year has "turned around" and carried him back into his childhood. This impression is so intense that it "burn[s]": the speaker feels his younger self's tears "burn[ing]" his cheeks, and his joy "burning / In the sun." This imagery suggests that such ancient "joy" is rather like the sun itself: glorious, awe-inspiring, so beautiful it hurts.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall"
- **Lines 21-25:** "A springful of larks in a rolling / Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with whistling / Blackbirds and the sun of October / Summery / On the hill's shoulder,"
- **Lines 31-34:** " Pale rain over the dwindling harbour / And over the sea wet church the size of a snail / With its horns through mist and the castle / Brown as owls"
- **Lines 42-43:** "the blue altered sky / Streamed again a wonder of summer"
- **Line 50:** "And the legends of the green chapels"
- **Line 52:** "his tears burned my cheeks"
- **Lines 62-64:** "the true / Joy of the long dead child sang burning / In the sun."

ASSONANCE

There's no full-on rhyme scheme in this free verse poem, but rich assonance almost takes rhyme's place, filling the verse with harmonies and slant rhymes.

For instance, listen to just one of the patterns of assonance in the first stanza:

It was my thirtieth year to heaven
Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood
And the mussel pooled and the heron
Priested shore
The morning beckon
With water praying and call of seagull and rook
And the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall
Myself to set foot
That second
In the still sleeping town and set forth.

A gentle /eh/ sound here travels all the way through the first stanza, creating slant end rhymes between "heaven," "heron," "beckon," and "second" and harmonizing inside the lines with "net webbed" and "set." This creates a kind of faint, misty near-rhyme, making this stanza feel musical and cohesive but unconstrained—a fitting mood to set as the speaker heads out for a birthday wander.

These aren't the only assonant moments in that stanza, either. There's also /ea/ assonance between "year" and "hearing," /ah/ assonance between "water," "call," and "wall," and short /u/ assonance between "rook" and "foot"; in short, there's a wealth of harmonies here, making these lines sing.

We've only highlighted a few moments, but similar tapestries of assonance are absolutely everywhere in this poem, creating a euphony that reflects the speaker's joy.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "year," "heaven"
- **Line 2:** "hearing," "harbour," "neighbour"
- **Line 3:** "heron"
- **Line 5:** "beckon"
- **Line 6:** "water," "call," "rook"
- **Line 7:** "net webbed," "wall"
- **Line 8:** "set," "foot"
- **Line 9:** "second"
- **Line 10:** "set"
- **Line 16:** "walked abroad"
- **Line 17:** "High tide," "dived"
- **Line 20:** "closed," "awoke"
- **Line 22:** "brimming," "whistling"
- **Line 23:** "sun"
- **Line 24:** "Summery"
- **Lines 26-27:** "suddenly / Come"
- **Line 29:** "blow cold"
- **Line 31:** "Pale rain"
- **Line 34:** "Brown," "owls"
- **Line 37:** "cloud"
- **Lines 39-40:** "birthday / Away"
- **Line 40:** "around"

VOCABULARY

My thirtieth year to heaven (Line 1) - In other words, "my thirtieth birthday." The speaker is measuring out his life as a step-by-step journey toward the afterlife.

The net webbed wall (Line 7) - This line paints a picture of a dock draped in fishing nets.

Brimming (Lines 22-23) - Overflowing, completely full.

Fond climates (Line 26) - Gentle, friendly-feeling weather.

Horns (Lines 32-33) - The "horns" in this image are a snail's eyestalks; the speaker is imagining a church's towers as those horns.

Marvel (Lines 38-40, Lines 61-62) - Feel awe or wonder.

Blithe (Line 41) - Happy, lighthearted, carefree.

Parables (Lines 47-49) - Educational stories with moral lessons in them. Here, the sunlight seems to have told mysterious stories to the young speaker.

Infancy (Line 51) - Babyhood or young childhood.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

While "Poem in October" is written in free verse (without a rhyme scheme or consistent meter), its shape on the page follows a repetitive pattern, like the rhythm of the seasons. Each of the poem's seven 10-line stanzas pulses between longer and shorter lines, giving the verse a sinuous, rolling look. This shape evokes both the hilly countryside the speaker climbs through and the poem's emotions: like the poem's shape, the speaker's life is cyclical, returning and returning to the "heart's truth" he first knew in his childhood.

METER

"Poem in October" is written in free verse, so it doesn't have a strict meter. It does, however, use a predictable pattern of changing line lengths to create rhythm and music. Each stanza pulses from longer lines to shorter ones and back again, evoking the natural rhythms the speaker describes: the seasons, the weather, and the movements of the human heart.

RHYME SCHEME

This free verse poem doesn't use a rhyme scheme. The lack of perfect end rhymes makes the poem sound airy, open, and naturalistic. But the language is still threaded through with slant rhyme, alliteration, and assonance, musical devices that make the lines sing.

For instance, listen to the echoing sounds in these lines from the end of the second stanza:

> High tide and the heron dived when I took the road
> Over the border
> And the gates
> Of the town closed as the town awoke.

Long /i/ and /o/ assonance weaves these lines together, and even create a slant end rhyme between "road" and "awoke." There's nothing so tight as a regular rhyme scheme here, but there's plenty of harmony—a choice that suits the speaker's sense of harmonious connection to the natural world around him.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a voice for Dylan Thomas, an October birthday boy himself (he was born on October 27). Thomas wrote several birthday poems, often using the occasion to reflect on his relationship to the natural world. This poem expresses his sense that people are part of the same life force that animates nature; people are certainly mortal, he felt, but they're also part of a deathless eternal "mystery."

It only seems fitting, then, that when the "weather turn[s] around" and a flash of summery sunlight illuminates the autumnal landscape, the speaker feels as if his own life has turned around, too. A taste of an earlier time of the year spirits him away to an earlier time in *his* years—a time when, as a boy, he felt even more intimately connected to the joyful "truth" of the world. That mystical little boy is still very much alive in him now.

SETTING

Readers can assume that "Poem in October" is likely set in Laugharne, the small Welsh town where Dylan Thomas and his family lived for a number of years (and where Thomas is now buried). Walking out into the countryside early in the morning on a misty autumn day, the speaker takes in poignantly beautiful views of sea, hill, and wood.

The speaker's loving attention to the town's landscape and wildlife suggests that he's intimately familiar with this place; in fact, the countryside feels as much a part of him as his childhood. Emotional geography, the poem's setting suggests, is interwoven with physical geography: a person's life and nature's life aren't really separate things.

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).

This poem is one of several birthday poems Thomas wrote, which often stress both his sense of his own mortality and his rapturous belief that he was part of the eternal life of nature. Modern readers might be a little alarmed that Thomas interprets his "thirtieth year to heaven" (only his thirtieth birthday!) as an occasion to feel autumnally middle-aged. However, when he wrote this poem he was well past the midpoint of his short life: he died of pneumonia (exacerbated by what he hyperbolically described as "eighteen straight whiskeys") at the age of 39, only a few years after "Poem in October" was first published.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dylan Thomas made his first notes for this poem in 1941 and completed it in 1944, just before the end of World War II (which ran from 1939-1945). The 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 mocking Hitler and Mussolini for the UK government during the war.

His poetry, however, is rarely directly political. In "Poem in October" as in many of his great works, he's a mystic, not an activist: he looks inward to his "heart's truth" and outward to the eternal life of the world, feeling the two intimately connected.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Thomas's life and work at the Poetry Foundation's website. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/dylan-thomas)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Dylan Thomas himself reading the poem aloud (and get a sense of how he heard its swinging rhythms). (https://youtu.be/EnoHCSU5yn8)
- Thomas's Legacy — Visit the website of the Dylan Thomas Centre to learn about Thomas's enduring influence. (http://www.dylanthomas.com/)
- A Portrait of Thomas — Take a look at a portrait of Thomas and learn something about his rowdy reputation. (His portraitist, Augustus John, remembers that Thomas was more likely to pose patiently if you gave him a bottle of beer to keep him quiet!) (https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/aug/16/national-portrait-gallery-buys-painting-young-dylan-thomas)

- Thomas on Art — Listen to a recording of one of Thomas's final public appearances, in which he wittily discusses film and poetry. (https://youtu.be/gyavcLn2_uo)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER DYLAN THOMAS POEMS

- Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night
- Fern Hill

HOW TO CITE

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Nelson, Kristin. "*Poem in October.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 25 May 2022. Web. 12 Jul 2022.

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