The force that through the green fuse drives

SUMMARY

The force that flows through a flower's green stem is the same force that fuels my youth. The force that destroys trees' roots will destroy me. And I'm speechless, unable to tell the crooked rose that the same icy force that makes it wilt makes me grow old, too.

The force that pushes water through stone is the same force that pushes my red blood through my veins. The force that dries up rushing rivers also makes my blood become thick and stiff. And I'm speechless, unable to tell my own veins that the same force that drains them sucks water from the spring that wells up in the mountain.

The hand stirring the pond also stirs up the quicksand; the hand that captures gusts of wind also yanks my ship's sails. And I'm speechless, unable to tell the dying man how the lime that the executioner will use to make his body decompose comes from the same materials that make up my own body.

Time's lips suck away at the original source of life; love dribbles down and pools on the ground, yet this bloodshed will soothe her pain. And I'm speechless, unable to tell the wind how time has spun up the universe with each tick of the clock.

And I'm speechless, unable to tell the lovers in the grave that the same twisted worm that consumes them consumes my own burial shroud.

THEMES

TIME, CREATION, AND DESTRUCTION

The speaker of Dylan Thomas's "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower" presents time as both the creator and destroyer of life. In each stanza, the speaker uses a metaphor to illustrate how the very "force" that makes things grow and move also eventually brings about their demise. Time, the speaker argues, is constantly unraveling and renewing the world, which means that life and death, creation and destruction, are endlessly intertwined.

Throughout the poem, the speaker makes it clear that time is both a source of generative and destructive power. It's like a spark that ignites the "green fuse" of a flower's stem and makes it bloom. Likewise, it's what fuels the speaker's "green age," or youthfulness—the force that makes the speaker feel powerfully alive.

Yet time is *also* what "blasts the roots of trees" and what will ultimately "destroy[]" the speaker. Time makes the rose both grow and wilt; it's what makes the "red blood pulse" through the speaker's veins yet will one day turn that same blood "to wax" (a reference to the way blood stops flowing and coagulates after death). Time "whirls" the nourishing water of life but also stirs up "the quicksand"—a substance that suffocates and devours. Time, the poem implies, brings things to life only to later consume them.

In a way, then, all things are *connected* by the fact that they experience the blessing and ravages of time. "[O]f my clay is the hangman's lime," the speaker says: the elements in the chemical "lime" used to speed up the decay of a dead body are present in the speaker's own "clay"—the speaker's body. The same "worm" that eats lovers in the grave "goes" at the speaker's own "sheet"; the speaker's bed might as well be a tomb, the mention of a "sheet" evoking the burial shroud that will one day cover the speaker's body. Though the speaker might not be *literally* decaying just yet, time is already ticking away—and it won't be long until the speaker, too, becomes worm food.

Of course, the speaker's death would thus *sustain* that worm's life. The poem isn't just suggesting that life *leads only* to death, then, but also that decay can become the *source* of new growth. Life and death are two sides of the same coin, an idea that connects the speaker to everything else in existence and suggests that destruction is in fact an essential *part* of creation.

Building on this idea, the speaker imagines time as a "leech" sucking from "the fountain head" (or the original source of life). "Love drips and gathers," the speaker says, illustrating how time greedily laps up love, youth, vitality, and so on. But, the speaker continues, "the fallen blood / Shall calm her sores." This suggests the way that time is both destructive *and* restorative. That "her" seems to refer back to the "fountain head," whose pain is soothed by the blood that time spills. (The speaker might be alluding to childbirth, when the mother's "sores" are calmed by the presence of her new child. Or, perhaps, this "her" evokes a Mother-Earth-like figure, alluding to the fact that death and decay provide the materials for new growth.)

The speaker continues, "Time has ticked a heaven round the stars." In other words, time is as vast and unknowable as the universe itself—or perhaps, the speaker is saying that time *is* the universe: it contains *everything*.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

HUMANITY, MORTALITY, AND ISOLATION

Though Thomas's poem presents life, death, creation, and destruction as intimately intertwined, the speaker seems distinctly isolated. Throughout the poem,

the speaker is unable to "tell" nature, other people, the dead, or even their own "veins" that they're going through the same thing as everyone and everything else. Even though all of existence is connected by time, the poem suggests, the speaker is alone in their *experience* of time and their *awareness* of their own mortality.

The speaker recognizes that time twists and shapes human beings as easily as it does a rose; people have no more power over time than a flower does. Time results in the speaker's demise just as surely as it does that of "the hanging man" or lovers in their "tomb." The same metaphorical "hand" that "whirls the water in the pool" and "ropes the blowing wind" also pulls the speaker's own "shroud sail" forward. In short, the speaker's body follows the same cycle of birth, growth, death, and decay as any other part of nature.

Yet the speaker is also "dumb"—unable to voice the ways in which their experience mirrors that of everything else. The speaker can't "tell" that flower, that dying man, or those lovers that they're all ruled by, and in a way connected by, the same force. In fact, the speaker can't even tell this to their own body (their "veins"). The speaker is rendered speechless in the face of time's incredible power. In this way, the poem suggests that although existence is all interconnected, it's also profoundly lonely. Everything is *subject* to time yet *experiences* time's passage in isolation.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-5
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 14-15
- Lines 19-20
- Lines 21-22

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

The force that ...
... Is my destroyer.

The poem begins by describing a mysterious "force" that moves through "the green fuse": a flower's stem. The word "fuse" makes it sound like this flower is about to ignite; this force seems electric, like a spark. That force, the speaker continues, moves up through the stem and "drives the flower," meaning that it *powers* or *fuels* it. Whatever this force is, it makes the flower *bloom*.

Enjambment pushes (one might say, "drives") the reader over the line break in a way that mirrors the movement of that force that travels up the flower's stem:

> The force that through the green fuse drives the
> flower
> Drives my green age [...]

This force doesn't just fuel the *flower*, readers learn in line 2: it also fuels the speaker's "green age," meaning it powers the speaker's youth. The whole sentence can thus be summed up as: "The force that makes the flower bloom also makes me young and energetic."

Note the use of repetition in lines 1-2:

> The force that through the **green** fuse **drives** the
> flower
> **Drives** my **green** age;

This is an example of chiasmus: the sentence's most important images follow an ABBA structure (green-drives-drives-green), as though the poem is circling back in on itself. This emphasizes the connection between the flower and the speaker, hammering home that both are equally subject to this "force."

The specific words that the poem repeats here are also thematically important:

- The color "green" symbolizes freshness and vitality. Both speaker and flower are in the fresh "bloom" of youth.
- The word "drives" conveys the relentless power of this "force" over the speaker and the flower. They are not *driving* but *being driven*, pushed forward.

The next line tells readers more about this force. While it makes both flowers and young people bloom, it also "blasts the roots of trees" and will ultimately become the speaker's "destroyer."

What creates things only to later destroy them? Time! The speaker is talking about the way that time makes things both *grow* and *decay*.

Dylan Thomas creates meaning not just through the literal meaning of the words he chooses, but also through the way the reader *feels* when they read them. Here, the rich, rhythmic sounds of the poem make it more intense and emotional. For example, these lines are thick with alliteration (force"/"fuse" "flower), assonance ("through"/"fuse"/roots"; "drives," "my), and consonance of /r/, /t/, /s/, and /z/ sounds:

> The force that through the green fuse drives the
> flower
> Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
> Is my destroyer.

The poem's meter adds to its momentum as well. Lines generally use iambic pentameter, meaning that they contain 10 syllables that follow an unstressed-stressed pattern (da-DUM). This creates a marching rhythm that pushes the poem forward.

However, Thomas isn't particularly strict with the meter. Here's line 1 for instance:

> The force | that through | the green | fuse drives | the flow- | er

While the rhythm is clearly iambic *overall*, it contains inconsistencies: there's a spondee (two stressed syllables) in the fourth foot ("fuse drives") and an extra, unstressed syllable dangling at the end of the line. Such variations keep the poem from feeling overly stiff.

Also note that the third line of each quintain (or five-line stanza) is much shorter than the lines surrounding it, thus breaking up the poem's rhythm and calling readers' attention to certain words—in this case, the word "destroyer." Time may be the giver of life, but it is also the thing that takes it away.

LINES 4-5

And I am ...
... same wintry fever.

The speaker is "dumb," meaning unable to talk. They can't have a cathartic chat with the "crooked," or wilting, "rose" about the fact that they're both doomed to the same fate. The speaker, too, will be "bent" by time; the speaker's "green age" will, like the rose, wilt. But they can't "tell" the rose this; it seems the speaker is alone in their awareness of mortality.

Just as spring inevitably leads to summer, then fall, and finally winter, so too does youth give way to old age and then death. The specific metaphor comparing time to a "wintry fever," however, might imply that death isn't *really* an ending: spring follows that "wintry fever," so perhaps the speaker is saying that new life will follow death.

The poem's form reflects this cycle of life and death, creation and destruction. Notice how each stanza sandwiches a short middle line between two sets of longer lines, creating a swinging, back-and-forth rhythm.

LINES 6-10

The force that ...
... same mouth sucks.

The second stanza repeats the format of the first, creating clear parallelism. Note how lines 6-7 use the exact same phrasing as the opening lines of the first stanza:

> The force that drives the [blank] / Drives my [blank]; that [...]

This repetitive language makes the speaker's point more emphatic, hammering home the idea that this "force" is relentless and has power over everything. It's what pushes "the water through the rocks," by which the speaker might be referencing a river racing along a rocky riverbed. This might also bring to mind the way water can carve valleys and canyons out of stone over millions of years.

This force also "drives" the speaker's "red blood," pumping life through the speaker's veins. The repetition (specifically, diacope) of the word "drives" again draws a parallel between the natural world and the speaker, both of which are driven by time. Note that the color red is also symbolic (just as the color green was in the previous stanza): it represents the speaker's passion and vitality.

Again, though, the very force that creates such vigor also destroys it: time "drives" rushing waters but it also "dries the mouthing streams." The sonic similarity between "drives" and "dries" reflects the idea that these actions are two sides of the same coin.

The word "mouthing," meanwhile, might be playing on the "mouth" of a river, or the place where it flows into a larger body of water; time will eventually drain not just the streams but their very *source*. The word "mouthing" might also refer to the sounds the streams make, the noisy rush of water being their way of speaking. This subtly personifies those streams and connects them with the speaker, as both have been rendered silent by time.

Just as the force will dry the streams, it will turn the speaker's "blood to wax"—thick and solid, unable to flow through the speaker's veins. In other words, time will kill the speaker.

The sounds of these lines once again create a driving, powerful rhythm that evokes the march of time. Listen to the pounding /d/ alliteration and consonance, which evokes the speaker's thudding pulse, as well as the growling /r/ sounds and long /i/ assonance in lines 6-8:

> [...] drives the water through the rocks
> Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
> Turns mine [...]

In the stanza's final two lines, the speaker repeats that they're unable to talk—to "mouth unto [their] veins" that they're being sucked dry by the same "mouth" that "sucks" up "the mountain spring." A "spring," referring to a place where water wells up to the surface, is typically a symbol of life, relief, and renewal, but time gobbles up that spring water until there's none left.

The speaker personifies time here, giving it a "mouth" that "sucks" life from the world. The repetition of the word "mouth" helps to convey time's power: time silences both the "mouthing steams" and the speaker's "mouth," even as its *own* mouth keeps on slurping up whatever it wants.

Finally, the speaker's continued inability to speak evokes their isolation. The speaker isn't alone in their mortality, but they are alone in their *awareness* or *experience* of it.

LINES 11-15

The hand that ...
... the hangman's lime.

The poem switches up its language in the third stanza while still sticking to the general structure established by the first two. Instead of a "force," the speaker now talks about a "hand." This personification builds on the idea of time having a "mouth" from the previous stanza.

Line 11 may be an allusion to John 5:4 in the New Testament, which describes an angel stirring the water in a pool that then heals anyone who enters it. This allusion, and the personification of time as a "hand," suggests that time is like a god, governing everything that happens on earth. Like some all-knowing deity, time sets things in motion and also puts things to an end. Time allows for growth and recovery, but it also stirs up "the quicksand" that can devour people whole.

Next, the speaker says that this hand "ropes," or captures, the blowing wind, reigning it in. Likewise, time "hauls," or pulls, the speaker's "shroud sail." This refers to a specific sail on a ship's mast. The "hand" of time yanks the speaker's ship (representing the speaker's *life*) forward, closer to death. Not coincidentally, the word "shroud" also refers to a cloth laid over a corpse before burial. Time stills "the blowing wind" and will also usher the speaker to their end.

Even though the speaker is participating in a universal experience, they still seem to feel isolated by it. They can't talk to the flowers or mountain springs, and they also can't share their experience with another human being: they're unable to "tell the hanging man" that the "hangman's lime" is made up of the speaker's own "clay."

Lime here refers to a chemical used to speed up decomposition, while "clay" refers to the speaker's own body (building on the idea that people are made from the dust of the earth itself). The speaker's body contains the chemicals that will cause it to decompose once the speaker has died.

The polyptoton of "hanging man"/"hangman" further reflects the idea that life and death are as intertwined as the executioner and his doomed victim.

LINES 16-20

The lips of ...
... round the stars.

For the first time in the poem, the speaker names the "force" directly:

> The lips of time leech to the fountain head;

Time has been granted a mouth, a hand, and now "lips," this continued personification making time seem godlike—or, maybe, demonlike. The word "leech" makes time seem like a grotesque, bloodsucking parasite that drains away life.

Time attaches its lips to "the fountain head," or the original source of all things. As time "leech[es]" (or sucks blood) from this life source, little droplets of "love" fall from time's lips and pool on the ground, and this "fallen blood" soothes "her sores." These lines are ambiguous:

- The speaker seems to be equating life, blood, and love. Time drinks up all of these things from the "fountain head."
- The "fallen blood" might refer to the dead: all those living creatures who have "fallen," been consumed by time. Their blood/love/life force, in turn, "Shall calm her sores." Death/decay/loss are somehow healing to... it's unclear: this pronoun appears from out of nowhere, but it sounds like the speaker is personifying "the fountain head" here as a female figure.
- One way to interpret this passage is through the idea of childbirth: that "fountain head" is like a mother who gives birth, a process that breaks her body breaks and spills her blood. But her pain is soothed by the new life she has brought into the world.
- Or, perhaps, readers might think of that "fountain head" as Mother Earth: "fallen blood" nourishes the soil, allowing for new growth that soothes the earth's metaphorical wounds.
- Thomas might not have a specific image in mind, of course. What's clear is that destruction isn't entirely, well, *destructive*: it also leads to creation.

There's something pretty spectacular and terrifying about that idea, which is probably why the speaker is rendered speechless throughout the poem. This time, the speaker says that they're unable "to tell a weather's wind / How time has ticked a heaven round the stars." The speaker can't explain to the wind that the force that moves it is the exact same force that created "a heaven round the stars." In other words, time created and governs (and maybe simply ***is***) the universe, each "tick" like another stitch in the fabric of existence itself.

LINES 21-22

And I am ...
... same crooked worm.

So far, each stanza has consisted of five lines. Now, the poem ends with a couplet. The speaker says that they can't "tell the lover's tomb" that the same worm that nibbles it (that tomb) is going after the speaker's "sheet."

The speaker isn't saying that there's a worm in their bed; instead, that "sheet" is meant to suggest a burial shroud, or a cloth laid over a corpse (also hinted at with the mention of the "shroud sail" earlier in the poem). The speaker might not be dead and buried just yet, but it's only a matter of time. Each

passing moment brings them one step closer to the grave—and to becoming worm food. Time is *already* eating away at the speaker.

Note, however, that the speaker doesn't actually try to address the *lovers* themselves: the speaker is talking about their *tomb*. This adds to the sense of loneliness and isolation in the poem; those lovers and the speaker are entirely cut off from each other, despite both being subject to the same force.

The poem appropriately ends with an image that suggests both death and life. The presence of the "crooked worm" means that the speaker is dead, yet that "crooked worm" itself is very much alive—sustained by the speaker's dead body. Life leads to death leads to life; creation and destruction are intertwined, always. The slant rhyme between "tomb" and "worm" makes the poem's final lines sound fittingly conclusive.

SYMBOLS

GREEN

The color green is often used to symbolize youth, health, and vitality, and this is true in this poem as well. In lines 1-2, the speaker says:

> The force that through the **green** fuse drives the flower
> Drives my **green** age; [...]

In other words, time is what makes both the flower and the speaker "blossom." (Keep in mind Thomas wrote this poem when he was 19 years old—and thus well within the "greenness" of youth!)

The "green" color of the flower's stem and the speaker's "green age" reflect the idea that they're still in the *creation* portion of the creation-destruction process the poem describes. They're young and vibrantly alive—for now. The speaker knows well that all greenery gets cut down eventually by a "wintry fever"; flowers wilt and youth "bends" into old age.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "the green fuse"
- **Line 2:** "my green age"

RED BLOOD

Red often symbolizes love, passion, and vigor. When the speaker says that "The force that drives the water through the rocks / Drives my **red blood**," they're implying that they're is still in the prime of their life, that their blood is as vibrant and powerful as water bursting through stone. Still, the speaker understands that "the same mouth" that devours "the mountain spring" will eventually stop their blood from pumping; their energy won't last forever.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "my red blood"

THE CROOKED WORM

The "crooked worm" at the end of the poem symbolizes the connection between life and death. When people die and are buried in the earth, their bodies decompose and become part of the soil that worms travel through and consume. This is why worms are often equated with death and decay.

The speaker says that the same worm that can be found at "the lover's tomb" is also "at [their own] sheet." That "sheet" refers to a burial shroud, a kind of cloth laid over a dead body. The metaphor suggests that the speaker's body, though still young, is already subject to the processes that will eventually result in their death. Time is always passing; the moment people are born, they are already, in a sense, dying.

And yet, that worm is also surviving thanks to the lovers/the speaker's decay. It's not just a symbol of death feasting on life, then, but also a symbol of life feasting on death.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 22:** "How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration (as well as consonance and occasional assonance) adds music, emphasis, and intensity to the poem. For example, listen to the /f/ alliteration that flows through the opening line, evoking the energy of that "force" flowing through the flower's stem:

> The **f**orce that through the green **f**use drives the **f**lower

The pounding /d/ alliteration in lines 2-4 ("**d**rives," "**d**estroyer," "**d**umb") adds to the poem's powerful momentum, as does the general consonance of these lines (for example, "bla**s**ts the roots of tre**e**s"). Also note the abundance of /r/ alliteration and consonance both in this stanza ("force," "through," "green," "drives," and so on) and throughout the poem ("rocks," "red," "whirls," stirs," etc.). These back-of-the-throat sounds make the language seem rougher, echoing the harsh reality of time's relentless passage. Throughout the poem, repeated sounds

make the language more intense, evoking the speaker's overwhelming sense of both amazement and isolation.

The poem's sounds also draw *thematic* connections between words. Take the similarity of "drives" and "dries," which reflects the link between creation (the way time drives things forward) and destruction (the way time dries up all life).

Finally, alliteration often brings the poem's striking imagery to life. For example:

- The /w/ alliteration of "**w**hirls the **w**ater" evokes the whoosh and splash of swirling water.
- The hissing sibilance of "at the mountain **s**pring the **s**ame mouth **s**ucks" suggests the sound of time slurping from that spring. The fluid /l/ alliteration ("**l**ips," "**l**eech," "**L**ove") and consonance ("fa**ll**en blood," "Sha**ll** ca**l**m") in lines 16-18 work similarly, evoking the sounds time makes as it gulps from "the fountain head."
- The crisp /t/ alliteration of "**t**ime has **t**icked" brings to mind the ticking of a clock.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "force," "fuse," "flower"
- **Line 2:** "Drives"
- **Line 3:** "destroyer"
- **Line 4:** "dumb," "to," "tell"
- **Line 6:** "drives," "rocks"
- **Line 7:** "Drives," "red," "dries," "mouthing"
- **Line 8:** "mine"
- **Line 9:** "mouth"
- **Line 10:** "mountain," "spring," "same," "mouth," "sucks"
- **Line 11:** "whirls," "water"
- **Line 14:** "to," "tell"
- **Line 16:** "lips," "leech"
- **Line 17:** "Love"
- **Line 19:** "to," "tell," "weather's," "wind"
- **Line 20:** "time," "ticked"
- **Line 21:** "to," "tell," "tomb"

PARALLELISM

Each stanza, apart from the last, repeats the same structure and much of the exact same language. This consistent parallelism creates a steadily building rhythm and evokes the overwhelming intensity of the speaker's awe.

Just look at how similar the first three lines of stanzas 1-3 are:

- The force that [...] drives the flower / Drives my green age; that blasts the [...]
- The force that drives the water [...] Drives my red blood; that dries the [...]
- The force that whirls the water [...] that ropes the [...]

All this parallelism foregrounds this "force" throughout the poem, emphasizing home the idea that time controls all things in existence. Time itself drives the *poem* forward. The parallelism also calls attention to time's many specific powers: it "drives," "blasts," dries," whirls," "ropes," "hauls" and so on, and it does all this to everything from flowers to blood.

Note that there's intense parallelism not just across but *within* stanzas as well:

- The speaker says that what "drives the flower" also "drives my green age," an example of diacope that emphasizes the link between the speaker's youth and the flower's bloom (connected in the sense that both are the result of time). The parallelism with the phrase "Drives my red blood" in the following stanza calls attention yet again to the speaker's youthful vigor.
- Other moments aren't as directly repetitive but nevertheless repeat the same grammatical pattern, as in "ropes the blowing wind" and "Hauls my shroud sail." The speaker keeps saying, again and again, "The power that does this to that thing also does this to me."
- All this parallel language thus reflects the fact that the speaker is just as subject to time's passage as everything else in existence.

The third line of stanzas 1-3 parallel each other in the sense that they all repeat the same idea: that time will ultimately kill the speaker. It will destroy the speaker, turn the speaker's blood to wax, and pull their ship closer to the end of their life's journey. Such parallelism makes the shift in the fourth stanza more striking: this time, the speaker refers to time's *healing, soothing* power, saying that the death it wreaks "Shall calm her sores." The sentence structure here remains extremely similar, however, reflects that these are two sides of the same coin; time is *both* a creator *and* a "destroyer."

The fourth and fifth lines of stanzas 1-4 and the two lines of the final stanza feature strong parallelism as well:

- "And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose / How [...]"
- "And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins/ How [...]"
- "And I am dumb to tell the hanging man / How [...]"
- "And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind / How [...]"
- "And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb / How [...]"

The intense repetition of the phrase "And I am dumb" reiterates just how awed, overwhelmed, and isolated the speaker feels in the face of time's power. It also emphasizes the idea that, though everything is subject to time's rules, the speaker is alone in their *experience* of time. They can't "tell" anyone or anything about the connection they sense.

Finally, the poem's use of parallelism simply makes it easier to

follow the speaker's argument, even when the language is densely lyrical and syntactically challenging. The repetition helps orient the reader while also conveying the speaker's emotion. The speaker isn't philosophizing about life in some detached, intellectualized way. On the contrary, they come across as deeply moved by the way time rules over all of existence.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

REPETITION

In addition to repeating the same grammatical *structures* throughout, the poem also repeats specific words and phrases to highlight certain images and ideas.

For example, the diacope of "green" in lines 1-2 calls attention to the fact that both the speaker and the flower are in the "green" or youthful/fresh/early phase of their lives. (The way "red blood" in the next stanza echoes "green age" again highlights the speaker's vitality and vigor.) The diacope of the word "drives" in lines 1-2, meanwhile, emphasizes the way that time relentlessly pushes everything in existence forward:

> The force that through the **green** fuse **drives** the flower
> **Drives** my **green** age; [...]

Note that the pattern of green/drives/drives/green here is also an example of chiasmus. The lines of the poem seem to fold in on themselves or circle back, reflecting the cyclical processes of creation and destruction that the poem describes.

The poem also features two examples of polyptoton. First, note the repetition of "mouth"/"mouthing" in the second stanza:

> [...] that dries the **mouthing** streams
> Turns mine to wax.
> And I am dumb to **mouth** unto my veins
> How at the mountain spring the same **mouth** sucks.

"Mouthing streams" might be a creative way of referring to streams at the point of their "mouths"—that is, where they merge with larger bodies of water. But "mouthing" also suggests *talking*. That is, the speaker might be personifying the streams, describing the sound of their water rushing past as them "mouthing," or speaking. the Saying that the speaker can't "mouth," or talk to, their own veins calls attention to the link between the speaker and those streams, both of which have been rendered silent by time.

The word next appears as a noun, in reference to time's own "mouth." Time has silenced the speaker and the streams, but it can still "suck[]" at the "mountain spring." This repetition calls attention to the fact that mouths aren't just used for expression; they also devour. This again suggests the relationship between creation and death.

Finally, note the almost playful similarities of "the hanging man" and "the hangman." This reflects the link between the executed and the executioner—again, between life and death.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "the green fuse," "drives the flower"
- **Line 2:** "Drives my green age"
- **Line 6:** "drives the water"
- **Line 7:** "Drives my red blood," "mouthing"
- **Line 9:** "mouth"
- **Line 10:** "mouth"
- **Line 14:** "the hanging man"
- **Line 15:** "the hangman's"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem's frequent enjambment contributes to its quick pace and impassioned tone. Enjambment pulls the reader down the page, echoing the way in which time pulls the speaker—and everything else—forward.

The first three stanzas all follow the same pattern of enjambment: the first two lines of each stanza are enjambed and then followed by a short, end-stopped line. Then the fourth line is enjambed, and the final line is end-stopped. Here's stanza 1, to illustrate this pattern:

> The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
> **Drives** my green age; that blasts the roots of **trees**
> **Is** my destroyer.
> And I am dumb to tell the crooked **rose**
> **My** youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

Those first two enjambments help to evoke time's power, driving the reader across the line break much like it drives that flower and the speaker's youth. The end-stop in the third line cuts into the momentum created by those first two lines, just as death cuts life short.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "flower / Drives"
- **Lines 2-3:** "trees / Is"
- **Lines 4-5:** "rose / My"
- **Lines 6-7:** "rocks / Drives"
- **Lines 7-8:** "streams / Turns"
- **Lines 9-10:** "veins / How"
- **Lines 11-12:** "pool / Stirs"
- **Lines 12-13:** "wind / Hauls"

- **Lines 14-15:** “man / How”
- **Lines 17-18:** “blood / Shall”
- **Lines 19-20:** “wind / How”
- **Lines 21-22:** “tomb / How”

METAPHOR

The poem uses various metaphors to make its imagery more vivid and to illustrate time's immense power. In the first stanza, for example, the speaker calls a flower's stem its "green fuse." Time essentially sparks this fuse, traveling up the stem and making the flower bloom—metaphorically, driving it, powering it. Likewise, time "drives" the speaker's "green age"—a metaphorical way of describing the speaker's freshness and youth.

Later in the stanza, the speaker calls time a "wintry fever" that "ben[ds]" their "youth" the way a winter wind might break a delicate flower. Time, this metaphor illustrates, is not just a fiery, life-giving force but also a cold blast of winter air, something that freezes and cracks life. The juxtaposition between these two metaphorical images—time as lighting a fuse and becoming a "wintry fever"—reflects the idea that time is both a creator and a destroyer; that light and death are intertwined.

The poem's metaphors often dip into personification, imbuing time with a will and agency that makes it seem godlike:

- The speaker grants time a "mouth" in the second stanza, for example, which it uses to suck from "the mountain spring" much as a vampire or leech would suck "blood" from a person. The speaker builds on this image in the fourth stanza, saying that time's "lips leech to the fountain head"—feed from the source of all life.
- Time is a "hand" capable of stirring up a rejuvenating "pool": a biblical allusion to John 5:4, in which an angel stirs the water in a pool so that the ill may step into it and be healed.
- But time also whips up deadly "quicksand," "ropes" or captures (as with a lasso) "the blowing wind," and "Hauls," or pulls, the speaker's "shroud sail" (or the mast of their metaphorical ship of life). In other words, time is in charge; people and nature are just pulled along by it.
- In line 20, the speaker says that "time has ticked a heaven round the stars." The words "ticked" and "round" evoke a clockface; with each passing moment, time has sewn the fabric of the universe itself. This metaphor might further suggest that time and the universe are in fact the same thing.
- It's clear that human beings have no power over the cycles of birth and death that both connect them to and isolate them from the rest of existence.

Other metaphors emphasize the connection between life and death:

- The speaker says that "the hangman's lime" (or the chemical used to quicken the decomposition of someone who was hanged) is made from the speaker's "clay." In other words, the body contains the elements of its own decay.
- In the fourth stanza, the speaker says that, as time "leech[es] to the fountain head," or source of life, "Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood / Shall calm her sores." It isn't entirely clear who the "her" in this scenario is, but it sounds like it refers to "the fountain head," which itself might be a metaphor for the earth or Mother Nature. Time sucks away at the earth's energy and life, but rather than killing "her," that "fallen blood" seems to make it whole again. Perhaps this is a reference to the fact then when something dies and decomposes it sustains new life and growth. Death isn't an ending but simply a part of a larger cycle.
- Finally, the poem ends with a metaphor as the speaker says that the same "worm" that eats away at "the lover's tomb" also finds its way into their own "sheet." The speaker's bed becomes a metaphorical grave here, their bedsheet like a shroud. They may still be in the prime of their life, but death is never far away.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 5
- Lines 7-8
- Line 10
- Lines 11-13
- Line 15
- Lines 16-18
- Line 20
- Line 22

VOCABULARY

Green fuse (Line 1) - This refers to the flower's stem.

Green age (Line 2) - Youth.

Dumb (Line 4, Line 9, Line 14, Line 19, Line 21) - Unable to speak or articulate. (Note that in contemporary use this word is considered an ableist slur.)

Mouthing streams (Line 7) - This might refer to streams reaching their "mouths," or the places where they merge with larger bodies of water. The speaker might also be personifying

the streams, with the sound of rushing water being the streams' way of metaphorically speaking.

Mouth unto my veins (Line 9) - Tell my own veins.

Whirls (Line 11) - Stirs.

Quicksand (Line 12) - Sand that is loose, wet, and gives way under pressure, meaning that if someone or something steps on it they will sink.

Ropes (Line 12) - Lassoes; confines with a rope; captures.

Hauls (Lines 12-13) - Pulls.

Shroud sail (Line 13) - One of a ship's main sails (a canvas that catches the wind and thus propels the ship). The word "shroud" also refers to a cloth in which a dead body is wrapped before burial.

Hangman's lime (Line 15) - A chemical used to speed up the decomposition of a body.

Fountain head (Line 16) - The original source of something (often used to describe the source of a stream, but can be applied to anything).

Leech (Line 16) - As a noun, this refers to a bloodsucking worm. As a verb, it refers to profiting or sponging off others.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The force that through the green fuse drives the flower" is made up of 22 lines split into five stanzas, four of which are quintains (five-line stanzas) and the last of which is a couplet.

The third line of each of the first four stanzas is much shorter than the rest, making it seem as though each stanza contracts in the middle. The movement from long lines, to short lines, and back to long lines again might evoke breathing in and out, or the cyclical nature of creation and destruction that the speaker describes throughout the poem.

Ending things with a couplet then works almost like the volta, or turn, of a Shakespearean sonnet. This quick, rhyming stanza creates an air of finality as the speaker reaffirms their own mortality.

METER

The poem is written in a rough iambic pentameter, meaning that for the most part, lines contain 10 syllables arranged in an unstressed-stressed pattern: da-DUM. Here are lines 1-2:

> The force | that through | the green | fuse drives | the flow- | er
> Drives my | green age; | that blasts | the roots | of trees

There are some variations here that keep things sounding dynamic rather than rigidly controlled. For example, both lines contain emphatic spondees (stressed-stressed). The first line contains an extra, unstressed syllable as well, while the second begins with a trochee (stressed-unstressed) that adds power to the word "Drives." The overall rhythm is still recognizably iambic, creating a steady, marching rhythm that evokes the relentless march of time and propels the poem forward.

The third line of each stanza, however, is highly irregular. Here's line 3:

> Is my | de**stroy**- | er.

While this line is still iambic, it is only five syllables long. The third lines of subsequent stanzas are only four syllables each, and line 13 isn't iambic at all:

> Hauls my | shroud sail.

These irregularities make the shortened third lines stand out dramatically. Each stanza feels like a birth-death cycle of its own—the long, iambic lines coming to an abrupt stop in the middle of the stanza only to restart again in the following line.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem contains plenty of rhyme, but its pattern is not always predictable. Most of the rhymes are also slant—so subtle, at times, that it's easy to overlook the fact that there's a rhyme scheme altogether! Stanzas 1 and 2 follow an ABABA pattern:

> [...] *flower A*
> [...] trees B
> [...] *destroyer. A*
> [...] rose B
> [...] *fever. A*

And:

> [...] *rocks A*
> [...] streams B
> [...] *wax A*
> [...] veins B
> [...] *sucks. A*

None of these rhymes are exact, but they're close enough to create a pattern and add music to the poem.

In stanza 3, however, this established rhyme scheme starts to break down. There are some echoes ("pool"/"sail", "wind"/"man") but "lime" doesn't register as a rhyme at all:

> [...] *pool A*
> [...] wind B

[...] *sail. A*
[...] man B
[...] lime. C

In the fourth stanza, "head"/"blood"/"wind" share final /d/ consonance, while "sores" and "stars" share /z/ and /r/ consonance. One might say there's an AABAB pattern here, but it's extremely subtle. The disintegration of the rhyme scheme might evoke the way that life gives way to the chaos of death and decay.

The poem then ends with a rhyming couplet: "tomb" and "worm" are clear slant rhymes and they make the poem's final moments sound more conclusive. The sonic similarity of these two words might also remind the reader that death (that "tomb) and life (that "worm") go hand in hand.

SPEAKER

Readers might take the speaker of the poem to be Dylan Thomas himself. Thomas was just 19 when he wrote the poem—still very much in his own "green age," or youth. That said, the poem itself doesn't give much away about its speaker apart from the fact that this person is presumably young (again, in their "green age").

What's most important is the speaker's sense of being struck speechless by time's awesome power and by the surreal, paradoxical connection between life and death, creation and destruction. The speaker argues that nothing is immune to the "force" that is time; the speaker is no more able to resist it than is the "crooked rose," "the mountain spring," or "the hanging man."

The speaker seems to find time's power at once beautiful and isolating. Everything is connected in the sense that it's doomed to follow the same trajectory. The speaker seems to appreciate the way that death gives way to new life, declaring towards the poem's end that "the fallen blood / Shall calm her sores"—an ambiguous phrase that nevertheless conveys time's power to not simply destroy but also to heal and soothe. Yet the speaker's inability to share their awe with others, or even articulate it to *themselves*, leaves them feeling pretty alone.

SETTING

The poem doesn't have a specific setting. When the speaker describes time tearing through "the roots of trees" and "water" bursting through stone, they aren't describing a real landscape but rather are using natural metaphors to illustrate time's power. This is why the speaker can jump from images of "mountain spring[s]" to ships to "the stars" to dead "lover[s]" in the grave. Since *everything* is subject to time's "force," everything is fair game for the speaker to include in the poem.

CONTEXT

LITEFORCE 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 (including this one!) 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).

Written in 1933 when Thomas was only 19 years old, "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower" was the poem that catapulted the poet into fame. It was published in his first book, *18 Poems*, in 1934. As a whole, this collection explores themes related to birth, death, and love in verse that's formal yet intensely passionate, unlike much of the more intellectual and emotionally reserved modernist poetry of Thomas's era.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Thomas lived during a particularly fraught time in history. He was born in 1914, the year World War I began, and he lived through World War II and its aftermath. Swansea, his beloved Welsh hometown, was badly damaged by German air raids during World War II. 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 "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower," as in many of his poems, Thomas aims for universal themes.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Original Rock Star of Poetry — An essay exploring Thomas's persona and the profound impact his work hadon rock n' roll. (https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/dylan-thomas-poetrysrock-star/article7855346.ece)

- Listen to Thomas's Dynamic Reading of the Poem — An audio recording of the poem as read by the poet. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58nrmQCcLGQ)
- "The First Poet Who Lived and Died As a Pop Star" — A short film exploring the incredible work—and unprecedented celebrity—of the Welsh poet. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWqGJq4DZOk)
- Read About the Poet's Life and Career — An in-depth biography of Thomas from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/dylan-thomas)
- The Official Dylan Thomas Website — Poke around this online hub dedicated to Thomas's life and works. (https://www.discoverdylanthomas.com)

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

HOW TO CITE

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