

Dylan Thomas

DCUS.online — ঢাকা কেন্দ্রীয় বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের শিক্ষার্থীদের জন্য

Dylan Thomas — Poem in October (ENH 402: Twentieth Century Poetry)

Overview — the story in simple English

Dylan Thomas (1914–1953) was a famous Welsh (ওয়েলসের) poet who wrote in English. "Poem in October" is a birthday poem (জন্মদিনের কবিতা). The poet wakes up on the morning of his thirtieth birthday in a small seaside town in Wales. He says it is his "thirtieth year to heaven" — meaning he has completed thirty years of his journey towards heaven, towards death. The town is still sleeping, but nature is awake: the sea birds, the herons (বক), the boats and the woods all seem to call him outside. So he gets up and walks out of the town, climbing a high hill in the autumn (শরৎকাল) rain. As he climbs, something magical happens: the weather "turns around" — below him the town stays rainy and cold like October, but up on the hill it becomes bright, warm and sunny like summer. In this sudden summer the poet suddenly remembers his own childhood (শৈশব). He sees again the woods, rivers and seas where he walked with his mother as a boy, and he remembers how, as a child, he felt God's presence in nature — in the trees, the stones and the fish. The dead child inside him comes alive again, and the child's old joy "sang burning in the sun." Standing on the hill in this borrowed summer, the poet ends with a prayer (প্রার্থনা): may his "heart's truth" still be sung on this same hill when his next birthday comes — may he stay alive, and may his poetic power and childlike joy never die.

 **One-line meaning:** On his thirtieth birthday the poet climbs a hill, recovers the lost joy and faith of his childhood through nature, and prays that this "heart's truth" will still be alive on his next birthday.

Quick Facts	
Published	Written in the mid-1940s; collected in <i>Deaths and Entrances</i> (1946)
Genre	Modern lyric; birthday poem; nature poem with religious feeling
Setting	A small Welsh seaside town (widely identified with Laugharne, Wales) and the hill above it, on an October morning
Narration / Form	First-person ("I"); 7 stanzas of 10 lines each; syllabic verse (অক্ষর-গোনা ছন্দ) with no regular end-rhyme
Fact often noted	The poem marks Thomas's own thirtieth birthday — he was born on 27 October 1914

Themes & Technique

- 1. Nature as a living, holy presence.** Nature in this poem is not dead scenery; it is alive and active — the herons are "priested," the birds seem to call the poet's name, and the weather itself "turned around." Nature works like a church

(গির্জা) where the poet worships. In the exam, always say: Thomas is a *romantic* among the moderns because he celebrates nature, not the modern city.

2. **Childhood and the loss of innocence.** The centre of the poem is the memory of "the long dead child" — the poet's own boyhood self. As a child he could feel wonder and God everywhere; as an adult he has lost this power. The hill-top vision briefly gives the child back to him. Compare this with Wordsworth's Romantic idea that the child lives closest to heaven.
3. **Time, birthdays and death.** The poem begins with "my thirtieth year to heaven" — every birthday is one more step towards death (মৃত্যু). Yet the poem is joyful, not sad: Thomas answers passing time with celebration, memory and prayer. This mixture of death-awareness and joy is his signature note.
4. **Religion and mystical (অতীন্দ্রিয়) vision.** The poem is full of religious words — "heaven," "priested," "parables," "the legends of the green chapels." But this is not church religion; it is a personal, pantheistic (সর্বস্বরবাদী — God present in all of nature) faith. As a child the poet whispered the truth of his joy to the trees, the stones and the fish, as if all creation could hear him.
5. **Memory as rebirth.** The walk up the hill is also a walk back into the past — the poet walks "abroad in a shower of all my days." Memory does not simply recall the past; it *resurrects* (পুনরুজ্জীবিত করে) it, so that the dead child's joy sings again "burning in the sun."
6. **The two weathers — a symbolic double world.** Below the hill: rain, autumn, the adult's ordinary world. Above: sunshine, summer, the child's visionary world. The "turning" weather is the poem's central symbol for the turning of the mind — from present to past, from plain fact to vision.
7. **Prayer and hope.** The poem ends not with a statement but with a prayer: "O may my heart's truth / Still be sung / On this high hill in a year's turning." The poet asks for continued life, continued faith and continued song — a poet's prayer for poetry itself.

Classroom techniques:

- **Syllabic verse:** each line counts syllables, not stresses — this gives the poem its strange, floating music.
- **Stanza shape:** long and short lines follow the same wave-like pattern in every stanza, so the poem's shape on the page suggests hills and water.
- **Assonance** (স্বরধ্বনির মিল) and **internal rhyme** instead of end-rhyme.
- **Compound coinages** (নতুন যৌগিক শব্দ): "heron / Priested shore," "a springful of larks" — Thomas joins words to make fresh images.
- **Personification:** the weather "turned around"; the birds and boats seem to bear the poet's name.
- **Religious imagery** applied to nature: "the parables / Of sun light," "the legends of the green chapels."
- **Circular structure:** the poem begins on the birthday morning and ends with a prayer for the *next* birthday — a full "year's turning."
- **Romantic lyricism inside modernism:** unlike Eliot's fragmented, ironic city poetry, Thomas keeps the single singing "I" of the Romantic tradition.

Key Quotations — memorize

1. "It was my thirtieth year to heaven" — the famous opening line; the birthday as a step towards heaven/death.
2. "the heron / Priested shore" — nature as church; the heron stands like a priest on the shore.
3. "And I rose / In rainy autumn / And walked abroad in a shower of all my days." — walking in the rain becomes walking through all his past days; the memory theme.
4. "A springful of larks in a rolling / Cloud" — the famous coined image of the hill-top summer.

5. "the weather turned around" — the key symbolic turn from autumn to summer, from adult to child (the phrase recurs in the poem).
6. "the parables / Of sun light / And the legends of the green chapels" — childhood's nature-faith expressed in Bible language.
7. "And the true / Joy of the long dead child sang burning / In the sun." — the climax: the dead child's joy reborn.
8. "the town below lay leaved with October blood" — the double weather near the close: summer above, red-leaved autumn below.
9. "O may my heart's truth / Still be sung / On this high hill in a year's turning." — the closing prayer; the direct answer to the Part B prayer question.

Critics' Views (safe to cite)

Critic	View	Use for
William York Tindall	Read "Poem in October" as a joyful birthday poem in which landscape and memory unite; an example of Thomas's later, clearer, celebratory manner.	Critical appreciation; childhood theme
David Daiches	Argued that Thomas's central theme is the unity of all life — birth, death and nature joined in one process, which the poet celebrates.	Nature; religion; overall assessment
Elder Olson	Stressed the careful craftsmanship behind Thomas's apparently wild style — the poems are deliberately built symbolic structures.	Technique; syllabic form; defending Thomas against the charge of carelessness
John Ackerman	Emphasized the Welsh background: Thomas's landscape, chapel culture and bardic tradition shape his religious feeling for nature.	Religion; Welsh setting; Laugharne
Walford Davies	Saw the later poems, including "Poem in October," as poems of place and memory in which childhood Wales becomes a paradise regained.	Childhood; memory; setting
Aneirin Talfan Davies	Regarded Thomas as an essentially religious poet whose imagery is soaked in the Bible and in Welsh chapel preaching.	Religion essay

Exam Q&A Bank

Part A — Reference to Context (5 marks)

1. "It was my thirtieth year to heaven..." (opening of the poem) — Very likely

These are the opening words of "Poem in October" by Dylan Thomas, the modern Welsh poet, from his volume *Deaths and Entrances*. The speaker wakes on the morning of his thirtieth birthday in a small seaside town in Wales. The context is the beginning of the birthday walk: the whole of nature — the harbour, the neighbouring wood, the herons and the sea birds — seems to wake him and call his name, while the human town still sleeps. The phrase "thirtieth year to heaven" is the key: the poet counts his birthdays not simply as years lived but as steps on the road *to heaven*, that is, towards death and eternity. Yet the tone is celebratory, not gloomy. The line is significant because it announces the poem's three great themes at once — time, nature and religion — and it shows Thomas's compressed style, where one small phrase carries the shadow of death inside a morning of joy.

2. "And the true / Joy of the long dead child sang burning / In the sun." — 🔥 Very likely

These lines come from the climactic later part of Dylan Thomas's "Poem in October." On his thirtieth birthday the poet has climbed a high hill above his Welsh town; the weather has magically "turned around" from rainy October to summer sunshine. In this visionary summer he suddenly remembers his own childhood — the woods, rivers and sea-town where he once walked with his mother, and the boy who whispered the truth of his joy to the trees, the stones and the fish. Here that buried boy comes alive: the child is "long dead" because adulthood has killed his innocent wonder, yet his joy now "sang burning in the sun." The paradox (আপাত-বিরোধ) of a dead child singing shows that memory, for Thomas, is a kind of resurrection. The lines matter because they turn a simple birthday walk into a mystical experience of rebirth, and they prepare directly for the closing prayer that this "heart's truth" may still be sung a year later.

Part B — Short Notes (5 marks)

1. How is nature depicted in "Poem in October"? — 🔥 Very likely (in both the 2019 and 2020 question lists)

Nature is the true hero of "Poem in October." First, nature is *alive and friendly*: on the poet's thirtieth birthday the harbour, the wood, the herons, gulls and rooks all seem to wake him and call his name, while the human town still sleeps. Second, nature is *holy*: Thomas writes of the "heron / Priested shore" and remembers "the parables / Of sun light / And the legends of the green chapels." Birds become priests, sunlight becomes a parable, and green woods become chapels — nature is a church where the poet worships. Third, nature is *magical and symbolic*: as he climbs the hill "the weather turned around," so that summer shines above while rainy October lies below; the two weathers stand for the adult's grey world and the recovered golden world of childhood. Fourth, nature is the *keeper of memory*: through natural sights the poet re-enters his boyhood walks with his mother. Unlike Eliot's dead city landscapes, Thomas's nature is romantic and sacramental (পবিত্র) — it restores "the true / Joy of the long dead child" and inspires the final prayer.

2. What prayer does Dylan Thomas offer at the end of "Poem in October"? — 🔥 Very likely (in both the 2019 and 2020 question lists)

At the end of "Poem in October" the poet stands on the high hill in a miraculous summer noon, though "the town below lay leaved with October blood." He has just relived his childhood joy and felt its mystery sing alive again in the water and the birds. Out of this experience comes the closing prayer: "O may my heart's truth / Still be sung / On this high hill in a year's turning." The prayer has three layers of meaning. First, it is a prayer for *life*: since every birthday is one more "year to heaven," the poet asks simply to be alive when his thirty-first birthday comes round. Second, it is a prayer for *poetic power*: "my heart's truth... sung" means that his gift of song, his poetry, should not dry up. Third, it is a prayer for *faith and joy*: he asks that the childlike wonder he has recovered on the hill may stay with him through the "year's turning." The prayer rises not towards a church God but out of nature itself — which is why critics such as Aneurin Talfan Davies call Thomas an essentially religious poet.

Part C — Essays (15 marks)

Essay 1: "Comment on the religious elements in Dylan Thomas's poetry with reference to 'Poem in October.'" — ★ Likely (2019 list; also set as "Discuss Dylan Thomas as a religious poet with reference to Poem in October")

Dylan Thomas is often called a religious poet, but his religion is of a special kind. He does not preach any church doctrine (ধর্মীয় মতবাদ); instead, he feels the presence of God, or of a holy mystery, inside nature, childhood and the whole process of life and death. "Poem in October" is the clearest example of this personal, pantheistic faith. This essay will show that the poem is religious in its language, in its vision of nature, in its treatment of childhood, and in its final act of prayer.

The religious note is struck in the very first line: "It was my thirtieth year to heaven." A birthday, an ordinary human event, is at once placed on the road to heaven. Life, for Thomas, is a pilgrimage (তীর্থযাত্রা): every year carries the soul one step nearer its

eternal home. The word "heaven" quietly reminds us of death, but without fear; the poet treats his mortality as part of a sacred journey. From the opening, therefore, time itself is given religious meaning.

Secondly, the poem consistently describes nature in the vocabulary of worship. The seashore is a "heron / Priested shore" — the tall grey heron stands like a priest conducting a service at the water's edge. The poet remembers "the parables / Of sun light / And the legends of the green chapels": sunlight teaches like Christ's parables, and the green woods are chapels of a natural church. Nature, in other words, is a temple, and walking through it is an act of devotion. John Ackerman has emphasized that this habit of mind comes from Thomas's Welsh background, where chapel religion and the Bible soaked everyday speech; Thomas carries that chapel language out of the pulpit and into the landscape. The result is a sacramental view of nature: the visible world becomes the outward sign of an invisible holiness.

Thirdly, religion in the poem is bound up with childhood. When the weather "turned around" on the hill, the poet re-enters his boyhood, walking again with his mother through those parables of sunlight. The child, Thomas suggests, is naturally religious: he spoke the truth of his joy to the trees, the stones and the fish, addressing all creation as if it could hear and answer. Growing up has buried this faith — the child is "long dead" — but on the hill "the true / Joy of the long dead child sang burning / In the sun." This is nothing less than a resurrection (পুনরুত্থান): the dead rises and sings. The religious pattern of death and rebirth, so central to Christianity, is re-enacted inside one man's memory on his birthday morning. David Daiches's view that Thomas's great theme is the unity of all life — birth, death and renewal joined in a single celebrated process — fits this moment perfectly.

Fourthly, the poem ends, as a religious lyric should, in prayer: "O may my heart's truth / Still be sung / On this high hill in a year's turning." The "O may" is the classic opening of supplication (মিনতি). The poet prays for another year of life, for the survival of his poetic gift, and for the continuation of the childlike faith he has just recovered. Significantly, the prayer is spoken on a hill-top — a high place, like the holy mountains of scripture — and it is addressed to no named God, rising instead from gratitude to the whole living world. Aneurin Talfan Davies therefore regarded Thomas as an essentially religious poet, one whose imagery is steeped in the Bible even when his creed is entirely his own.

It must be admitted that Thomas's religion is unorthodox. There is no sin, no judgement, no church in the poem; the "green chapels" have leaves for a roof. His faith is closer to Wordsworth's nature-mysticism than to formal Christianity. Yet the emotions of the poem — wonder, reverence, thanksgiving, supplication — are authentically religious emotions.

In conclusion, "Poem in October" is religious in structure and spirit from its first line to its last. It opens on the road "to heaven," worships in nature's green chapels, witnesses the resurrection of the dead child's joy, and closes with a humble prayer. Dylan Thomas may not be a poet of the church, but he is, in the deepest sense, a poet of the holy.

Essay 2: "Critically evaluate the poem 'Poem in October.'" — ★ Likely (2020 list)

"Poem in October," written for Dylan Thomas's thirtieth birthday and collected in *Deaths and Entrances* (1946), is widely regarded as one of the finest short lyrics of twentieth-century English poetry. A critical evaluation must weigh its subject and themes, its structure and technique, its imagery, and its place among modern poems. On all four counts the poem rewards close study.

The subject is deceptively simple: a man wakes on his birthday, walks up a hill outside his Welsh seaside town, remembers his childhood, and prays. Yet from this small walk Thomas builds three large themes. The first is time and mortality: "It was my thirtieth year to heaven" counts each birthday as a step towards death, casting a gentle shadow over the celebration. The second is nature, presented as alive and holy — the "heron / Priested shore," the birds that seem to carry the poet's name over the farms, "the parables / Of sun light / And the legends of the green chapels." The third is childhood and memory: on the sunlit hill the poet re-experiences his boyhood so intensely that "the true / Joy of the long dead child sang burning / In the sun." Loss, recovery and thanksgiving are thus woven into one October morning.

Structurally the poem is a masterpiece of hidden discipline. It consists of seven ten-line stanzas written in syllabic verse: Thomas counts the syllables of each line rather than the stresses, and repeats the same wave-like pattern of long and short lines in every stanza, so that the poem's very shape on the page suggests hills, water and breathing. There is no regular end-rhyme; the music is made instead by assonance and internal echo. Elder Olson rightly insisted that behind Thomas's

apparently wild, spontaneous manner lies deliberate and even mathematical craftsmanship — and "Poem in October" is among the best evidence, for its rapture is carried by one of the most tightly engineered stanza forms of the century.

The imagery deserves special praise. Thomas's coinages compress whole pictures into two or three words: "a springful of larks" pours the season of spring itself out of a rolling cloud; the shore is "priested" by herons; the birthday walk becomes a walk "abroad in a shower of all my days," where falling rain and falling remembered time become one. The controlling symbol is the double weather: as the poet climbs, "the weather turned around," so that summer blazes on the hill while "the town below lay leaved with October blood." The two weathers embody the poem's two worlds — the rainy autumn of adult fact and the radiant summer of childhood vision — and the "turning" enacts the mind's own turn from present to past. William York Tindall reads the poem as a joyful birthday celebration in which landscape and memory become one, and this weather-symbol is precisely the hinge (ফুঁ) on which that union turns.

Set against his contemporaries, Thomas appears as a romantic among the moderns. Where Eliot's landscapes are broken city wastelands and his speakers ironic fragments, Thomas keeps the single, singing first person of Wordsworth and the Romantics, and his nature heals rather than mocks. David Daiches identified Thomas's essential theme as the celebrated unity of all life — birth, death and nature bound together — and Walford Davies has shown how, in the later poems of place, childhood Wales becomes a kind of paradise regained. Both judgements are confirmed here. One may also concede the usual criticisms: Thomas's syntax can be difficult, his emotion can seem excessive, and the poem says little about society or history. But in this poem the difficulty is at its minimum and the emotion is disciplined by the strict form; the charge of obscurity, often fair against his early work, largely fails here.

Finally, the ending gives the poem its lasting shape. The vision fades, October remains below, and the poet, still standing in his thirtieth year to heaven, prays: "O may my heart's truth / Still be sung / On this high hill in a year's turning." The circle of the year closes upon a hope, not a certainty — a movingly human ending for a birthday poem written in the war years.

In conclusion, "Poem in October" unites strict craftsmanship with overflowing feeling, and private memory with the universal themes of time, nature and faith. It shows Thomas's mature style at its clearest and most humane, and it fully deserves its reputation as one of the great celebratory lyrics of the modern age.

⚡ One-Page Revision Sheet

Item	Content
Story in 3 lines	Poet wakes on his 30th birthday in a Welsh sea town; nature calls him out. He climbs a hill where the weather "turns" from rainy October to summer, and he relives his childhood joy and faith. He ends with a prayer that his "heart's truth" may still be sung next year.
2 must-quotes	"It was my thirtieth year to heaven" • "O may my heart's truth / Still be sung / On this high hill in a year's turning."
2 backup quotes	"And the true / Joy of the long dead child sang burning / In the sun." • "the parables / Of sun light / And the legends of the green chapels"
2 critics	Elder Olson — careful craftsmanship behind the seemingly wild style; David Daiches — Thomas's theme is the celebrated unity of all life (birth, death, nature).
Technique words	syllabic verse, assonance, compound coinage, personification, sacramental nature imagery, circular structure, romantic lyricism
Top 3 likely essays	1) Religious elements / Thomas as a religious poet in "Poem in October" ★ 2) Critical evaluation of "Poem in October" ★ 3) Nature in "Poem in October" — build the Part B nature answer into a full essay 🔥

Exam-timing tip: In the 4-hour paper give the 15-mark Thomas essay about 45 minutes — 5 minutes to plan, 35 minutes to write (intro + 4 body paragraphs + conclusion), and 5 minutes to check that your two memorized quotations are copied exactly.