



KS4 Activities

The Welsh rhythm in Dylan Thomas's work



Did Dylan Thomas speak Welsh?

- No, he probably didn't, but his parents were first-language Welsh speakers.
- They gave him a Welsh name from the Mabinogion – meaning 'Prince of Darkness', but didn't speak Welsh to him.
- Welsh was considered a 'second-class language' at the beginning of the 20th century.
- English was the language 'to get on in the world'.



Did Dylan Thomas understand Welsh?

- Welsh-speaking relatives would call by in 5, Cwmdonkin Drive, and he spent childhood holidays in the Welsh-speaking Llansteffan area.
- According to his grand-daughter Hannah Ellis, Dylan heard and understood Welsh conversations but took part in English.
- Many critics agree that his understanding of Welsh influenced his poetry.





Dylan knew of Welsh poetry

- His father had an extensive library.
- Aneurin Talfan Davies, a colleague at the BBC, recalled that Dylan used to question him on the rules of 'cynghanedd' – Welsh strict metre poetry.
- Dylan told his fellow poet Glyn Jones that if he had learnt Welsh, he would probably have composed Welsh strict metre poetry.





English poets and Welsh poetry

William Barnes, Thomas Hardy, Robert Graves and Gerard Manley Hopkins are all examples of poets who were influenced by Welsh strict metre poetry.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:GerardManleyHopkins.jpg>

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) spent time in Wales studying theology, learnt some Welsh and came under the influence of strict metre poets. **He, in turn, influenced Dylan Thomas.**



Task 1: Say these lines by Gerard Manley Hopkins out loud, then mark the **alliteration** and/or *rhyme*. These are features of ‘cynghanedd’ in Welsh, which Hopkins loosely imitates and experiments with:

- The blood-gush blade-gash
- The down-dugged ground-hugged grey
- Warm-laid grave of a womb-life grey
- Hack and rack the growing green
- Christ’s lily and beast of the waste wood



Task 1 answers: (alliteration in bold, *rhyme* in italics)

- The **blood-gush blade-gash**
- The **down-dugged ground-hugged grey**
- Warm-laid **grave** of a **womb-life grey**
- *Hack* and *rack* the **growing green**
- Christ's lily and *beast* of the **waste wood**



Dylan Thomas follows the rules of 'cynganedd' more closely than Hopkins.

Task 2

Say these lines out loud. Now, mark the **alliteration** and *rhyme*. Can you work out the pattern which is identical in each one?

- To the burn and turn of time
- When the morning was walking over the war
- Easy in the mercy of his means
- Though the town below lay leaved with October blood



Task 2 answers:

These lines can be split into three parts:

Parts 1 and 2 *rhyme*; parts 2 and 3 have **alliteration**:

- To the *burn* /and **turn** / of **time**
- When the morning /was **walking** / over the **war**
- *Easy* / in the **mercy** /of his **means**
- *Though* / the town **below** / lay leaved with October **blood**

This is called 'cynghanedd sain' in Welsh.



Task 3

Say out loud these lines of Dylan's work which involve **alliteration** only. Can you see a pattern?

- Though I sang in my chains like the sea
- The house that lies in the head



Task 3 answers:

- Though I **s**ang / in my chains like **th**e **s**ea
th **s** [n m ch ns l k] **th s**
- The house /that lies in the head
th h [th t l s n] **th h**

Both lines have a repeated series of alliteration, with other consonants 'in the way'. This is called 'cynghanedd draws' in Welsh.