

Was Dylan Thomas a grafter or a drunk?

Video transcript: Eighteen straight whiskies

Richard Harrington:

Kingsley Amis once scathingly wrote that Dylan Thomas “was an outstandingly unpleasant man who cheated and stole from his friends and peed on their carpets.”

It is undeniable that, at times, Dylan drank heavily. When he did cross into drunkenness, he often behaved disgracefully.

Tales range from inappropriate behaviour at parties, being drunk at college poetry readings and – as Amis alludes to in his bitter comments – urinating on a plant in Charlie Chaplin’s house.

Focus on the writer’s relationship with alcohol has grown since his death, taking on an almost mythical status.

Alcohol would have been a constant in Dylan’s adult life. But it would have been familiar to him too from an early age.

According to biographer Paul Ferris, Dylan’s father DJ also liked the hard stuff, but he “didn’t drink dangerously or wildly; just a little too much to go unnoticed by the neighbours”.

Thomas revelled in the romantic image of a drunken poet, and seemed to want to project an image of himself as a hard-drinker.

In fact, he sometimes exaggerated his own drinking.

A perfect example of this would be the alleged boast of downing 18 straight whiskies shortly before his death in New York. Questioned afterwards, the proprietor says it was likely no more than six or eight.

Alcohol was also a constant presence in the tempestuous relationship between himself and his wife Caitlin, who said that theirs was not only a love story, but a drinking story.

She also said that Dylan didn’t really like alcohol – it was just the drinker’s habits and life that appealed to him.

Whatever your thoughts on his personal life – whether he was a drunk or just played the drunk – should it detract from the quality, and volume, of work that he produced in such a short life?