

Under Milk Wood: pantomime or carefully crafted literature?

Video transcript: “Love the words, love the words”

Owen Sheers:

Under Milk Wood is Dylan Thomas’s celebrated snapshot of life and dreams in a Welsh village by the sea.

It was first performed on stage in New York during Thomas’s third visit to America, by which time he was being welcomed in the country as a poet, performer and, increasingly, a celebrity.

On the night of that first performance in 1953, Thomas’s final stage direction to the actors was simply to “Love the words, love the words”.

Under Milk Wood was written more to be heard or spoken than read. In places, the play is almost like an adult pantomime with its sexual humour and bawdy, archetypal characters.

It’s a play about love, life, sex, loneliness, death, and memories, all played out in the one eavesdropping, curtain-twitching community.

The voice of the piece lands somewhere between prose and poetry, and this, I think, is a crucial part of its success. As with much of Thomas’s work, the wordplay, sounds, and musical rhythms of Under Milk Wood are just as important as the meaning of what is said in the play.

Although its characters are often comical and dramatically extravagant, what lifts the play is Thomas’s subtlety and skill as a serious literary craftsman. It’s these devices and techniques, lying just below the surface of the script, that give Under Milk Wood its enduring magical appeal.