

Under Milk Wood: pantomime or carefully crafted literature?

Video transcript: Prose with blood pressure

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Under Milk Wood was written, in part, in Dylan Thomas's famous Writing Shed. Originally composed for radio, Thomas himself described the lyrical language of Under Milk Wood as 'prose with blood pressure'.

But what, exactly, makes it sound so poetic?

Thomas's skilful use of internal rhyming goes some way towards answering this. Let's take a look at a famous line from the start of the play.

"limping invisible down to the sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea"

The 'o' sounds in slow, crow and boat are what makes this line sound so lyrical.

When a writer uses a repetition of vowel sounds like this to create internal rhyming, the technique is called assonance – something that Thomas uses throughout Under Milk Wood. And in complex ways too, often with more than one rhyming sound on the same line or in neighbouring lines.

A similar device, called consonance, can also be used to create a rhythmical echo and drive in the writing. This is when – rather than vowels – it is the consonant sounds that are repeated.

Look at how prominent the letter 'd' is in this example of consonance.

"And you alone can hear the invisible starfall, the darkest-before-dawn minutely dewgrazed stir of the black, dab-filled sea"

The rhythm of Under Milk Wood also contributes to the poetic sound of the play.

As with certain examples of his poetry, Thomas uses what's called sprung rhythm – seemingly random, bouncing beats that trip off the tongue but don't follow any regular pattern.

Sprung rhythm imitates and accentuates the rhythms of natural speech, and Under Milk Wood was designed to tread this border line between everyday talking and a more lyrical language.

Under Milk Wood feels rhymed, and together with the use of sprung rhythm, it's this that gives the play its incantatory effect, and makes us so want to hear it out loud, coming to life on the tongue, just as Thomas had always intended when he first wrote it.