

An illustration of a child wearing a dark hat and a red and blue striped scarf, looking up at a night sky filled with many small, white, star-like shapes. The background is a dark teal color with a pattern of fine, white, diagonal lines.

# *A Child's Christmas in Wales*

by Dylan Thomas

Adapted for the stage by  
Jeremy Brooks and Adrian Mitchell

## Know-the-Show Audience Guide

researched and written by  
the Education Department of  
The Shakespeare Theatre  
of New Jersey





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# A Child's Christmas in Wales

## About Dylan Thomas

Dylan Marlais Thomas was born in Swansea, Glamorganshire (Wales) on October 27, 1914. He was educated at Swansea Grammar School and became well known for his obtuse poetry, amusing plays and prose. Before the publishing of his first book, Thomas worked as a reporter for The South West Daily Post in Swansea (1931-1932) and as a freelance writer in 1933. Thomas' first book, 18 POEMS was published when he was just 19 years old. His poems had first appeared in the Sunday Referee in 1933 as part of a feature column called "The Poets' Corner." The Referees editor, Victor Neuburg, began to award prizes to the poets whose work was judged the finest over a six-month period. The winning poet's work would then be published in book form. Thomas was the second poet to be awarded the prize, which he won for the second poem he published, "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower." The editors had considerable difficulty finding a publisher who would accept Thomas' manuscript, however, until David Archer of the Parton Bookshop agreed to have the book printed. The work remained obscure and received little praise. Thomas followed 18 POEMS with 25 POEMS in 1936.



Dylan Thomas reading for the BBC in the 1940's

Thomas lived a life of poverty in England and in Wales. He married Caitlin Macnamara in 1937. The couple had two sons and a daughter. Thomas then began to concentrate on prose with such works as "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog," "Adventures in the Skin Trade," and "Quite Early One Morning." During this time, Thomas also worked as part of a documentary film unit during World War II. He published many short stories, wrote film scripts, broadcast stories, did a series of lecture tours in the U.S. and wrote UNDER MILKWOOD, a radio play for voices. In 1949, Thomas began more frequent visits to the United States, touring colleges to read his poetry. He was the recipient of the 1953 Foyle Prize.

In 1953, during his fourth lecture tour of the United States and after a long period of depression and drinking, he collapsed in his New York hotel room. He died on November 9th at St. Vincent's Hospital at age 39, and it is believed that his death was caused by alcohol poisoning. Thomas is buried in Laughame, Wales, where his grave is marked by a simple wooden cross.

# A Child's Christmas in Wales

## Growing up in Wales



Dylan Thomas' childhood home

"...for Swansea is built like Rome on seven hills between which the River Tawe winds towards Swansea Bay ... And then, on the other side of the bay lies the Gower Peninsula, one of the most gorgeous stretches of cliff and heath, one of the most romantic and wild sceneries in the whole of Britain. From the top of the cliffs the waves seem to whisper as they break in the sandy coves or

reverberate within the caves far below.

The town in which Dylan spent his first twenty years, or more than half his life, was thus in three ways a frontier: geographically, in that it is a seaport and here was the junction between land and ocean; culturally in that this was the meeting point of the Welsh and English languages, and it is to this that Dylan was referring

when he wrote of Swansea's 'twotongued sea'; socially, in that here lies the dividing line between ancient, agricultural Wales of 'the good, bad boys from the lonely farms' and the Wales of the mining valleys with their own particular and very vivid life.

It was in the very nature of Swansea and of the Wales he knew that Dylan found one of his principal themes ... He was a Welshman, but he was an English poet; no major English poet has ever been as Welsh as was Dylan. His instincts were those of a countryman, as is most of his imagery, yet he was in many ways a very urban character. He could not swim but he was only ever happy by the sea."

-from THE LIFE OF DYLAN THOMAS by Constanine Fitzgibbon



A Room in Dylan Thomas' childhood home



# The Poetry Of Dylan Thomas

## The Song of the Mischevious Dog

There are many who say that a dog has its day,  
And a cat has a number of lives;  
There are others who think that a lobster is pink,  
And that bees never work in their hives.  
There are fewer, of course, who insist that a horse  
Has a horn and two humps on its head,  
And a fellow who jests that a mare can build nests  
Is as rare as a donkey that's red.  
Yet in spite of all this, I have moments of bliss,  
For I cherish a passion for bones,  
And though doubtful of biscuit, I'm willing to risk it,  
And love to chase rabbits and stones.  
But my greatest delight is to take a good bite  
At a calf that is plump and delicious;  
And if I indulge in a bite at a bulge,  
Let's hope you won't think me too vicious.

written by Dylan Thomas at age 11

## Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
Because their words had forked no lightning they  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
Their frail deed might have danced in a green bay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,  
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

From Thomas' 1952 collection *In Country Sleep*

# A Child's Christmas in Wales

## A Brief Synopsis

**Please note: Below is a full summary of the play. If you prefer not to know the full plot, consider skipping this section.**

An adult Dylan begins the play telling us of Christmases he remembers while growing up in the small Welsh town of Swansea. His remembrances transport us back in time to one particular Christmas Eve where a young Dylan prays to Father Christmas for a B.S.A. bicycle with a three-speed gear, a magician's set that does real magic, a "little, little real machine gun" to frighten away the Town Hill Boys, and a big, woolly ginger dog for his very own.

He awakens in the morning to discover a stocking by his bed full of tiny treasures and a mysterious parcel, delivered by the postman, which his mother insists he waits until "present-giving-time" to open. A disappointed Dylan rushes off to play outside with his friends Jim, Jack, and Tom.

After a morning stalking the "dreaded and terrible-whiskered saber-clawed arctic tiger" (a.k.a. any of the neighborhood cats roaming about), Dylan and the boys head down to Cwmdonkin Park where they switch to stalking the Town Hill boys. The Town Hill boys confront Dylan, steal a sugar stick from him and make their way out of the park. After some candy trading, singing and a near escape from Smoky, the park caretaker, Dylan and the boys rush home for supper.

Supper begins with the arrival of Dylan's aunts and uncles (and their gifts), as well as his cousins; Brenda and Glenda. The last to arrive is Dylan's favorite aunt, Aunt Elieri. She gives Dylan the magic kit he so desperately wished for, and his parents surprise him with the B.S.A. three-speed bicycle.

After "present-giving-time" everyone turns their attention to the Christmas

dinner itself, only to learn that Dylan's Mother has burned the turkey in the family's new gas oven. Smoke billows from the kitchen, and Dylan is sent to call the fire brigade. Just as he reaches the front door, however, the fire brigade comes racing in (they had seen the smoke while driving up the street). A quick investigation leads the fire brigade to conclude that there was never a fire at all, just a lot of smoke produced by burning turkey fat.

Mother enters from the kitchen, tearfully lamenting the ruined turkey, only to have the meal saved by Aunt Bessie's timely turkey...a prepared bird from a cancelled hotel holiday party.

After dinner, Dylan and his family enjoy their blazing puddings, with each serving revealing a hidden Christmas charm to the guest. Each charm is meant to represent something about their future. The pudding is followed by the Christmas crackers and an ill-advised indoor rugby match.

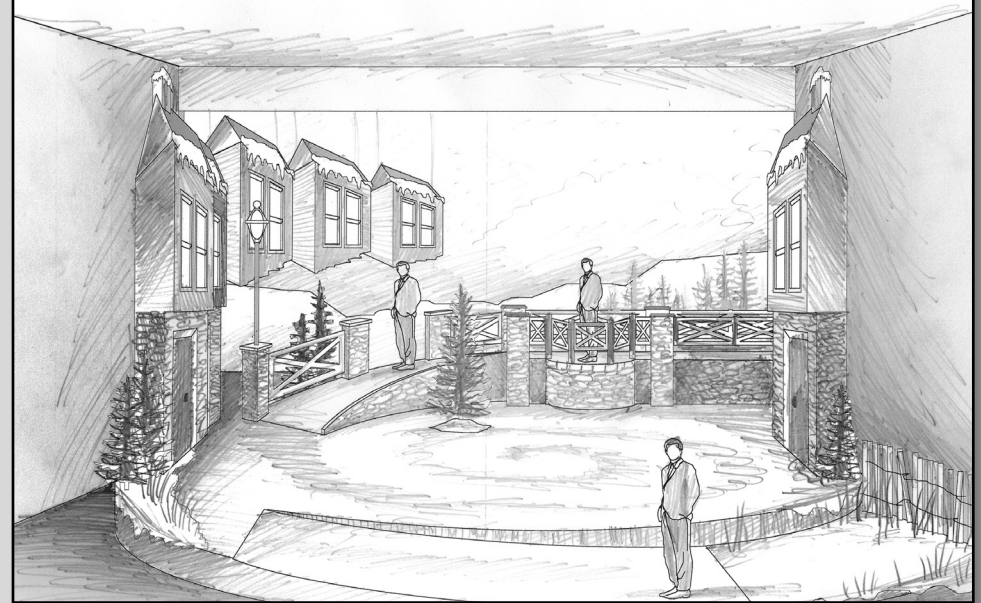
After Mother puts an end to the rugby match, Dylan sets out to meet up with Tom, Jack and Jim once again, only this time he's not traveling alone. He's been forced to bring his cousins, Glenda and Brenda, along. Eventually they find themselves at the seashore, where Jim teases Brenda and makes her cry, prompting Glenda to come to her aid, insisting that Jim apologize. Jim and Jack rush off, with Glenda and Brenda in hot pursuit. This leaves Dylan and Tom alone for a few moments, where Dylan opens up about his favorite Aunt Elieri as the sun sets. On the way home from the beach, Dylan has an odd encounter with a young boy who looks just like him, only this boy is sporting quite a shiner. After a brief confrontation, Dylan hurries home.

Once home, Dylan and his family begin to tell scary stories about the spirits and ghosts who still linger in their small Welsh town. After a few rounds of scary stories, and Aunt Elieri's beautiful song about the ancient Welsh spirit, Taliesin, The Town Hill boys pass by the house while caroling. Much to Dylan's chagrin, the boys are invited in and the family joins them in singing and dancing. Eventually, everyone says their goodbyes and Dylan heads up to his room and settles into bed.

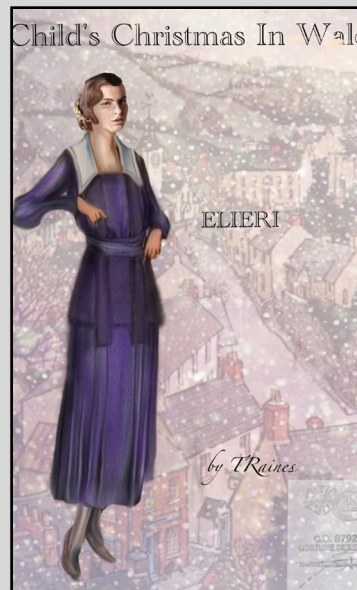
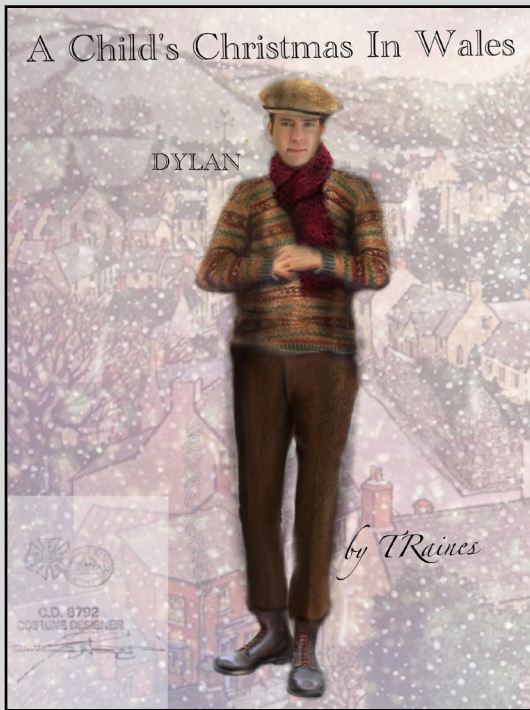


# In This Production

## A CHILD'S CHRISTMAS IN WALES



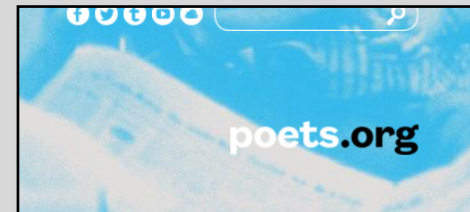
Above: Set rendering by Jonathan Wentz.  
Others (from left): Dylan, Elieri, Fireman, Smoky Costume design sketches for by Tristan Raines





# Explore

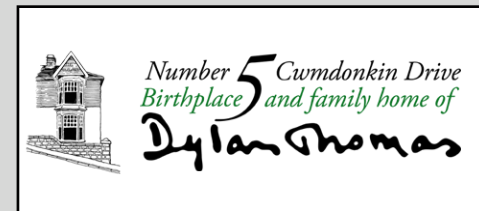
The American Academy of Poets website. Features a Dylan Thomas bio and selected poems  
[www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/dylan-thomas](http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/dylan-thomas)



A Dylan Thomas website, maintained by the city of Swansea, Wales  
[www.dylanthomas.com](http://www.dylanthomas.com)



The "Official" Dylan Thomas website, maintained by his family and estate  
[www.discoverdylanthomas.com](http://www.discoverdylanthomas.com)







# Sources & Further Reading

## PRINTED MATERIALS

DYLAN THOMAS: THE BIOGRAPHY by Paul Ferris, Counterpoint Press, 2000.

DYLAN THOMAS'S WALES by Hilary Laurie, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1999.

THE COLLECTED POEMS OF DYLAN THOMAS: THE ORIGINAL EDITION by Dylan Thomas, New Directions Books, 2010.

A CHILD'S CHRISTMAS IN WALES, by Dylan Thomas, illustrated by Trina Shart Hyman, Holiday House, 1985.

# A Brief Chronology of Thomas' Work

1934 - *18 Poems*

1936 - *25 Poems*

1939 - *The Map of Love*

*The World I Breathe*

1940 - *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*

1943 - *New Poems*

1946 - *Death and Entrances*

*Selected Writings of Dylan Thomas*

1950 - *Twenty-Six Poems*

1952 - *In Country Sleep, Collected Poems, 1934-1952*

1953 - *The Doctors and the Devils*

1954 - *Under Milkwood*

*Quite Early One Morning*

1955 - *Adventures in the Skin Trade and*

*Other Stories*

*A Prospect of the Sea*

*A Child's Christmas in Wales*

1957 - *Letters to Vernon Watkins*

1964 - *The Beach of Falesá*