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How Green Is "Fern Hill"?

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The structure of Dylan Thomas' "Fern Hill" is best seen as circular, an ideal form for a thematic statement concerning the cyclic relationship of youth, time, and death. One might get to the center of the poem by developing any one of several motifs: color, nature, childhood reverie and recollection, religious overtones, or the effect of time upon experience. Because these motifs are richly and intricately interwoven, it is difficult to separate them, it being understood that a specific image does not work exclusively within one motif but may cross over as well to play on images in other motifs. I have chosen to explore the images derived from the word green, because they seem central to the poem's development and cut across the other imagistic systems.

In even a quick and superficial reading, green leaps from the page to become the most obviously dominant color image of the poem (with gold a close second). Once the word itself has been introduced (line two), it radiates into numerous reflexive images. The word green appears seven times, occurring at least once in every stanza. By repetition it helps unify the stanzas. Green first appears in the title (although the reader may discover it there last) as the color of ferns. It also appears in the last two lines of the poem (directly in "green and dying" and indirectly in "sea"). Green is alpha and omega. It ties the two ends of the poem together into a circle. In addition to those items specifically and directly called green (grass, the persona as child, fire, and stable), several other items come to be thought of as green or partly green: apples, trees and leaves, (unripened) barley and hay, fields, water, and the sea. These are all golden as well, if gold is thought of as both color and light. The items of vegetation start as green but will ripen into gold; the pristine landscape is green, and the new sun is golden.

Green and gold, then, are thought of either as different stages of a single process or equated in chronological time.

Although the first stanza presents the persona as a child, an even earlier "time" is suggested in the title image. Ferns are first plants in archeological time. The title evokes primordial fern forests. Fern green is moderate yellow green (prefiguring the interplay between green and gold in the first stanzas) and slightly greener than apple-green.
In the first two stanzas the man-child enters the pristine fern forest. It is the first spring of man and the same spring recreated in each individual’s particular springtime, childhood. It is a landscape in which the child, unaware of time and mortality, is “as happy as the grass [is] green.” The child himself is identified as green: innocent, fresh, young, naive, uncut, unripe, carefree in the green world he inhabits. He is honored among the animals as prince and lord; he is huntsman and herdsman, playing, by time’s mercy, in a timeless and untroubled land. Close identification with nature produces in the child as it does in the primitive the wonder and awe of holiness. It is Eden before the fall, light without darkness, joy without knowledge.

In stanza three an apparently new motif appears which seems to be in contrast to the light-green-gold imagery of the earlier lines. Stars, moon, nocturnal birds, and darkness signal the nightfall of sleep, and the farm flies away in images representing the child’s relaxing hold on the conscious world. The new motif has been prepared for, in “night above the dingle starry,” in stanza one (a dingle is a wooded valley, suggesting both the green foliage and dark shadows of ferns), and by use of the nightjar, a nocturnal bird often called a fern owl. Light and dark are merged in the phrase, “horses flashing into dark.” The three stanzas represent the phases of the first cyclic movement in the poem: green to gold (stanza five suggests that first light is white) to darkness.

Stanza four projects the vegetation cycle onto all creation, brings the circle full round, as the green world is reborn, as it is each day, by the dawn of light. To the child each day holds the wonder of new creation. The cosmic cycle of nature, repeated daily in the sun’s death and rebirth, repeated seasonally in crops, is witnessed by the green child, unaware of his part in the cycle, growing golden and moving to darkness even as he wakes fresh to the new day. It is interesting that Thomas prefers maiden to Eve, stressing youth and rejecting evil. It is still before the fall, before awareness sullies the stillness. It is also interesting that Time does not become the serpent. Time is merciful to allow this golden heyday of innocence from knowledge. We are protected by now knowing at this point that time allows us so few such mornings before the children follow time out of grace.

“Lamb white” is a curious image in stanza six. It is, of course, innocence and sacrifice (a tie with the seasonal death-rebirth ritual as well as a Biblical echo), but it also plays on herdsman ironically. The child, lordly and princely over the flocks, is now the lamb of sacrifice. The relationship of the child to Time is analogous to the relationship of Christ to God. Both must be sacrificed. Through herdsman the lamb image also pulls green fields and grass into this section of the poem. The images of green, golden, light, and white now all resonate one on the other, becoming a kind of cosmic whole in the overall imagery of the poem.

“How green is ‘Fern Hill’?”

“Time held me green and dying/ Though I sang in my chains like the sea” is the poem’s natural and expected conclusion. Here green carries the connotations of all the earlier lines, plus the added one of the new context. Green is simultaneously the color of new grass and of the rotting corpse, of birth, and of death, of the spring that can only become winter eventually. We are chained always to time and mortality, yet we are held (the word means both fastened to and maternally cradled) for a time in ignorance by the mercy of Time. The forces that are life giving are death dealing, too. We are dying the moment we are born. We do not understand this in childhood but only later in a fall from grace, in the adult world of awareness and hindsight.
What is the poet’s reaction to this paradox? In other poems (“Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” and “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London”), Thomas has expressed the two poles of his attitude. In “Fern Hill,” he states the inevitable irony of green and dying, of being chained, limited, bound to mortality at that very moment we think to sing like the open sea. In this poem Thomas accepts the paradox. The poem celebrates the wonder and joy of childhood, the poet’s own Welsh boyhood and mankind’s as well. The predominate tone of the poem is still green, touched by the bittersweet knowledge of the last lines but green nonetheless. There is nothing harsh or bitter or dark about the poem, only an inevitable acceptance of the irony. That time allows us such few mornings as the one described in the poem only sharpens the memory of them for us. “After the first death, there is no other.”

Thus we see that green works on several levels of the poem: as pure color, as description of nature, as metaphor for childhood, with Biblical overtones (Eden, herdsman of the flocks), chronologically (fern forest to mould of the corpse), and thematically (birth-death as prefigured in the vegetation cycle). The poem is entirely successful in what it attempts to do. One’s initial impression of the poem is its lushness of language, but the language has precision and clarity as well as abundance. Although on the one hand, the texture of the poem is richly figured with connotation and nuance, on the other hand, the selectivity and precision of the language controls the poem. We get language working a double role: extending the poem from the personal to the transpersonal and, by selection and repetition, unifying the various motifs.

1The concluding line of “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London.”

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Cafeteria Idyl

With only a sheaf of Ezra Pound
Between him and mankind,
Among the longhairs and the cokes
He sat serenely blind
And, taking care to stop his ears
Against the wishwash of his peers,
He in cupped silence waited for
The time when every image sprang
From its own music and the surf
Leaped and the plumed gods sang.
Initiate at the mysteries, he
Would celebrate the rites of tone,
Happy, among these tables, to
Partake of his fresh world alone.

Brother Justin Paschal, FSC

Minneapolis, Minnesota