And death shall have no dominion

Dylan Thomas (1914–1953, England)

What the poem is about

Summary
This 20th century poem (see p. 13) emphatically declares that death has no supremacy over the soul. Even though our physical bodies die, our souls are immortal and cannot be conquered by death.

When we die, our bodies are left naked and they disintegrate. However, our souls become one with nature or the universe. Any mental infirmity we may have had on Earth, will be healed once we are dead. Even if our bodies drown at sea, the soul will be resurrected. Loved ones we have lost might be gone, but the love we shared with them is not gone – it lives on.

Even when our bodies cannot be recovered below the twisting sea, the soul does not die or suffer the same tortures. Torture may break the physical body but it cannot destroy a person’s spirit. The soul is stronger than faith or evil – it cannot be annihilated.

Death has no authority even though it takes away the life of the senses when the body’s life ends. While we may no longer hear the cry of gulls or the roar of the waves, death will not have power over us. Life is short, like that of a flower that blows away or no longer faces the rain. Despite this brevity, there is a triumph over death: our souls will be resurrected regardless of how mad or dead our bodies may have become. The everlasting spirit we possess will break out of our graves into the sun and last eternally, even longer than the sun.

Themes
- The immortality of the soul
- Physical death.

The way the poem is written

Form
- The poem has three nine-line stanzas or novetets.
- The title becomes a refrain that frames each stanza: “And death shall have no dominion”. The rest of each stanza consists of images supporting this firm pronouncement.

Poetic techniques
- Simile: “dead as nails” (l.24) compares the dead body to nails because both are hard and rigid.
- Alliteration: “death … dominion” (l.1, l.8, l.9, l.18, l.19 and l.27) – the explosive d-sound conveys force and helps to emphasise the denial of death’s power;
- “lovers be lost love” (l.8) also creates a strong rhythm;
- “lying long” (l.12) emphasises the length of time the body may lie under the sea, indicating that the body may linger but the soul will be saved from the body’s fate.

Antithesis: “dead as nails” (l.24) is contrasted with “hammer through daisies” (l.25) – while the body may be dead, the spirit will be resurrected from the grave with such force that it will be like a hammer pounding up through the flowers covering the grave. Nails are passive while hammers are active.

Paradox: “though they go mad they shall be sane” (l.6) – even if they were mad while alive, once they die, their malady will disappear and they will be sane again;
- “though lovers be lost love shall not” (l.8) – even though the people we love may die, love itself is eternal;
- “split all ends up they shan’t crack” (l.17) – the body may break under torture but the spirit is invincible.

Oxymoron: “unicorn evils” (l.16) – unicorns are legendary creatures said to be wild but good. The “unicorn” contrasts with “evil” to create a complex image, suggesting that if evil is concentrated to such a degree, it will impale the body.

Symbolism: “strapped to a wheel” (l.14) is a symbol of religious martyrdom – even those who suffer and die for their faith, have a soul stronger than religious faith.

Choice of words: “racks” (l.13) were torture machines that stretched the body and pulled it apart. This image therefore refers to the worst form of suffering the body can endure, emphasising that although the body may be dismembered, the spirit cannot be torn apart.

Enjambment: The second line in each stanza (“be one/with the man”, “windings of the sea/ they lying long”, “cry at their ears/or waves break”) runs onto the third. This underlines the sense of movement suggested by the words themselves.

Repetition: “And death shall have no dominion” is repeated in l.1, l.9, l.10, l.18, l.19 and l.27. This mimics the chorus-like effect one would find in a religious hymn or sermon and serves to emphasise death’s lack of power.

Chiasmus: is a special kind of repetition in which the phrasing is reversed. “Break in the sun till the sun breaks down” (l.26) suggests that the spirit will break through the grave into the sunlight and that it will outlast even the sun. It will last for all eternity, even longer than material entities.

Tone: assertive, defiant, triumphant.
First Additional Language contextual questions

1. Refer to lines 1–2 of the poem: “Why should I let work/Squat on my life?”
   a) Identify the figure of speech used in these lines. (1)
   b) Explain what the word “squat” tells us about the speaker’s attitude to work. (2)
2. Identify the weapon he considers using to rid himself of work. (1)
3. What is the effect of the alliteration in lines 10–11? (2)
4. Give one word to describe the people depicted in stanza 4. (1)
5. Refer to lines 25–26: “For something sufficiently toad-like/Squats in me too”.
   a) Explain in your own words what the “toad-like” thing is that “squats” in the speaker. (1)
   b) Explain what this “toad-like” thing prevents the speaker from doing. (1)
6. Refer to the poem as whole. Identify three reasons that people work. (3)

Home Language contextual and essay questions

1. Account for the poet’s use of rhetorical questions in the opening stanza. (2)
2. Critically discuss the use of sound devices in stanza 2. (3)
3. Discuss the inclusion of “lecturers” in the list of folk who live by their wits (stanza 3). (4)
4. Explain the irony in comparing the wives to whippets in stanza 5. (2)
5. Refer to lines 23–24: “the stuff/That dreams are made of”.
   Discuss the writer’s intention in these lines. (3)
6. Summarise the main idea expressed in the last stanza. (2)
7. Essay question: The poet makes a point about work, freedom and responsibility. Show how he uses the image of a toad to convey this message. Write your answer in an essay of 250–300 words. You could consider some or all of the following aspects in your answer:
   • The connotations associated with the image of a toad
   • How the toad imagery in stanzas 1 and 2 contrasts with the toad imagery in stanza 7. (10)
Poetry Prescribed provide therapeutic workshops promoting poetry as a self healing tool. It was really inspiring to share a table with like minded people and discuss some truly amazing poems, as well as create and get up and share that creation with the rest of the group. The latter was quite a daunting prospect for me personally but it proved to be a real buzz! The atmosphere generated in that room was one I truly felt at home in and I left the workshop with an extra spring in my step. I greatly admire what I understand Poetry Prescribed to be about and through this workshop I felt a greater sense of empowerment towards my own mental health and well-being. See more. Jade Lauren.