

Dylan Thomas' Poetry – A Critical Study (1914 – 1953)

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Abstract: *The present study comprises FIVE chapters. The opening chapter is entitled "The Poet and the Milieu, in which his early friends like Daniel Jones, E.W.Ted Lock, Pamela Hangfold Johnson, George Baker, G.S. Prasad, Edith Sitwell, Henry Gibson, Elder Olson who were to find a place and their impact on his writings. The second chapter entitled "The Creative Genius of the Poet" attempts to examine Thomas' achievement as a poet. The third chapter is entitled "Dylan Thomas' Imagery and Symbolism". His writings are interspersed with myths and allusions from classical as well as Renaissance Literature through the present day. The fourth chapter of Dylan Thomas is "The craftsmanship and the Poet", attempts to examine the influence of the Bardic tradition. The concluding chapter sums up the observations made in the preceding chapters. The chapter deals with my assessment of the poet's work besides certain evaluations made by significant writers.*

I. The Poet And The Milieu

Dylan Thomas expresses not only his poignant ideas but also displays the milieu and spirit of Welsh region through his verse. The long shadows of two World Wars of 1914-18 and 1939-45 left an indelible impression on the minds of sensitive readers. Science and Technology have transformed our lives. The Second World War split the world into two blocks, the East dominated by Russia and the West by America. Apart from the little wars going on in South-East Asia, middle East, and Africa, The world today is living under the threat of a third global and nuclear war Whose consequences may be too horrible to imagine.

There was a sense of loss, disenchantment, and frustration. The younger generation revolted against Victorian ideals and after the war they took up their pens smote hard against what they called the cant and humbug of traditional standards of life and art.

Aggressive realism became the hallmark of 'modern' literature as presented by the great masters like G.B. Shaw, Galsworthy, Barrie, Noel Coward, Terence Rattigan and others. English literature of the twentieth century, whether simply 'modern' or distinctively 'modernist' has been fed to a neat extent in theme as well as in technique by continental writers. The technique of Modern poetry headed by T.S.Eliot has been borrowed from the French symbolists.

The symbolists believed in oblique statement as opposed to the direct. Modern poetry was inaugurated by Eliot's "Waste Land". It is a significant landmark in English poetry as that of "Lyrical Ballads".

Modern poetry has also been influenced by the techniques of music, painting and other fine arts. The modern poets freely used the vocabulary and techniques of the other arts. The English poetry of the first half of the 20th century formed an appropriate literary context to the poetry of Dylan Thomas and an understanding of which is essential for a proper evaluation of his work.

The name "Dylan" came from one of the medieval prose romances in the Mabinosion. As a noun it implies "sea" or "ocean".

Dylan Thomas' father D.J.Thomas was a humble school master and wanted to be a poet. His father read Shakespeare aloud to Dylan before the child could speak. Whether or not this is the time, Dylan read nursery rhymes and some rhymes of Thomas' own making. Dylan Thomas - once said that the first poem of Thomas knew were nursery rhymes: "I wanted to write poetry in the beginning because I had fallen in love with words. The first poems I knew were nursery rhymes, and before I could read them for myself I had come to love just the words of them, the words alone... And these words were, to me as the notes of bells, the sounds of musical instruments, the noises of wind, sea and rain, the cattle of milk carts. I cared for the shapes of sound that their names, and then words describing their actions, made in my ears; I cared for the colours the words cast on my eyes". 1

Thomas wrote 18 poems in 1934 and 25 poems in 1936 which comprised "The Map of Love" (1939), "The World I Breathe" (1939), Portrait of the Artist as a "Young Dog" (1940), "New Poems" (1943), "Deaths and Entrances" (1946), "Selected Writings of Dylan Thomas"

(1946), "Twenty Six Poems" in 1950, "Country Sleep" (1952), "Collected Poems" (1934-52), "The Doctor and the Devils" (1953), "A Film Script, Under Milk Wood" (1954), a Drama "Quite Early One Morning" (1954), Adventures in the "Skin Trade and Other Stories" (1955), "A Prospect of the Sea" (1955), "A Child's Christmas in Wales" (1955), "Letters to Vernon Walkins" (1957). "And Death shall have no Dominion", "A Refusal to Mourn the Death by Fire, of a Child in London" - "The Map of Love" containing sixteen poems and seven prose tales, was published in 1939.

In 1946 came the finest poetry namely, "Deaths and Entrances" including "Poem in October", "Fern Hill" and "In My Craft or Sullen Art". Thomas wrote for the radio and films. Thomas broadcast on the "Stories of Walter de la Mare" which was published as part of a symposium in 1947. Thomas' two more creative and ambitious dramatic projects were the "Doctor and the Devils" (1953) a screen play, and "Under Milk Wood" a radio script - "Under Milk Wood" is more exciting of the two.

Louis Simpson :Studies of Dylan Thomas : The Macmillan Press Ltd., London ,1978 P. 6

II. The Creative Genius

Dylan Thomas is a great stylist, and lover of words, and a careful Craftsman. Thomas is able to give an impression of spontaneous overflow of poignant feelings. In fact, Thomas was a pioneer of a new movement in poetry called Neo-Romanticism and remained the leader of English poetry, after the Second World War, until his death in 1953. Many of Thomas's poems are to achieve a fusion of emotion and thought, soul and mind like the metaphysical poets. Conventional Romantic poetry is always associated with nature poetry.

Radhey L. Varshney: The Poetry of Dylan Thomas:" Doaba House Pub., Delhi (1982) P: 72 7 E.W. Tedlock "Dylan Thomas: The legend and the poet": W.H. Einemann Ltd. London (1960) P:146.

As John Ackerman remarks, "Dylan Thomas Life and Work" exact words One, I am a Welshman; Two: I am a drunkard; There: I am a lover of the human race, especially of women. This concise, humorous, and not untruthful account of himself was given by Dylan Thomas. It shows was aware of the extent of which Thomas temperament and Thomas imagination were the products of Welsh environment."

Ackerman: "The Welsh Background from Dylan Thomas": Background from Dylan Thomas": Thomas life and work: University Press (1964) P:25

This conception that 'Poet is for society' and 'Poetry as social institution pervaded and constituted the most important elements in bardic tradition. All the time their poetry had been addressed to God, Kings, Knights, Saints and Nuns. The bards never gave expression to their own feelings. The bard was a man with sensitive perception of the things around him (poet). They were preserved in manuscripts in the 12th, 14th and 15th centuries. These manuscripts were collected in the four Ancient Book of Wales:

As a poet of Nature, like Wordsworth and Whitman, Dylan Thomas is a keen and close observer of Nature. Nature to him is a part of human Phenomenon. His descriptions of Nature are new and startling. The sun in Thomas poetry becomes "man-eating; the beeches become 'vowel'. The poet for example, in the following passage formally attaches the terminology of language- 'Vowel' words 'syllabic' signature"speeches"signs' to the world of nature-water, women, birds, etc.

Among Thomas major nature - poems mention may be made of "Fern Hill", "Poem in October", "A Refusal to Mourn", "Lament", "A Winter's Tale", And "Death Shall Have no Dominion".

The lines from "A Refusal to Mourn", will convince the reader and the critic about Thomas's ability to exploit nature for spiritual message, calm and peace:

Never until the mankind making
Bird beast and flower
Fathering and all humbling darkness
Tells with silence the last light breaking
And the still hour
Is come of the sea tumbling in harness
And I must enter again the round -
Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound
Or saw may salt seed
In the last valley of rack cloth to mourn....

(A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London)

Poem of October" is one of the exquisite lyrics of Dylan Thomas. It is a birthday poem of Dylan. Thomas had been working as a writer of scripts for the film industry and also broadcasting from the B.B.C... The Lyric is remarkable for the way in which Dylan Thomas is able to look at nature with a child like wonder and curiosity.

My birthday began with the water-Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name
Above the farms and the white horses And I rose And I rose In rainy autumn.

..(A Poem in October)

For this reason, this is a deeply moving poem in which Thomas finds both himself as a man of thirty and sees in real time the child self of long age. Many my heart's truth Still be sung

On this high hill in a year's turning"

(A Poem in October)

"Fern Hill" Is deservedly, one of the most popular of Dylan Thomas' poems. Wonderfully rich and full of vitality, two words combine together in highly original ways to picture the joyful exhilaration of a child." "And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
In the sun that is young once only,
Time let me play and be
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
And the Sabbath rang slowly,
In the pebbles of the holy streams!... – (Fern Hill)

'Green and golden' - 'Golden' brings ripe fruit to mind and 'Green' not Only the colour of nature but asserts that 'Sabbath rang slowly'- Sunday, a Day of rest and worship. A holy day which is devoted to the worship of God,

The maker and his son, the saviour Jesus Christ. E -ature poem. The magical landscape of two poems has a two-fold. The poem also celebrates the mysterious power of Nature. The expressions of mystery and power come to a climax in the stanza four:
And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all
Shining, it was Adam and maiden,...

(Fern Hill)

One can say that, Dylan Thomas may be seen as a rustle employment of oral power to subdue and involve. Dylan shows his schizoid inversions, by charming, clowning and magic.

'At last the soul from its foul mouse hole,
Slunk pouting out when the limp time come... '

(Lament)

III. Welsh Poetry - Imagery And Symbolism

Welsh Literature in English:

The phrase 'Welsh Writing in English' has replaced the earlier 'Anglo-Welsh literature' because many Welsh Writers in English have felt that the latter usage failed to give "Welsh Status to Welsh people who, not speaking Cymreag, nevertheless do not feel at all English" (2)

There is no final, clear definition of what constitutes a Welsh Writer in English, or Anglo-Welsh author. Obviously it includes Welshmen whose first language is English, rather than Welsh, such as Swansea born Dylan Thomas (1914-53) and novelist.

In the beginning, Raymond Gardick discovered sixty-nine Welsh men and women who wrote in English prior to the twentieth century (7) Defydd Johnston thinks in "debatable whether such writers belong to a recognizable Anglo-Welsh literature as opposed to English literature in general"(8). An Anglo-Welsh tradition are found by some in the novels of Allen Raine (Anne Adalisa (Evans) Puddicamble) (1836-1908) from New Castle Emlyn, Carmarthenshire, whose work — Stephen Knight proposes "realized a real, if partial. separate identity and value for a Welsh Social Culture".

However, many see the Carmarthenshire born satirical short-story writer and novelist Caradoc Evans (1878-1945) as the first or first modern -Welsh Writer in

English. His Short story collections *My People* (1915) and *Capel Sion* (1916) were highly controversial, and Roland Mathias bitterly comments that "No other Anglo-Welsh Prose Writer.. displayed such ill will to Wales or to "Welsh people"

IV. The Art And The Craftsmanship Of The Poet

Most of Dylan Thomas' poetry "Eighteen Poems (1934) and Twenty Five Poems (1936) are re-working of the material contained in the Four-Swansea Notebooks. As Thomas tells us, for him the writing of poetry was a, "Sullen Craft" and not an art or a matter of inspiration. This craft could become creative and reach the level of highest art".

Thomas's last English volume of new poems "Deaths and Entrances" came out in 1946. It increased the impression of variety, and of steady development. It contained a remarkable number of successful poems of notably different kinds. One kind, in particular, at once caught the fancy of a wide public, it is a kind which very roughly, throwing out words at a venture, one might call the recaptured, childish, landscape, semi-fairy tale, semi-ode kind: more concisely, the long poem of formal celebration. Such for instance are seven late poems by Thomas. 'Poem is October' A Winter's tale 'Fern Hill'; 'In Country Sleep'; 'Oven Sir John's Hill'; Poem on Thomas Birthday, "In the White Giant's Thigh". All these poems have a larger and looser, a more immediately apprehensible shythrical movement than most of Thomas's earlier works. They do not aim at dark, packed, and concentrated, but at bright, expensive effects.

In his diction, one can notice the tilting, rhythmic style in the following lines of the poem "A Poem on his Birthday".

I hear the bouncing hills
Grow larked and greener at berry brown
The mansouled fiery islands! Oh,
Holier than their eyes,
And my shining men no more alone
As a sail out to die "

(Poem on Thomas Birthday)

The little poem of "Deaths and Entrances" is for instance, almost certainly on the whole a failure. If only for the reason that Thomas does not provide us with clues enough to find out what exactly is happening in the poem and yet does provide us with clues enough to make us bother about what is happening. The setting is certainly the bombing of rails on London:

"On almost the incendiary eve
Of several near deaths,
When one at the great least of your best loved
And always known must leave
Lions and fires of his flying breath
Of your immortal friends

(Death and Entrances)

Apart from the extraordinary complexity of this rhyme scheme, the reader should notice that the vast majority of the words in the poem, most of the exceptions being participles, are monosyllables. The only word that is more than a disyllable is 'conversation', and it is also the most abstract word in the poem and the word that, as it were, states the poet's theme. No doubt any skilful craftsman might invent and carry through form like this as a metrical exercise.

From the man on the stairs and the child by his bed.

(The conversation of prayers)

A reader can notice that the theme of the poem is the divine innocence of a child. But it is mainly a nature poem. The magical landscapes of the poem have a twofold effect. The child roaming the countryside finds time moving slowly through long morning of

pleasure. The noise of water passing over the pebbles is like church bells calling the boys to worship. Thomas wants to convey to Thomas readers that the child's awakening to the beauty of nature has a divine significance, and that all human joy is holy. The poem also celebrates the mysterious power of nature. The expressions of mystery and power came to a climax in stanza four.

"Shining at were Adam and maiden..."

And also in the last stanza

"Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days,

That time would take me

Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,

In the moon that is always rising..."

(Fern Hill)

V. Perennial Importance Of Dylan Thomas — A Critical Estimate

"Innocence is always a paradox, and Dylan Thomas presents, in retrospect, the greatest paradox of our time" says Paul Ferris.¹ C.B. Cox, opines; "at a time when the language of poetry has seemed to be in danger of being pulled apart between the meaningless exuberance of surrealism on the one hand, and the self-conscious precision of poets influenced by positivist theory on the other, he has achieved a balance between the two, in Thomas best poems, while retaining and even drawing our attention to the separateness of both".

1 Paul Ferris: "Dylan Thomas: Hodder and Stoughton. (1978) P: 308

Dylan Thomas is a poet, who became a legendary after death. After his demise functions went on being organized. Thomas gained popularity at a time when Auden – Eliot school of poetry was on the decline. The socialism of the thirties was dead, and there was a craze for the olden lyricism and Romanticism. A reader notices that, Thomas poetry is under constant evaluation since his death in 1953. Thomas is a poet for the masses as well as for the intellectuals whereas Eliot and Auden or Yeats are the poets for the intellectual only.

Cazamian opines, "Dylan Thomas, whom many good judges to-day acknowledge as the most brilliant poet produced by Great Britain for two generations, was Welshman and none would dream of denying that the Celtic heritage counted for much in Thomas lyrical elegance... Nurtured by Joyce, the Bible, and Freud Dylan Thomas derived original strength from the threefold source. A strange poetry that acts in the manner of a sonorous spell. Thomas themes were gradually decanted and fortified. He was the singer of an incomprehensible, dynamic, and cruel world, but of one in which childhood innocence tends to be a profoundly religious insight into the enigmas of birth, death, reproduction, the gracefulness of the young shoot and the victory of the every gnawing worm".

In fact as the poem continues, Thomas is describing here a sort of 'Pantheistic' Eucharist. In the second stanza, fruit becomes "flesh" and its juice becomes "blood".

"Once in this wind the summer blood

Knocked in the flesh that decked the vine".

("And Death Shall Have No Dominion")

And again the stanza ends with the motion of destruction - a sort of sacrificial process, necessary to human preservation, and creation. And in this last line, Man broke the sun, pulled the wind down. Actually, it is not The Sun, and the wind which man pulls down when he plucks the grapes, but the workings of these within the fruits. Just as the first line of the first stanza suggests the Gospel passage, "This does in remembrance of me". (St. Luke 22, Verse 9), so the last line of the last stanza recalls Christ's other statement, as reported by the Apostle, on the occasion of the last supper.

Dylan Thomas lyric owes much to the metaphysics. There is a net-work of James which clash and conflict. Images of light and dark, of birth and death, of destruction and creation of womb and tomb the opposite poles of creation and destruction jostle in Thomas poetry. Finally, a good many of Thomas poems has the dramatic structure which marks a metaphysical strain. Dylan Thomas has left a lasting imprint on English language and poetry, which would never be the same again. Dylan is a poetic personality undeniably distinct and original, but also flawed and tragic.

A true reader can say that Thomas with his increasing fame as a poet attracted the attention of the B.B.C. and the success of the portrait made his entry into the world of films as a scriptwriter inevitable. Thomas voice was immensely rich and resonant, but he was the serious and impersonal poet who died young, like Keats. Thomas' mind is not a clock and it does not tell the fleeting minute. The poetry of Dylan Thomas is full of the deepest-pain ofcourse there are a few moments of relief.

Bibliography

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