



RESEARCH ARTICLE

RETROSPECTION AND INTROSPECTION IN DYLAN THOMAS POEMS

Ms. RAJARAJESWARI. M

Assistant Professor, Department of Science and Humanities, Rajiv Gandhi College of Engineering & Technology, Kirumampakkam, Puducherry, India



ABSTRACT

The present paper focuses on Dylan Thomas has handled both the techniques to project the past through the present and also to give his opinion of the state of the world now in general and then in particular with reference to his own life experiences. A critique of his three poems will amply illustrate his masterly handling of these two techniques in his poetry.

Keywords: Childhood, retrospect, introspect.

Ms. RAJARAJESWARI. M

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INTRODUCTION

There are three distinct phases in the development of English verse between 1930s and 1960s, which correspond roughly to the divisions of the decades. The first runs from the publication of Auden's *Poems* in 1930s to his *Another Time* in 1940s. The second, lasting from 1940s until the early 1950s covers the publication of a mass of verse inspired by the Second World War. The third marks the appearance of poets who were younger when the War began and who are sharply differentiated in many ways from the two previous generations of poets though the 1930s and 40s saw the evolution of a 'neo-romantic' movement often in declared opposition to the New Country Poets. The period between 1930s and the outbreak of the Second World War do have certain features in common with the period, which produced the Romantic Movement in England. The new Romantics of the late 30s proved to be similarly diverse; what they had in common was a sense of close identification with the Surrealist movement. In the late 30s and 40s a self-consciously 'Romantic' revival took place, as a reaction against the New Country Poets.

The Apocalyptic understandably saw themselves at odds with Pound, Eliot, and the new country poets; as they were influenced by the poetry of the 30s. The poet who was most obviously an Apocalyptic in style, and yet-despite the adulatory notices he received from the group-remained aloof, was Dylan Thomas (1914-54).

Dylan Thomas: His Life and Works

Dylan Thomas was born in Wales in 1914 and died while on a reading tour of America in 1953. He was the son of a Swansea schoolmaster, a teacher of English in a grammar school, who had himself poetic ambitions. He had been a poet of considerable reputation for twenty years and, with publication of his *Collected Poems*, was at the height of his fame. He was one of the two or three poets of his time whose name,

like that of Eliot or Auden, was familiar to the man in the street. *Under Milk Wood*, his radio play, introduced his works to an even wider audience than that which appreciated his poetry. Thomas had become, as few poets of our age have become, a kind of legend. He was the pattern of the poet as a bohemian, and this was in many ways a misfortune for him. As Macbeth says, he is the greatest Welsh poet of the century and the Welsh quality of high-flown rhetoric (hwyl) is perhaps behind what one admires in his poems (210). Thomas was a magnificent reader of his own poems and for those who have heard recordings of his voice it is almost impossible to imagine other readers for some of his major poems. He was a remarkably conscientious craftsman for whom meaning was bound up with pattern and order.

His biographers recognize that something went wrong with him right in his childhood. He suffered in childhood from some psychological trauma, which accounts for the observations in his life and conduct. According to some psychologists, in the nature of 'compensation' for the early wrong he had suffered, he drew on the Bible and on universal folk themes rather than on obscure late classical writers. He belongs to that company of artists who destroy themselves and who make art in spite of or because of their self-destruction (Press 223).

His reputation as a poet rests on his poetic volumes. In his earliest volume, *Eighteen Poems* (1935), he spoke of the process of writing a poem as one of stripping away darkness, of struggling upto light.

Twenty-five Poems (1936), the second volume, brought him on the whole more praise and more fame than his first. It shows Thomas experimenting with new themes, new images, and new styles. Thomas's third volume, *The Map of Love*, which contains prose pieces as well as poems, appeared in 1939 on the verge of the Second World War. As Fraser points out, the fourth volume *Deaths and Entrances* (1946) increases the impression of variety, and of steady development, which the earlier volumes give. It contains a remarkable number of successful poems of notably different kinds (20).

The later poems like "*Poem in October*", "*A Winter's Tale*", "*Fern Hill*", "*Over Sir John's Hill*", "*Poem on his Birthday*", "*In the White Giant's Thigh*", have a larger and looser, a more immediately apprehensible rhythmical movement than most of Thomas's earlier work. They do not aim at dark, packed and concentrated, but at bright, expansive effects.

RETROSPECTION AND INTROSPECTION IN DYLAN THOMAS

The word "retrospection" is a combination of "retro" and "spect". The word "retro" is a prefix from Latin meaning "backward" (retrogress). The word "spect" is from Latin "spicier" meaning "to look". Retrospection is the action, process, or faculty of looking back on things past. It also means a survey of past events or experiences. Similarly the word "introspection" is composed of "intro" and "spect". The word "intro" is a prefix, from Latin meaning "in worldly", "within". Introspection is observation or examination of one's own mental and emotional state, mental processes, etc. In other words, it is an act of looking within oneself. It also refers to the quality, tendency, or disposition to do this. Dylan Thomas has handled both the techniques to project the past through the present and also to give his opinion of the state of the world now in general and then in particular with reference to his own life experiences. A critique of his three poems will amply illustrate his masterly handling of these two techniques in his poetry.

"Fern Hill"

"Fern Hill" serves as a retrospection-window for Thomas to have a peep into his past and to bring a contrast between his past and his present through the process of introspection. "Fern Hill" is narrated by the mature poet, who reflects systematically on the delights of childhood and its symbiotic relationship with the natural world, in the adolescent's nascent sexuality, and, ultimately, on the loss of childhood innocence and the realization and mortality.

"Fern Hill" was the name of a farm owned by the poet's aunt, Ann Jones. It was a dairy farm in the Llanbri in Carmarthenshire, Wales. The as a boy spent many summers with his aunt at Fern Hill. It is the death of this aunt, which is the subject of the poem, "After the Funeral". Fern Hill, the poem abounding with nostalgia of the past and the dead childhood days of the poet, is the best expression of the retrospective nature of the poetic man Dylan Thomas. The excitement and innocence of childhood are revived. The formal way of presentation is blended with rich meaningful interpretive and synthetic images. He compares

his vision of the world to Adam's vision of Eve when he saw her for the first time. But this vision was not to last. Inexorably, time made him grow. And the world no longer appeared fresh or wonderful. The world appears glorious in childhood and becomes drab and ugly to adult eyes is a theme treated by many poets and mystics. Wordsworth's *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* is a well-known poem dealing with this subject. Dylan Thomas recalls in "Fern Hill" the world as he saw it during long summers at his aunt's farm in Wales during his boyhood. The description starts with the narration of his happy boyhood days in which he was jubilant, carefree and was in an untroubled unhappiness. With the progression in the poem we find the poet's understanding of the philosophy of life that at "the mercy of time he was green and golden". The poet's identification as one with those who spend their life in nature veils his longing to be once more innocent and happy as those whom he appreciates. Vivid memories remind him of the beautiful effect created by light suddenly falling on tress as well as on daisies in meadows and on fields of barely.

Waking up, the poet would find the farm at his side. Fresh from his sleep, the poet would find everything bright and beautiful. The world would seem to him as wonderful and lovely as Eve appeared to Adam when he first saw her. The sky would look fresh and new, and the sun equally novel and interesting. He felt, he says, as the first-created horses would have felt on seeing the first dawn. Nothing disturbed his happiness. The house was gay. He liked the company of birds and animals. He could never get away from the feeling that the clouds and the sun were ever new. He was full of eager desires. He did not know that such care-free happiness would not last long. The poet's identification as one with those who spend their life in nature veils his longing to be once more innocent and happy as those whom he appreciates. He calls himself "a prince" and to him those places and those times were the Eden and the beatitude before the fall. He considers the innocence of the childhood a holy gift and those were the lamb-white days in which he was ignorant that he was a mortal and that life was full of limitations. Other might have regarded him as foolish to express so much joy under these circumstances. But like the sea he did not mind singing in chains. The joy felt at the moment was the important things. The poem thus celebrates "the glory and joy of life despite the inevitability of eventual death" (Macbeth 226).

"POEM IN OCTOBER"

"Poem in October" is another poem that deals with the themes of retrospection and introspection. In "Poem in October" he looks at the small town where he lived on the morning of his thirtieth birthday in October. Suddenly the present scenery that he sees before him mingles with the memory of the mornings that he saw in childhood long ago. He experiences a strange thrill at this fusion of the past and the present in his mind on the morning of his thirtieth birthday in October.

Of the more limpid, open-worked poems of the third period, "Poem in October" can stand as an excellent example. The poet, on his thirtieth birthday, is remembering his past and seeing himself in the familiar Welsh landscape as a boy with his mother.

It was my thirtieth year to heaven
 Woke to my hearing from harbor and neighbour wood
 And the mussel pooled and the heron
 Priested Shore
 The morning beckon
 With water praying ad call of seagull and rook and the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall
 Myself to set foot
 That second
 In the still sleeping town and set forth.

It is the morning of his thirtieth birthday. The poet wakes up early listening to the various sounds coming from the harbor and also from the wood nearby. While the poet is walking through this beautiful scene listening to the sound of the autumn rains, a strange mingling of the present and the past, of actuality and memory, of country and sea, and of sun and rain takes place. In his imagination he sees the past and present scenes simultaneously. The memory of his childhood days brings tears to his eyes. The tears begin to roll down his cheeks. His thoughts now return to the actual present. He remembers that it is an October

morning and that he is taking a walk on the morning of his thirtieth birthday. One wish is uppermost in his mind. He would like to give beautiful expression to the feelings of innocence and sense of mystery and awe that he used to feel long ago in his childhood days once again, before the year is out. The poem reveals the great poetic sensibility of Dylan Thomas. The unusual sensations of, and the strange fusion of the past and the present are beautifully brought out by the poet. He now meditates on life and the impending death. The process of introspection begins.

The horror of death is transcended; a poem is made which has freed itself from the Whirlpool of its author's obsessive fantasies. It is, of course, true that even these poems derive some of the poignant beauty from Thomas's unremitting awareness of death. He considers life in its [proper perspective] and feels confident, cheerful and optimistic.

He celebrated the wonder of creation all the more splendidly because he knew that it would be swallowed up in universal doom. We find it hard to believe in the booming rhetoric of "And death shall have no dominion", whereas we respond to the ambiguity, the total acceptance of mortality, implicit in 'After the first death, there is no other', "Poem in October" is an example of his technical innovation as a poet. The language is highly musical and the poem reveals Dylan Thomas's unusual gift for absolute poetry.

"THE FORCE THAT THROUGH THE GREEN FUSE DRIVES THE FLOWER"

This poem deals mainly with the aspect of introspection. He meditates on life, growth and death. The point of the poem is to suggest that all life, animal and vegetable, is subject to the same laws of nature, and that all things grow old, decay and die. "This idea is far from original, but the severe, slow rhetoric of the poem give this message an air of great weight and authority" (Macbeth 223). The theme is analogous to the correspondence between the microcosm ("the little world": man) and macrocosm ("the big world": the Universe). "Each stanza of the poem reiterates the principal theme of the identity between the energies of the Universe and those by which man lives" (Thomas, C.T. 406). The poet also expresses his inability to communicate this truth, probably because he is handicapped by limitations inherent in language, or probably because for the profundity of the truth that has to be expressed.

The poem reveals the animistic (belief that natural objects or phenomena of Universe possess soul or consciousness) identity of nature and man. Dylan Thomas always tried to reconcile the individual with the general process. The poem also fuses the forces of creation and destruction. The early poem shows Dylan Thomas's compassion for all mortal things and the poet yearns to communicate with all mortal entities. He looks at every manifestation of god as a link in a long chain of existence. Man dreamed of a timeless paradise of love beyond death to console himself for the limitations of mortality. The poem ends in despair with a deliberately ugly phallic image. Blake's symbols give a clue to interpret Dylan Thomas's symbols in the poem. The force that destroys the poet has been destroying wind and water. He exults in the kinship rather than commemorates the fellow victims.

Man is the only animal who has the power to use reason. Thomas reveals this in his broodings on human life. The poet is aware of a sacramental universe in which the common things of life serve to illustrate profound mysteries. Hence all created things, whether blades of grass or sea-waves breaking on to the shore or "the fishing holy stalking heron", are of themselves holy and are a witness to the creator. With all his reasoning and perspicacity, man still finds it difficult to unravel the mysteries of life in totality. Perhaps he could hardly succeed in future too.

Dylan Thomas as an experimentalist

Thomas's achievement as a poet and his personality as a man are so inextricably linked that we can scarcely understand the one without studying the other. It seems likely that the pattern of his emotional development was dictated by certain childhood experiences, or even ordained by his genetical endowment. His imagination permits him to enter into areas of experience previously unexplored or to unveil new aspects of perfectly common experiences. According to Cohen, "A naturally unintellectual poet, he allowed a dream-like association of images, many of them taken from childhood memories, to form the connecting thread on which a poem was to be hung" (167).

Thomas experimented with form and language. He innovated stylistic devices. For instance, he titled a poem as "A grief ago" wherein he has placed the word "grief" in an uncommon linguistic environment. He has many unusual coinages to his credit like the word "summery" in "Poem in October", meaning "having the qualities of summer". He uses a phrase "green chapels" in the same poem to refer to "woods". The nouns "priest" ("Poem in October") and "leech" ("The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives The Flower") are used as verbs. The imagery is often violent and the language is mostly intense.

Dylan Thomas uses imagery as a tool to convey his experiences that are normally ineffable and intangible. His imagery is so complex that at times his ideas become obscure and paves the way for multiplicity of interpretations. Dylan Thomas drew upon the human body, sex and Old Testament for much of his imagery and complex wordplay, and his verses are splendidly colorful and musical. The depth and intensity of his underlines his metrical experiments - all suggest that Thomas had the makings of a great poet especially later when he learned to impose discipline on his writing, and to make his imagery less a matter of his private understanding.

The truth is that Thomas is neither a whirling romantic nor a metaphysical imagist, but a poet who uses pattern and metaphor in a complex craftsmanship in order to create a ritual of celebration. How much a poem of the kind owes to the imagery and to the cadence, as well as to the careful patterning, can be seen at once if one takes the perhaps extreme method of turning its paraphrasable content into conventional rhymed verse (Cox 16).

The note of ritual, of sacrament, of celebration, achieved through his special use of imagery and by other devices, is central in Thomas's poetry. His earlier poems often fail by being too packed with metaphor suggestive of identity. Later Thomas naturally avoided close packing of the imagery, and chose a style closer to that of "Poem in October" than to that of his earlier poems. The Bible is a most important influence in Anglo-Welsh writing, and is the source of a great part of Thomas's imagery. Thomas's poetry is born of the contradiction between glory and decay, between entrance into the world and death, between flesh and ghost.

The following lines are an index of his glorious and complex imagery.

The lips of time leech to the foundation head;

("The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives The Flower")

The hand... that ropes the blowing wind

Hauls my shroud sail.

("The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives The Flower")

My birthday began with the water –

Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name...

("Poem in October")

It was my thirtieth

Year to heaven stood there then in the summer noon

Though the town below lay leaved with October blood

("Poem in October")

Times let my hail and climb

Golden in the heydays of his eyes

("Fern Hill")

In Corcoran's opinion, "Thomas's poems are attempting to reticulate some area of primary cellular development, to return to an origin by opening a poetic space or field in which images may stir, congeal, combine, split off, recombine, lapse, dissolve and circulate in a process of quivering or pulsating genesis imitative of the process of bodily genesis itself. (43 & 44)

CONCLUSION

Dylan Thomas wrote very slowly, often at the rate of only one line a day after hours of hard sober work, and he describes his poems in the introduction to his *Collected Poems* (1952) as written "for the love of man and in praise of god" (Macbeth 210). Macbeth further says that "Apart from his painstaking craftsmanship, so strangely at odds with the popular legend of his life, Dylan Thomas's poetry is perhaps especially interesting

for its optimism. No other poet writing in English since Yeats has responded to life with such a consistently affirmative and positive note. This may in part account for Thomas's continuing appeal to readers who don't normally pay much attention to poetry" (210).

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