

A glimpse into the life and poetry of Dylan Thomas

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Abstract

My research paper focuses upon the life and poetry of Dylan Thomas who, no doubt was born in an age of two World Wars, but he did not inherit the pessimistic thoughts from the disillusioned atmosphere caused by the wars. Through his poems, he has done a dual task of accepting the inevitability of death and loss and encouraging people to come to terms with the reality of loss and death and confront these directly and optimistically. Apart from this, my research paper focuses upon Dylan's deep attachment to his family, his aunt for whom he has composed poems which symbolize a token of honour given by him to them. Thomas' love for Wales and Welsh language is clearly visible in his poetry which shows that he was deeply attached to his roots. My paper also focuses upon his use of symbols, images, alliteration and plain language in his poetry.

Keywords: world wars, disillusioned, inevitability, optimistically, welsh, wales

Introduction

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) ^[13] is not only the greatest of the poets of Wales but also the most fascinating literary figures of Modern England. Thomas is known to the public not only as a writer but also as one possessing the talent of an entertainer and "a first rate broadcaster, particularly of his own short stories based on his childhood in Wales" (Fraser 3). He was also an extremely gregarious man and had a warm and lovable personality. Thus, he became a legendary poet of the Modern age. Dylan was born on 27th October, 1914. He spent his whole childhood and his youth in 5 Cwmdonkin Drive, on the top of a hill by a park in the suburban district of Swansea, called the Uplands. His father was a teacher in a grammar school and he was also blessed with poetic gifts. Thus, we can say that Dylan must have inherited some of his poetic gifts from his father which he later on polished.

As a child, Dylan was sickly. He suffered from weak lungs owing to which he was not able to attend his school regularly. Later on, in 1925 he was admitted to the Grammar school, Swansea, where his father taught English. Though, he was not brilliant in his studies, but he did well in his English subject. He showed interest in amateur dramatics as well and actively participated in them. Although his father wanted Dylan to get a scholarship to a university but Dylan instead of fulfilling his father's wishes, took up the job of a reporter in Swansea newspaper. In the later part of his life, Dylan did several other jobs like screen writing and broadcasting to overcome his financial difficulties.

Thomas' Welshness is an important part of his personality. He never spoke or understood Welsh language as he studied only English but still Welsh remained a part of his blood stream. Thomas himself sums up his personality:

one; I am a Welshman; two I am a drunkard; three: I am a lover of

human race, especially of women. (Cox 25)

His knowledge of The Bible and his intellectual and religious attitude to life were typically Welsh in nature. Moreover, his love for the verbal music and for the extravagant phrase and witty exaggeration shows the impact of Welsh culture on him. The Welsh have a very strong family sense and this trait can be traced in Dylan Thomas' character as well. He was deeply attached to his family members and his love for them can be perceived by the readers in his poems like "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night" in which Dylan expresses his love for his dying father and advises him to put up a brave face before his coming death. In another poem "After the Funeral", Dylan's attachment to his dead aunt, Ann Jones is seen as he says:

Morning smock of the spade...
Shakes a desolate boy who slits his throat
In the dark of the coffin. (CP 80)

Thomas began writing poetry out of his interest in the poetical activity. He came into the lime light when he won prizes for the poems that he had contributed to the magazine, *Sunday Referee*, edited by Victor Neuberg. This magazine finally financed the publication of his first volume of poems, *Eighteen Poems*. Then in 1936, his second book of verse, *Twenty Five Poems*, was published. This publication made him popular instantly and 3000 copies of it were sold within a year. In this volume, Thomas experimented with new themes, new images as well as new styles. This volume includes famous poems like, "And Death Shall Have No Dominion", "The Hand that Signed the Paper", "Should Lanterns Shine" etc. In the same year, his other book of poems and stories, *The Map of Love*, was published. It was the least popular of all his volumes but it contained some of the poet's famous poems

like "After the Funeral". The prose portion of this volume was not much of a success. In 1946, his last English volume of poems, *Death and Entrances*, was published. In this volume, he wrote some emotional poems in which he shows a passionate love for nature. Some of his poems in this section are linked with his childhood memories like "Fern Hill" or "Poem in October". "These poems do not aim at dark, packed and concentrated but at bright, expansive effects" (Fraser 20). This book includes some shorter poems like, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London", the two very short personal poems, "To Others than You" and "In My Craft or Sullen Art". For Dylan, the process of writing poetry is one of:

Stripping away darkness, of struggling up to light, and also of that struggle as taking place through dialectic of images. (Fraser 9)

His poetry has no social references and is apparently unrelated to any tradition. Thomas resisted the literary traditionalism of the Eliot school as he wanted no part of it:

Poetry to him was not a civilizing maneuver, a replanting of the gardens; it was a holocaust, a sowing of the wind. (Shapiro 171)

He was anti tradition by nature, by place and by his will. Although he has been considered to be a part of the Apocalyptic poets but their influence on his poetry is not clearly evident.

In his Preface to *Collected Poems*, he spoke of his poems being written "for the love of man and in praise of God" (Fraser 9). Thus, his poems identify the body of man with the body of world. His best poems affirm the unity of life (Man with nature, growth with decay and life with death). He sees life as a continuous process, sees the workings of biology as a magical transformation producing unity of identity, identity out of unity, the generation linked with one another and man linked with nature as we see in:

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer. (CP 8)

Dylan makes extensive use of symbols in his poems because he seeks to convey the complex psychological state to his readers. His symbols are his own as we see in "Fern Hill", the farm of his aunt is symbolic of Garden of Eden and just as when Adam & Eve lost their innocence, they lost the Garden of Eden, in the same way Dylan after having grown up has lost the happiness of his childhood which he enjoyed on the farm of his aunt. His other symbols include 'light' in "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines" as symbolic of knowledge of life and death, 'stale fern' and 'stuffed fox' in "After the Funeral" as symbolic of the idea that life is in continuity while death is an interlude. Apart from being a good symbolist, he was also a great artist in the use of words. He revised and polished his words till he achieved perfection. Dylan avoids using exaggerated and uncommon vocabulary. His language is

marked by simplicity and clarity. Dylan, being influenced by the Metaphysicals, employs the images of pain, disease and death in his poems. Like the Metaphysicals, he brings together in his poems opposite concepts. The images of light and dark, of birth and death, of destruction and creation, of womb and tomb etc recur in his poems. Many of these images are literal while others are symbolic.

The poetry of these years became poetry of revolt and this revolt could be seen in the content as well as in its form. Before this period, there existed romantic tradition in which the poets constituted an imaginary world of their own which sheltered them from the harsh realities of the real world. They would sometimes become a nightingale and fly into the dark forests for days at a stretch or they could hear "voices from the clouds" ("Daffodils" by Wordsworth) and could see daffodils dancing before that "inward eye" ("Daffodils"). The romantic poets didn't care about the social or political conditions. But the after effects of the First World War and the threat of second war shattered the romantic tradition of poetry to pieces. The poets turned away from the decadent romantic tradition and began to see life in its naked reality. They began to write about the subjects that actually existed and that affected the lives of great many people like the heavy thud of the bus traffic, the creaking of tramcars, the rattling noise of railway trains, the drone of an aero plane etc. find place in the modern poetry. In the works of poets like T.S. Eliot, the modern world is portrayed as the waste land where there is squalor and dinginess spread all around. A large number of poems were being written to show the meaningless and uncontrolled life of the modern man as in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by Eliot and "The Unknown Citizen" by Auden. The realism in the subject matter of the poetry made the poets reject the highly ornate and artificial poetic style of the romantics. They preferred to make use of that language and words that resemble our everyday speech.

In such an atmosphere, the poetry of Dylan Thomas takes its place and it can also not escape the influence of the prevailing social conditions. He, as a poet of the twentieth century, prefers to see life as a whole and faces the stark realities of the life squarely instead of escaping into a dream world where there is bliss, happiness and no problem. The very themes of Dylan Thomas' poetry throw light upon the fact that he was not an escapist. He was a person who himself had seen the deteriorating conditions of the world around him, so he could not shut his eyes to the horrors and fears of the wars. As he noticed that people had been gripped by the fear of death and loss of their lives, he, by means of his poems, tried to convince them that both losses as well as death are part of one's life. This shows that his optimistic vision of life failed to be hampered by the mood of disillusionment that has dominated the minds of society as a whole. He himself says that

My poetry is... the record of my individual struggle from darkness to some measure of light (Tindall 24).

Dylan could well understand the human psychology and so he in poems like, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire of a Child in London", "Ceremony after a Fire Raid", has raised

the death to the level of martyrdom. In both the poems, the death of the characters has been caused by air raids. Dylan knew that the people of modern society were fearful of dying such a death, therefore he, in his poems, raised the stature of both the girls to that of martyrs. In his other poems like "And Death Shall Have No Dominion", "The Force That Through The Green Fuse Drives The Flower", the poet highlights the idea that every life contains the element of death and every death contains the element of rebirth. Through such poems, he wanted to induce a ray of hope in the hearts of people living under the fear of death and show that death is a part of human cycle and therefore it is bound to come to every human being. Moreover, he wanted to convince them that the physical death of the person would not exterminate him completely as every death is followed by rebirth and that after death, a man can continue to live in the memories of his near and dear ones, an idea that he has highlighted in the poem "After the Funeral". In this poem, he states that the memories of his aunt, Ann Jones will continue to live in his mind, even though she is physically dead.

His poetry also shows that loss like death is also an integral part of man's life. A man in his life loses many things- his innocence, his happiness etc and Dylan says that such losses are part and parcel of a person's life. In his poems, Thomas has shown undergoing losses of different kinds but he ends these poems on a positive note and says that all these losses are inevitable. Therefore, a man needs to accept his losses and must try to come to terms with them. Then in poems like "In My Craft or Sullen Art" and "The Hunchback in the Park", he states the idea that the loss of acknowledgement and loss of physical incompleteness can also be overcome. Therefore, in none of his poems, he has given us a pessimistic thought that abounds the poetry of his contemporaries. Through his poems he has done a dual task- firstly, he accepted the inevitability of death and loss and secondly, he asked people to come to terms with them and confronts them directly and optimistically

Thus, these features of Thomas' poetry show that he was a great poet who expertly handled his themes as well as techniques. He was original in the use of language which injected a new vigour in the poetry of Modern Period. His poems are full of meaning and their aim is to introduce the readers to the hidden truths of life. His early death in 1953 deprived English literature of an important poet, a fine prose writer and a promising dramatist.

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