

TREATMENT OF THEME OF DEATH IN THE POEMS OF DYLAN THOMAS

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Art is one of the many ways through which we humans adopt to cope with the mystery and tragedy of life and after. It is the means to offer advice, express, grief or postulate on the after-life. If death is daunting, why die at all? The solution seems simple, but obviously it's not easy to counter nature. After all, the world would get sort of crowded if we didn't die, not to mention that people might start getting bored. We cannot, nor should we, transcend the law of nature.

Although Thomas poetry is mostly devoted to the exploration of various psychological and physical facets of love and sex, a close examination of his poetry also shows through contention of images a rational theme of death in it. Indeed, his poetry occupies a distinct place in the history of English literature for erosion of traditional concept of death that it kills us and we die. He intellectually talks of the retention of life's zeal and flow in his poetry. He, under all circumstances, encourages and praises life for its beauty and bounty, and would assert the importance of fighting to live life to the fullest. This is true that "we are in God's hand, brother", not in theirs¹ but to allow melancholia associated with death to dampen the spirit of life is something what Thomas opposes most.

And the poems here, selectively picked up, complement and supplement each other on the theme of death. The boys in "I see the Boys of Summer" claim our notice first. Plainly the speaker who sees these complex boys is one of them, sharing their fate. Since he is also a poet, the boys are poets, too. Poets, Welshmen, adolescents, sperm cells, and embryos — all of these, and these boys are governed and guided by the four seasons : autumn, winter, spring, and summer - are all suggestive of the temporal order in which the Sun and the Moon follow their respective course uninterrupted. And the conflicting images of heat and cold, wet and dry, love and sterility, fertility and sterility, life and death, creation and destruction proceed together, and each involves its opposite. What is strikingly noticeable is the coherence of the opposites. The change in the external images exerts its impact on the activity of the boys who conspire with their opposites suggest conception. The development of the embryo is the result of conspiracy between them. Still "in their mothers", the summer children paint the "shades" (ghostly darkness) of the "quartered" (four, inhabited) seasons on the walls of their dams. "The signal moon" may be that of the ninth month. Womb and moon are "zero" by shape and promise. That the boys at this point are also adolescents "in the sun" is made almost plain by their activity. As adolescents, they try "fairy thums", which gives suggestions of masturbation and sexuality, undermining the theme of sterility and death. And, again, the key word "seedy" includes fertility and decay. The seedy boys "lame the air" as the pulse of "love and light bursts in their throats". Thus these seedy harvest glory and become "men of nothing"² and victims of time.

But making the most of time warrants a challenge before the clock strikes the "chiming quarter" of midnight or death. Aspiring to "ring the stars" while old man time (the sleepy man of winter) rings out Tennyson's wild bells at year's end. Midnight may be irreversible, but blowing, however vain, is the activity of vital winds, poets, and whales; and ringing the bell of the stars could imply Tennyson's new year. Drying "love's damp muscle" and breaking a kiss in "no love's quarry"³ mean love's end in sterility. In Part III, the last time, a geographical conceit, like Andrew Marvell's "planisphere",⁴ unites all contraries, ambiguously.

The same theme repeats in "A Process In The Weather of The Heart" and many other poems too. Favourite words ("weather", "fork", and "dry") are important words in this ghostly rhymed poem, indicated by semi-colons, in each second and fifth line, except the last. Applying 'weather', a word for outer climate, to inner climate joins two worlds. "Damp" and "dry", customary tags for life and death introduce a customary collocation of hot and cold : "golden"⁵ or molten shot (sperm) in the freezing tomb of the womb. It seems Thomas like D H Lawrence thinking with the blood brings knowledge of death and looks forward to the Apocalyptic climax by creating the theme : awareness of death as part of life. Possessed by death, Thomas in his graveyard meditations balances the forces of life and the forces of death.

Dark weather in the eye enables it to see the darkness of bones in the tomb; and the womb brings death with every birth "as life leaks out". Halt the "light" or knowledge of the weathered eye is dark and of the dark. The "fathomed sea" of the womb breaks on "unangled" (unfinished, unmeasured, dry) land. Seed becomes public forest in vain. For each tree there 'forks' or divides its fruits, half of which drops in death's wind. At this point the metaphysical ingenuity that distinguishes this poem begins. To the enlightened by darkness, both the quick and the dead are dead and both are ghosts. And the natural process, in the world as in the heart, ambiguously "turns ghost to ghost". This could mean that the quick ghost becomes a dead ghost, that these ghosts, meeting socially, confabulate, or that each ghost becomes more ghostly. The final lines, hurrying along without semicolon, are Apocalyptic. The Sun and the moon meet like shades of quick ghost and dead ghost, i.e., "double shade". The two weathers of the inner heart and the outer sea unite in a general confusion that allows "give up"⁶ to be read in more ways than one.

This poem is parallel in theme to "The force that through the green fuse"; but most of the early poems show Thomas's obsessive concern with the natural process that, linking man and world, inner and outer, turns upon the axis of life and death. Oscillation between life and death, making and destroying, rising and falling affords the movement. Conflict and union, as in other poems, are machinery here. Almost as allusive as something by Eliot, this poem also calls Blake, the Bible and secular myth to mind. Thomas's crooked rose and worm point to Blake's "The Sick Rose". The phrase "shroud sail"⁷ strikes a reference to Theseus and Tristan, supports the thematic marriage of love and death.

The image of explosive force, both creative and destructive ("fuse", "blasts"), is like that in the third stanza of "When once the twilight locks". "Green Age" (youth) wears the greenness of the fuse. "Crooked" means bent, deformed, aged, and wicked. The poet's youth is as "bent" as old age, with which it shares "wintery fever", a juxtaposition of hot and cold that refers to the sterility of love in age and adolescence alike. In line, "And I am dumb to tell", the word 'dumb' means silent, inarticulate, incapable of telling, which could mean writing a poem. The image of water and veins from stanzas two and three recurs. "Fallen blood" is that of death and birth. The idea of love-death is echoed in "lovers's tomb"⁸. Tomb, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, remains love's tomb; but every tomb in Thomas is also womb, where dead men hang by living cords, and the end of love.

The last line, packed with meanings, brings the senses of the poem together. If the "crooked worm" in Blake's "crooked rose" is a coffin-worm, confirming the idea of death then in Thomas's the "sheet" is a winding sheet or a 'shroud'. If this worm is phallic, the sheet becomes a bed-sheet. If this worm is the poet's finger, telling us dumbly as it writes, the sheet is a sheet of papers. Worm and rose, united by crookedness, are opposites, the one masculine, the other feminine. Yet rose is a traditional image of Christ, as worm, a traditional image of Satan. The brilliant remark of the critic deserves mention here. "The force that Thomas celebrates is the life force itself, however involved Eros may be with Thanatos - and the more the more appropriate. This double force, we must agree, remembering Lawrence and Freud, is one of the forces in modern British literature"⁹. Certainly Thomas obsession with birth, copulation and death is present and prominent in his early poems and no reader can well deny that. Alun Lewis, another Welsh writer points out that these poems are about "the single poetic theme of life and death".¹⁰ This obsession with death, which is the most striking feature of his works, almost certainly went back to his childhood and became intensified in his adolescence. His fascinated preoccupation with the process of birth and the monstrous excitement of sex are the by-products of his horror of death. Birth and copulation were for Thomas merely stages on the way to death. The child in the womb knows its destiny:

My heart knew love, my belly hunger;
I smelt the maggots in my stool¹¹.
x x x
Sewing a shroud for a Journey
By the light of the meat eating sun,
Dressed to die, the sensual strut begun ...¹²
x x x
And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm¹³.

To Dylan, death is immanent. The moment the embryo is formed in the mother's womb, death is ready to take it. This embryo grows into a small baby, and continues to live risking death at each stage of its evolution. To Thomas, the very concept of birth, therefore, signals death. His poem "Light Breaks Where no Sun Shines" that talks about the womb-tomb theme, is a puzzle that may be that of life and so intended. Let us examine the poem briefly. "Light breaks" certainly states the uncertain theme. 'Breaks', connecting this light with dawn, agrees with "push in" and "file through", yet the verb of intrusion 'breaks' can mean ending as well as beginning. No sun, no sea, no flesh in this place, yet, paradoxically, there are light, waters, and flesh. Light without sun suggests the first day of Genesis or, if light is life, a cell's first night in the womb. Outer sea and inner waters recall the 'green fuse'. The "things of light" as "broken" as light itself, are "ghosts with glowworms in their heads", like those charnal and phallic worms of the poem, "I see the boys of Summer". Since they file flesh in its absence, these wormy ghosts, which make womb seem tomb, may be the knowledge of life and death that instinct furnishes a cell or what proceeds a cell. No amniotic water, no flesh here, maybe, because this is so long before conception that the knower is hardly there at all. It may be to invoke thought as it happens in the poem "If I were tickled by the rub of love" where the metaphysical virus of "the rub of love" seems enlightened by foreknowledge that here too a similar thought strikes in the head, "behind the eyes"¹⁴, that is, a sort of enlightenment recurs in the brain. Should this enlightenment be viewed social, moral, or religious? - is not explicit.

But what seems to be clear in "Light Breaks Where no Sun Shines" is that enlightenment is localised in both body and mind. The body symbolizes heart while the mind stands for intellect. The fusion of the two in it attains synthesis of Lawrence's thinking with the blood and Eliot's intellect. And if "tips of thought" joins with "immediately at the tips"¹⁵ of the senses, the discordant concord of Eliot and Lawrence is a conceit. Anyway, Eliot and Lawrence seem present here, the one by virtue of tips and vacant lots, the other by virtue of blood. On the whole, the poem raises many questions and leaves them to literary speculations. Many paradoxes and contraries, embedded in the poem, whether converging or diverging, enthrall, a confusion that may be that of life.

The embryo, as represented in "A Grief Ago", always the result of male-female sexual union, is the symbol of human guilt and sin, of the curses of Adam and Eve. The very existence of the embryo is the pacesetter of grief. With the moment of conception of the being, the history of grief begins. In other words, death begins with the very inception of life, rather earlier than the embryo comes out of the mother's womb. The embryo is like a rose cast to plague. The dark in the poem is rising, and the dark is acid death, leaping mother, like father. Let mother draw her children to her before the "suncock" of dawn casts her bone upon the phoenix pyre, bringing resurrection. Let children, therefore, cross her palm "with their grave gipsy eyes", telling her fortune as she tells theirs. The word 'grave' what each gipsy gravely tells the other. And the word 'Gipsy' means Egyptian, which in Thomas's iconography means grave. He means to say that her womb is a grave where children arrive through sexual intercourse between the couple of opposite sex, branded by this "lily" as punishment for original sin. Here, 'lily'¹⁶, the Joycean flower of funerals and Easter, is Jesus, bringing pardon. The curses of Adam and Eve seemed to have kept hunting his mind. Each male child is viewed as Adam who created sex in the form of Eve. In other words, sex has been responsible for this never-dying-death,

which is grief. And this grief begins even before birth. Hence the poem is titled "A Grief Ago". To cure this grief/curse, Jesus alone is welcomed.

"Poem in October" is a poem about the making of poetry out of youth. Inherent in the poem is a consciousness of the past in terms of this present that brings in an awareness that the art of poetry is the means for apprehending this past and making it meaningful. But the poem comes to terms with the possibilities of regret through prayer. Mingling a sense of joy and delight with a sense of regret, the poem "Fern Hill" less resolved and more poignant than this poem, concentrates on child's innocence and lack of understanding revealed by an interjectory "Oh" concludes.

Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.¹⁷

Because this death leaves no possibility of any future entrances, regret dominates.

The theme of the poem "Especially When The October Wind" (as of many of his poems) is poetry and the writing of a poem. Making a poem, a defiance of death, is part of the creativity that Thomas celebrates. This birthday poem is first of a series that includes "Poem in October" and "Poem of His Birthday". By reversing the true rhymes of the first stanza of "Especially" Thomas creates autumnal landscape inhabited by the poet who is no longer a crab but a spider now closely related to crab. Words drained from his heart (in the first stanza) are necessarily heartless. Spinning webs in darkness is creative, but not of sweetness and light. And "the coming fury" (of death) is a Miltonic confusion that "makes the 'fury' more furious to suit modern requirements maybe, or maybe, as Milton says in "Lycidas", this multiplication is but

... playing on the steep
where your old Bards, the famous Druids ly.¹⁸

"Do Not go gentle into that good night" honours a man who was not so much an agnostic or an atheist as a man who had a violent and quite personal dislike for God. The poem, a villanelle, opens by urging the failing Mr. Thomas (I mean the poet's father) to "Rage, rage against the dying of the light". Its final verse, however, enthrones the object of these exhortations in a position almost of deity:

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

The poet, offering this poem, offers what is in effect a prayer to his father. This father is his own human father, at whose deathbed he, a dutiful son, asks a blessing. It is also, however, the supreme Christian Deity : for this poem, similar in pattern to "After the funeral" and "A Refusal to Mourn", turns from pagan to Christian language for the ultimate consolation and comprehension of death, and asks that this Father 'curse' and 'bless'¹⁹ the poet with, respectively, the fact of and the comprehension of this death.

"A Refusal to Mourn takes" as subject the death by fire of a child during the war. It seeks a poetic way of apprehending and coming to terms with the horror of such a death and ultimately arrives at religious terms. One of the propositions behind "Refusal" is that language fails to express the extremity of human experience that is met in death. Refusing to mourn, he builds a greater monument than mourning can. The poet affirms that he will never mourn until

... darkness
Tells with silence the last light breaking
And the still hour
Is come of the sea tumbling in harness;

for until that time, noise and light and the rest of the world will provide the only adequate monument to the child's death, compared to which the "grave truth" of his poetry would be petty. Only after the end of the earth can language, even conventional religious language, be a satisfactory approach to death. Until then, says the poet,

I shall not murder
The mankind of her going with a grave truth
Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
Will any further
Elegy of innocence and youth.

In the Bible and other Christian scriptures we have stations of the Cross, places where Crosses have been fixed as reminders to us of the suffering and last agony of Christ, places where we must stop and worship. Thomas has changed crosses to "breath". 'Breath' means life hence 'stations of breath'²⁰ means death and suffering, human suffering rather than divine suffering, the suffering which is the lot of all mankind. The poet will not write elegies on the youth and innocence of the dead child. There are already too many such Elegies, and he is not going to add one more to them. Its manifestly Christian content confirms the religious basis of the poem. It also confirms the futility of mourning, which, by recalling death, is itself a kind of further death. The poet refuses to engage in such murder, preferring to let the fact of death stand as its own unparalleled monument. In fact, Thomas tries to come to terms with death through language.

"Lament" was the last poem Thomas completed before his death in 1953. Thus it is the fruit of his maturity and represents the clarity, precision and perfection of his art at its best. The poem is all about an 'Old ram rod' who, at the moment of death, surveys his life through the various stages of growth and maturity. 'Ram rod' is a symbol for the phallus, the male-organ. A comic twist is given to the whole narration in as much as the poet himself becomes the sex organ and this poet turned phallus, this

ramrod, sighs as he looks back at his life from the vantage-point of old age. A ram rod, creative tool of God and man was of egregious nature in his past days which had kept away from the "chapel fold" signifies the congregation of white sheep. Hence he sighs for a past that is lamentable. Death, the final word, has lost at last its sexual implication: "Now I am a man no more, no more ..."21. Because he has mostly given over his life to destructive aggression because of the immoral schizoid motive, it is better to destroy by hate than love. The state of mind in which he finds himself is such that he is afraid of giving - here giving love and parental affection to his children who innocent like the angels but to the schizoid they are harpies or Devils. The schizoid's values are all topsy-turvy. "Fair is foul, and foul is fair"22 for him, as for Macbeth's witches. Virtues are the vices that torture him at the moment of death. Chastity, innocence, modesty are all alike hateful to him. And so he welcomes all the deadly virtues to plague his death. It is an attitude which we all experience in bitter moments in schizoid mood. Hence his attitude to life as revealed here may be termed amoral. Such an attitude reveals the openness of his mind and heart.

Critics consider this poem to be autobiographical. And we are sure there is perhaps some small grain of truth found in each remark or impression that a researcher comes across. Whether it be autobiographical, we are not so sure, but it seems to have something of what one reads here :

When I first met him at a party, he looked like, and acted the part of, an amorous Volkswagen, driven by Harpo Marx chasing the girls round the room, he blew down their dickies. Everyone, wives and husbands alike, took this in good part, except John Malcolm Brinnin, who sat frowning in a corner. Thomas .was a poet, after all, and we were academic bourgeoisie, except John Malcolm Brinnin. It was plain, moreover, that the harmless poet, doing his best was doing what he thought expected of him or else was hiding shyness"23.

"Lament", in fact, belongs with "Under Milk Wood" in being a script that demands reading aloud. One of the characters of that play provides an apt summary of this monologist's attitudes: "O", sighs Polly Garter, mother of many and wife of none, "isn't life a terrible thing, thank God?"24 The "I" in this poem is not simply a surrogate for Dylan Thomas. An indiscriminate attempt to examine Thomas's own life through the lenses of "Lament" would lead to wholesale misinterpretation. Certain features may suggest his life, however; and one of these features is a possible similarity between the old man and the poet's father. Composing the poem, Thomas apparently has his father in mind. The old man of the final stanza, preferring sin to the 'deadly virtues' of religion, seems, like Thomas's father, to have a violent and quite personal dislike for God "Lament", in fact, seems to be an exaggerated and fanciful answer to "Do Not go gentle in the that good night" by a man who plans to do anything but that. There, poet advised father 'sad height', and in no position to 'bless', the old man in "Lament" shares the father's attitudes and retorts in an appropriate manner.

Yet the death faced is his own. Thomas is simple, personal, concerned with the ultimates of death and religion, has moved through the ambiguities and uncertainties of his earlier poems. And so his denial of deadly virtues does not mean extinction of them. It only means that he has absolutely resigned himself to time allowing it to either save/ reward or plague him. Moreover, to believe that he shall be damned in death is not right. His denial of deadly virtues seems to result from his temporary inability to mourn the loss of them unsatisfactorily. It also seems to spring from his impossibility of redemption. But such a mood lasts no longer for a longer period of time. The impression of helpless imprisonment gives way to an Apocalyptic vision of salvation. Thomas the poet of "Vision and Prayer", wanting to remain lost, was found. Here the poet, lost from his familiar home and circumstances, is perhaps willing "to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord" through death for, as Jesus cryptically observed, "whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it"25. In any case, the paradoxes of his existence are those that the Christian must encounter. Lost, he is free, and God, the fabulous figurehead of fables, is at the same time the cherished and personal dear God.

Leaving mourning behind, the poet concentrates on his blessings and on the (in the poem) magnificence of the future. Spurning the "Cold, dying trails" of animal life, he celebrates instead the future that holds not simply death but a greater understanding of life. No longer caged and hopeless, man is a spirit in love who, rising above the "spun slime" of his world, reaches for the "nimbus bell cool kingdom come" of heaven. But beyond these, he counts "this last blessing most":26

That the closer I move
To death, no man through his sundered hulks,
The louder the sun blooms
And the tusked, ramshackling sea exults;
And every wave of the way
And gale I tackle, the whole world then,
With more triumphant faith
Than ever was since the world was said,
Spins its morning of praise.

This knowledge lets him comprehend his world more clearly : the 'sun' (as always, son), once a diminutive mustard seed, 'blooms' because of this understanding, and the sea, on which he envisioned his 'voyage to ruin', is full of praise. More than knowledge however, this faith, truly religious, is an active force in life On his voyage he cannot only talk about but "tackle"27 the gales and waves of destruction; and this 'triumphant faith' extracts from these encounters not disaster but praise.

Charting his course among his fellows, he perceives, through the eyes of his 'triumphant faith', the world's beauty. The prayer, or the poem, ends on an unequivocal affirmation of faith:

... Oh,
Holier than their eyes,

And my shining men no more alone
As I sail out to die

The voyage to death is no longer a 'voyage to ruin'; for faith, enhancing the life of these 'shining men',²⁸ raises the poet above loneliness and despair. It is no accident that the narrator, beginning in the company of animals, ends in the company of men and angels. Appraising himself through metaphors of animals, he could only conceive of life as survival of the fittest and ultimate doom of all.

Thomas's poem "Death and Entrances" borrows its title from John Donne's sermon "Death's Duell". Thematically, both dwell on a meditation upon the old subject of death's being no respecter of persons. The former's begins with the description of an evening of which the horror will be so great as to seem almost like the one "in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat."²⁹ This poem composed in August hints at the irony of an invasion on Christmas Eve.

On such a night most vital friends - one of those "wild men" of "Do Not go gentle", "who caught and sang the sun in flight"³⁰ - seek exact hits and certain deaths experience. They experience sudden tragic contrast as: on the one hand, the fire of love and song and eulogy breaking from the dust-formed body; on the other, the incinerated dust of the dead singer. Donne says of the latter in Death's Duell : "... in this death of *incineration*, and dispersion of dust, we see *nothing* that we call This death of *incineration* and dispersion, is, to natural *reason*, the most /recoverable death of all"³¹ Donne in his sudden incineration will be delivered "from the manifold deaths of this world, the *omni die* and the *tota die*, the *every days death* and *every houres death*"³², imaged in Thomas by the attritional aspects of marriage. In the first stanza of his poem death appears to have been personified as o stranger as distant and as much a comfort to the wayworn traveler as Polaris. Death is a pilot-like who journeys skyward only. Man's journey here is also towards skyward.

This death is, then, a triumph, not a tragedy. Though man's life has been one of lamentations ("we our owne funeralls with cries, even at our birth" in Donne's prose), "many waters quench not love" of life (from Thomas's) and "in the *grove* [womb] the *worms* do not kill us, we breed and feed" (again from his) : as the Christian sucks at Christ's wounds, so the sea-shell at the pilot's. Briefly, Thomas's word "hap" of war stills the praises of our best friend, compels a stranger to die for us, and presents as the last thing we see in life the face of an enemy. In other words to see the death of human race at the hand of so-called Death shall be the last thing here.

His ironically juxtaposed birth of Saviour, and the high-flown language : "With every cry since light/flushed first across his thunder-clapping eyes"³³ to seem applicable to a god. But the same sort of rhetoric resounds in "Do not go gentle into that good night", which deals with mere men. Such language is more easily justified. It takes resounding words to capture the effect of aerial bombardment. And such a birth destroys the coherence of the poem as much as of our thought of and over life.

Death is not an end of living but a metamorphosis. The force that through the green fuse drives the flower does not cease even in the so-called 'Death' when the flower no more lifts its head to the blows of the rain. Thomas was as original in the use of brilliantly metaphors and in his approach to death as Donne. In both the poets, as also in Hopkins as we have seen, death is not the ultimate end, but the beginning of undying eternal life. This thematic assertion is squarely confirmed by Thomas when he says, "And death shall have no dominion". This is exactly the same as saying "Death be not proud" that we come across in one of Donne's holy sonnets. In Donne and Hopkins, therefore, physical death ensures our entry in the kingdom of God from where, in so far as the majority of Christians popularly believe, there is no coming back.

As per the gospel truth the world is not our home. It is only a passing through. Exactly like Jesus we wish and are required to enter the divine world of light and life, shunning behind us this imperfect and transitory world.

Death is no tragedy as it is an exit from physical existence, and hence not to be dreaded. Far from being tragic, it is a way by which Jesus was liberated from flesh to return to his heavenly home All we need is to be enlightened through divine love and awareness. Thus, it is closer to Indian spirituality.³⁴

This is spiritual birth after which death itself dies. As Donne says, "Death, thou shall die".³⁵ This is very much there in Dylan Thomas and also much more.

There is always a suggestion in Thomas that death is also followed by biological birth. The Thomasian order of the major themes thus could be - Love-Sex-Birth-Death-Birth. We may logically be prompted and naturally be tempted to believe that Thomas, though a Christian comes close to our Hindu belief in rebirth (the biological birth). And that being the case Dylan Thomas may favourably be deemed as a poet of cultural neutrality who transcends time and place. And this is the greatness of an artist that Thomas was.

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