

The Symbolic Use of Language in Dylan Thomas' Poetry

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Dylan Marlais Thomas (1914-1953), a neurotic and sickly child, was born in Swansea, South Wales. His father, as a strict schoolteacher, exposed his son to poetry early and at the age of four, Thomas was reciting verses from Shakespeare.¹ Fascinated by D.H. Lawrence's poetry of a vivid natural world, Thomas left the school at sixteen to read on his own.² His popularity was unique in the literary world in the sense that he was not concerned with the intellectual and social issues like other popular poets of his day, producing work reminiscent of the Romantic period with an emotionally charged lyrical approach. It is denoted that:

Thomas was the archetypal Romantic poet of the popular American imagination—he was flamboyantly theatrical, a heavy drinker, engaged in roaring disputes in public, and read his work aloud with tremendous depth of feeling and a singing Welsh lilt.³

He began to write poems and short stories in a way that the flow of language is perfectly controlled. His linguistic structures are remarkable in their daring and power. He is a verbal manipulator of genius in the sense that his poetry "whose content as well as form is verbal- a poetry whose subject itself is words"⁴. Significantly, in all of his poems, the meaning is often missed by the reader who does not keep in mind the special

attitude to language. Language is truly symbolic and it is not only a tool of expression, but something deep and mysterious. He is intensely aware of the existence of words and experiences as in his poem "From Lover's First Fever To Her Plague": And to the voice that, like a voice of hunger, / Itched in the noise of wind and sun. (ll. 30-31)

The poet has acknowledged as one of the most important Welsh poets of the 20th century. He is noted for his original, rhythmic and ingenious use of words and imagery.⁵ We almost feel the physical impact of language, rather than their referential force as in his poem "In Memory of Ann Jones":

her threadbare
Whisper, in a damp word, her wits drilled hollow,
Her fist of a face died clenched on a round pain;
(ll. 32-34)

This is a notable way of conveying experience than the conventional expression of poetic language. Instead of being a means which would lead on to the experience that the poet wants to give through contemplation, the poem becomes the experience itself. He tries to make his experience as a poet in some way coexistent with our experience as readers.⁶ This technique to bring words and experience together gives Thomas' language the overpowering reality of a physical apprehension.⁷ The directness is also partly responsible for the influence of his images, which appeal directly to the senses as in his popular poem "Fern Hill":

And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the
calves
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. ...
(ll. 15-18)

In such poetry, he uses language in such a way as to resist any direct attempt of intellectualization. Through the senses,

images are conveyed to the mind and no rationalizing process interferes with the immediacy of the communication.⁸ Once the resistance to reason is built up, the poems ought to have for us the direct impact of things. Actually the reader is rushed among sensations, and there is such an intensity and such bewildering fullness of details as in "A Winter's Tale":

Look, and the dancers move
On the departed, snow bushed green, wanton in moon light
As a dust of pigeons. Exulting, the grave hooved
Horses, centaur dead, turn and tread the drenched white
Paddocks in the farms of birds. The dead oak walks for love.
(ll. 71-75)

The poet creates a structure of carefully controlled tensions giving the force of movement to the poem. We can feel the words rising instantly from the flow of consciousness. Henry Treece once remarks to Thomas's method:

The life in any poem of mine cannot move concentrically round a central image; the life must come out of the centre; an image must be born and die in another; and any sequence of my images must be a sequence of creations, recreations, destructions, contradictions.⁹

Similarly, this technique can be seen in "In Memory of Ann Jones" which is written on the death of the poet's cousin. It has a great complexity than a natural elegy. Neither the event nor the poet's sorrow seems to occupy a central position in the poem, yet the poem is undoubtedly a coherent whole. The poem gathers force as the poet puts one image against a conflicting one, the actual dead woman against the monumental figure. He has made out of her life and death. These images are allowed to come into a conflict, and the poem moves backward and forward between Ann of the real life and the mythical Ann of the poet's artifice. The conflict is also brought out by the opposition of such images as in:

I know her scrubbed and sour humble hands
Lie with religion in their cramp, her threadbare

Whisper in a damp word, her wits drilled hollow,
Her fist of a face died clenched on a round pain
And sculptured Ann is seventy years of stone
These cloud- stopped, marble hands, this monumental
Argument of the hewn voice, gesture and psalm,
(ll. 31-37)

The tension is kept up by other images like the natural, homely cottager and the religious object she has become. This is a contrast which comes out through a number of suggestive touches, i.e., "hearth" or "ferned and foxy woods"- on one hand, and on the other, the calling of the "seas to service" and "the hymning heads":

....Ann's bard on a raised hearth, call on
The seas to service that her wood-tongued virtue
Babble like a bellbuoy over the hymning heads,
Bow down the walls of the ferned and foxy woods
(ll. 21- 24)

Sometimes the contradictory elements are brought together and resolved in a single phrase like "wood-tongued virtue", or the suggestion of both the natural freedom and Christian humility in phrases like "That her love sing and swing through a brown chapel, /Bless her bent spirit with four, crossing birds." (ll. 25-26)

By the end of the poem, these symbols are merged into each other, and thus the fox becomes something like a fern "The stuffed lung of the fox twitch and cry love" (l. 39), and the fern becomes something like the fox "And the strutting fern lay seeds on the black sill" (l. 40). Ann, the fox and the fern, has become one to take on the quality of life. Thomas describes his technique in a letter:

I make one image—though 'make' is not the right word; I let, perhaps, an image be 'made' emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual & critical forces I possess—let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make, of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth

contradictory image, and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict.¹⁰

Significantly, this poem is remarkable in many ways. It is not a formal elegy written in an objective manner, but it is something personal with a certain intensity of passion. A monumental symbolic figure is stated in: "this skyward statue/ With the wild breast and blessed and giant skull" (ll. 27-28). In addition, there are suggestive touches in the poem which bring some of the human aspects of the real Ann. Her scrubbed and sour humble hands and her threadbare whisper symbolize the reality of the person he is speaking about. Actually, it is not Ann who is the center of the poem, but Ann's death in his personal being. Her figure has become a part of the poet's own experience which he is symbolizing.

The poet experiences the joy that comes of understanding the meaning of a whole experience, and it is this joy which he gives in the poem. His acceptance of life is reflected in the power of imagery and physical detail that we find in this poem. Thus, his main inspiration is not the tragedy but the joy of life. In his "Prologue to Poems", he stated that the poems are written for the love of man and in praise of God, conveying the joy in an abundant imagery :

How I, a spinning man,
Glory also this star, bird:
Roared, sea born, man torn, blood blest.
Hark: I trumpet the place,
From fish to jumping hill! Look:

(ll. 39-43)

The poet sees man in the image of God, but the implication of this image is not theological, but intensely physical. He gives all importance to the temporal and fading flesh, which he regards as the guardian of the immortal spirit. His poetry does not seem to be concerned either with intellectual or spiritual matters. Robert Horan suggests that: "It is a renaissance of voluptuousness that gives to his work its sensual, deceptively

unintellectual surface"¹¹. The reality of creation comes to him as a vision and in this vision, the element of sex predominates. He refers that the universe is sexually dynamic, pointing out that life and death are equally real because they are aspects of the great reality of creation. Even death itself appears to him as a dynamic force to measure time as in "Here In This Spring":

A worm tells summer better than the clock,
The slug's a living calendar of days,
What shall it tell me if a timeless insect
Says the world wears away?

(ll. 14-17)

Actually, Thomas uses these symbols in the sense that he does not want the religious support to give meaning to his symbols. In earlier literature, the religious or mythological tradition and the literary tradition mutually supported each other and the poet of those times could exploit the tension between personal experience and the tradition to give meaning to what he wrote. This tension is no longer found in the 20th century and Dylan Thomas, as one of the great modern poets, used a technique to create a state of tension between the different explanations of the human situation given by religion and science.¹² He is essentially symbolist who has no opposition for science or religion. Consequently, he used different aspects of this knowledge to make us aware of the fundamental mystery of existence.¹³

Thomas' achievement can be seen if we compare his way of handling symbolism with Eliot's. A good example of this difference is provided by the symbol that is suggested to both by the raiding enemy planes spreading fire in the city of London during the second world war. Both poets use the symbol of the dove, finding an analogy for the plane, noting that the effects suggested by the symbol are widely different. In "Little Gidding" section two, Eliot speaks about the dawn: "After the dark dove with the flickering tongue/ Had passed below the horizon of his homing" (ll. 29-30). In addition, he develops the

same symbol in section four of the same poem, where he speaks of an air-raid:

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre -
To be redeemed from -fire by fire.

(ll. 1-7)

The flaming dove suggested by an-enemy plane becomes a symbol of salvation. It brings to the poet a vision of the descent of the Holy Ghost bringing the Pentecostal fire. The idea of death is changed into that of purification. The Christian emphasis gives Eliot's symbol its full meaning and value. With Thomas, the same symbol appears in quite different context to bring other suggestions. In his poem "Into Her Lying Down Head" section one, the beloved cannot get out of her head the idea of the enemy planes spreading destruction:

Into her lying down head
His enemies entered bed,
Under the encumbered eyelid,
Through the rippled drum of the hair-buried ear;
And Noah's rekindled now unkind dove
Flew man-bearing there.
Last night in a raping wave
Whales unreined from the green grave
In fountains of origin gave up their love,
Along her innocence glided
Juan aflame and, savagely young King Lear,
Queen Catherine howling bare
And Samson drowned in his hair.

(ll. 1-13)

The imagery, here, is complicated to get the suggestive effect. At first, Thomas explores the contrast between the war-bringing enemy aircraft and the dove, a messenger of peace.

That dove, who had been saved from destruction by Noah, has become the symbol of destruction. In the next line, the phrase "man-bearing" introduces a complex double meaning. It refers to the idea of the virgin, with the Holy Ghost traditionally represented as a dove, man-bearing, the bringer of Christ, man-God. This idea introduces a series of sexual images with psycho-analytic suggestions, finally identifying the image of the dove with "Juan aflame". The phrase brings back associations with the flames of the Holy Ghost and the fire of the aircraft. In this way, the Biblical reference is related to an act of rape, while counterpointing the religious and Freudian implications of the dove-symbol.¹⁴ Eliot, starting from the same point as Dylan Thomas, presents one consistent religious interpretation of the dove-symbol. Thomas brings together the dove of Noah from the old testament and the dove of the Pentecost from the new testament, giving them a Freudian interpretation. He connects the dove with the enemy aircraft and the rape of the country. The references to Catherine, Lear and Samson give the whole passage a sense of universality: the particular incident of the air-raid is given a timeless quality.

Accordingly, the structures and the ideas in Thomas' poems have acquired him a reputation of poetic obscurity and he appears to be the most obscure. This is unacceptable since he had no desire to be obscure or esoteric and his poetry is mysterious because of the compressed language which is common in modern poetry.¹⁵ His images have a technique, making us concentrate more on what he is saying and shed light to the reality that the poem presents. They create an effect of simultaneity in the sense that all things are present in the instant. Past, present and future are seen as parts of a cyclic process rather than a sequence. This technique comes out in his poem "I See the Boys of Summer" to point out that the first section is concerned with birth and growth as in:

I see the summer children, in their mothers
Split up the brawned womb's weather,
Divide the night and day with fairy thumbs;

There in the deep with quartered shades
Of sun and moon they paint their dams
As sunlight paints the shelling of their heads.

(ll. 13-18)

Man's decline and his inevitable decay is focused in the second section of the same poem:

In spring we cross our foreheads with the holly,
Heigh ho the blood and berry,
And nail the merry squires to the trees;
Her love's damp muscle dries and dies,
Her break kiss in no love's quarry.
O see the poles promise in the boys.

(ll. 19-24)

In the final section, the two aspects are brought together in a synthesis: summer and ruin, the maggot and the womb, flint and soft pitch:

I see you boys of summer in your ruin.
Man in his maggot's barren.
And boys are full and foreign in the pouch.
I am the man your father was.
We are the sons of flint and pitch.
O see the poles are kissing as they cross.

(ll. 1-6)

In another poem "The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower", Thomas deals with the endless cycle of life and death in a series of immensely rich and vivid images. He denotes that "time is creative as well as destructive at the same time"¹⁶. Time is responsible for growth and destruction and it affects nature and man:

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees,
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

(ll. 1-5)

A poem which symbolizes this attitude is "The Hand that Signed the Paper". Here, the poet has a vision of an object or action in all its states or tenses.¹⁷ Future and present usually kept distinct in our mind in the sense that they are juxtaposed by the poet; he sees an action and its consequence at the same time as in:

The hand that signed the paper felled a city;
Five sovereign fingers taxed the breath,
Doubled the globe of dead and halved a country;
(ll. 1-3)

The sovereign powers of the politician are shown as vested in the fingers alone: with these he signs nation-shaking documents. There is also the implication that the men who declare war or make treaties are mere tools or objects through which the process of time works. The hands of the politician are like the hands of a clock, not human members in contact with a heart "Hands have no tears to flow" (l. 16).

This attitude of Time and the idea of life and death that imply each other connect Thomas with the great symbolists. Man reflects this idea in himself in the conflict between flesh and spirit. In the poem "I, In My Intricate Image", the poet represents the "man-iron" (body) (l. 6) and "ghost in armour" (soul) (l. 5) as equally aggressive elements and the triumph of the body is the death of the spirit. One consequence of the full acceptance of all the implications of time as process is that time becomes the pursuer instead of being the pursued as in his poem "When, Like a Running Grave":

When like a running grave, time tracks you down,
Your calm and cuddled is a scythe of hairs,
Love in her gear is slowly through the house,
Up naked stairs, a turtle in a hearse,
Hauled to the dome,

(ll. 1-5)

It is interesting to note that time can be conquered only through its full acceptance. In one of Thomas' greatest poems "Fern Hill", Henry Treece has written:

It is Thomas's final poetic statement. He has found his refuge in childhood, always his most convincing territory. When the rushing years have winnowed the harvest he left behind him, we shall find no doubt that his truest talent was that of the Innocent Eye, which showed him unerringly the microcosm of the child.¹⁸

The poet is able to capture the pure sensations of childhood, pointing out that "Fern Hill" is a complete evocation of innocence in pastoral surroundings. Many of the words and images relate to the young boy lying on top of the hay piled on a hay wagon. The freshness and innocence of childhood is recalled, but sense of mortality and the transitory nature of life is never far away. It recalls the pure delight of childhood innocence. It is spiritual. A child sees this and as we grow old, it is harder to hold to that vision. Time is both jailer and teacher only in eternity will we be freed from that chain to roam again in innocence.¹⁹

Nostalgic recollection of a child's holiday in the farm is the starting point. This farm is provided with a light to be radiant. Though the poem has the form of an elegy for lost childhood in actual poetic terms, we experience the states of innocence and eternity. Thomas creates an idyllic sketch of a Carmarthenshire dairy farm in which his aunt Ann and his uncle Jim had lived when he was a child.²⁰ He uses words and phrases which recreate a child's interpretation of the world.

The first two stanzas are full of effects of sunlight, but in the third, the nocturnal objects enter. He "rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away" (l. 24), referring to the typical childish fantasy that the world disappears when it is no longer visible.²¹ In the last stanza, we are reminded about the endless progression of time.²² The child finds that time takes him:

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,
Nor that riding to sleep

(ll. 46- 48)

The oddness of the first line, with its suggestion of an evil presence or a mysterious double in the flickering movement of the shadows, and of the ghostly appearance of the swallows in the dim lights of the loft, distils a feeling of sin and death. "the sun born over and over" (l. 38) yields to the moon which is always rising, a symbol of the growing cold: that of a contracting imagination and heart. By the light of the moon, the happy day-time vision of the farm vanished, and when the light returns it is to discover "the farm forever fled from the childless land".(l. 50)

The poem ends with a pathos and an acceptance of reality that the poet's older voice has taken over, mourning his lost youth with echoes of the opening:

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.

(ll. 51-53)

Though he continued in his chains, singing endlessly and naturally like the sea, he could not help being aware of the inevitable binding to the sad situation of the world, by which the child at last must lose his carefree innocence.²³ These three lines of the poem are little bit critical but interesting. Sea always sings with the rhythm of its tide. The chain is the chain of time in the sea ebb and flow in tide. In these two different times in every 24 hours, sea sings in two different rhythms. In human life also, we have ebb and flow tide-childhood and adulthood. These lines, in addition, point out the common fate of all life, decline and pass away, but the eternal spirit is within

us, and the everlasting song of our true destiny can be heard rising over all change and time.²⁴

Indeed, his technique to make the lyric the essence of poetry with all the intensity of drama and something of the power of religion, is distinctive.²⁵ He has done something which marks a turning point in poetry, giving him a place among the great poets of the world. His particular mastery lies in symbolic use of language to denote that his poetry is a homogeneous, polyphonic blend of linguistic sounds derived from the assonance, alliteration, concord, discord, euphony, and cacophony.²⁶

NOTES

¹www.neuroticpoets.com/Thomas. Retrieved March 28, 2016

²www.poet.org/dylanthomas. Retrieved March 12, 2016.

³<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/dylan-thomas>. Retrieved June 3, 2016.

⁴Derek Stanford, "Dylan Thomas". London: Penguin Books, 1965, p. 96.

⁵<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dylan-Thomas>. Retrieved March 21, 2016.

⁶John Bayley, "The Romantic Survival: A Study in Potic Evolution". London: Penguin Books, 1957, p. 212.

⁷Henry Treece, "Dylan Thomas". Great Britain, Pelican Books, 1949, p. 17.

⁸Giorgio Melchiori, "The Tightrope Walkers: Studies of Mannerism in Modern English Literature", London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956, p. 87.

⁹Treece, p. 37.

¹⁰<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/dylan-thomas>.

¹¹E. W. Tedlock, "Dylan Thomas, The Legend and the Poet", London: 1960, p. 137.

¹²<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dylan-Thomas>.

¹³www.neuroticpoets.com/Thomas.

¹⁴<http://books.google.iqbooks> "The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas". Retrieved June 2, 2016.

¹⁵www.cs.rice.edu/ssiyer/minstrels/index-poet.html#Thomas. Retrieved June 17, 2016.

¹⁶www.poetrybyheart.org.uk.poems "poetry By Heart". Retrieved June 17, 2016.

¹⁷www.ppu.org.uk.poetry-responsibility "The Hand that signed the Paper". Retrieved June 13, 2016.

¹⁸Treece, p. 112.

¹⁹www.cs.rice.edu/ssiyer/minstrels/index-poet.html#Thomas.

²⁰<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fern-Hill>. Retrieved June 8, 2016.

²¹www.bbc.co.uk/wales/dylanthomas/fern-hill. Retrieved June 23, 2016.

²²Ibid.

²³Treece, p. 119.

²⁴www.bbc.co.uk/wales/dylanthomas/fern-hill.

²⁵Tedlock, p. 271.

²⁶<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dylan-Thomas>.

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