

***The Significance of Death in Dylan
Thomas's Poetry***
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Received: 13/4/2022

Accepted: 21/5/2022

Published: 2022

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Abstract

This study is about the significance of the concept of death in Dylan Thomas's poetry. The poet presents his views about the death in a way that easily touch the reader, but there are serious flows about his concept from the Islamic perspective in his poem "Do not go gentle into that good night". The poet asks his dying father to fight against death by doing good and strong actions to achieve greatness after his death. The poet has a point, and what he asks for is significant, but he asks that at the waste time. The study approved that through the Islamic perspective, the man cannot do good deeds as he is approaching, and it is not important for the man to achieve greatness after his death as much as what he is going to face in the grave and the Hereafter. The study also approved that the time of doing or even believing is over when death comes in Islam. The researcher recommends that the learner as much as the teacher should be aware of the fact that death is a global concept with various views among religious and cultures, but all of them are worthless compared to Islam. And since the concept presented through literature, specially foreign literature, is very important and matters all people, then it should be discussed through the Islamic perspective because Islam is not only a religion, but rather it is a life method that should be adopted in every single educational situation.

Key words: perspective, Dylan Thomas, Islam, death, Hereafter.

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Introduction:

Dylan Thomas was born in 1914 in the town of Swansea in Wales. His father was a school teacher. Thomas went to grammar school and after that he worked for a newspaper in Wales then wrote poetry. At twenty he published a book called *Eighteen poems*, and two years later he published *Twenty-Five poems*. In the late thirties, Thomas was employed by the British Broadcasting Company to read poetry over the air. His success at public reading led him to his three visits to the United States in 1950, 1952, and 1953. But in America he went overboard in orgies of drunkenness and dissipation on each visit. But on the third visit in the fall of 1953, celebrating his thirty-ninth birthday and the success of his recently published *Collected Poems*, he collapsed and died two weeks later of brain fever. (Inglis, p. 405).

Thomas often sought to reveal aspects of life that are often overlooked in order to reveal important truths about them. Like many authors, his experiences influenced his writing and revealed many important themes such as the celebration of the divine purpose that he saw in all human and natural process. Thomas is largely known for his imaginative use of language and vivid imagery in his poems. He began writing poetry as a child, and was published by his teens. This study explains the significance of death in three of his selected poems. The first one is *Fern Hill*, the second is *And Death Shall Have No Dominion*, and the third is *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*.

Section One
Fern Hill

It is one of the finest poems. Its theme is childhood and the way in which time brings the decline of youthful innocence and joy. But the child is not aware of this; only the adult, looking backward realizes how he is subject to the process of death. Based on the memories of a child's form of holiday, the poem moves from his uncaring joy through conscious delight and pride to time's movement and destroying power. The poem is written in a nine-lined stanza. It is written in six complex stanzas and each one has a system of rhyme called assonance, in which the vowels of the last words in two or more lines rhyme. His skill is evident throughout in the long flowing lines intermingled with shorter cadence. *Fern Hill* is the name of the farm owned by his aunt, Ann Jones, the woman whose death inspired one of his most eloquent poems "After the Funeral".

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Thomas often stayed as a child at this farm in North Cramer then Shire, so his poem is firmly rooted in childhood memories.

The poem begins with the speaker happily recounting spending time outside in a picturesque landscape with green grass, apple trees, and a starry sky where he felt like a prince. He details his adventures as a youth, recalling how he acted as both a huntsman and herdsman and saying that time allowed him to play in the sun once only—the first hint that this happiness won't last.

In the first stanza, all the themes of the poem are introduced the little boy living on the farm, playing in the sun and dreaming at night under the stars. And so lordly in his childish play he is, nevertheless, without knowing it, a creature of time.

Time let me hail and climb Golden in the heydays of his eyes

In the second stanza, the movement of the poem begins like the first bubbling of a stream. The little boy himself is seen in the poesy's memory playing for a natural audience in complete harmony. In childhood time is a merciful ruler. Personifying the "lilting" house at the start of the poem sets the stage for the landscape the speaker describes: it is so lively and vivid that it is almost a character itself. Time is similarly personified, becoming almost like a playmate to the young boy. Thomas's use of the phrase "once below a time" emphasizes the power of time—the speaker is merely a guest in time's domain—and instantly reminds us of fairy tales beginning "once upon a time," calling to mind stories of childhood innocence. (<https://www.gradesaver.com>)

The line "in the sun that is young once only" in the second stanza is the first hint that the speaker's joyful innocence won't last. Though time "lets" him play, it remains in control. In the second stanza, he also mentions the Sabbath and "holy" water, marking the first of many Christian references that will grow richer as the poem progresses and giving Fern Hill a sacred aura. The colors green and gold, which will become recurring images, also appear.

The third stanza continues the celebration of Fern Hill as the speaker recalls the beauty of both days and nights at Fern Hill. His simple recollection of Fern Hill—"it was air"—is telling. Air is, of course, necessary for life, but also invisible and easy to take for granted, just as the young narrator doesn't fully appreciate Fern Hill. The poem's images become more abstract and dreamy, such as the vague adjectives "lovely and watery" and the unnaturally "green" fire. Again, green is used to mean full of life.

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The moon of his childhood day is passed, and play gives place to sleep and dreaming "under the simple stars", dreaming of owls and horses "flashing in the dark" here the day time vision is paralleled by the nightly dreams of ecstasy. Thomas also employs the device of supposing that the farm vanishes as the child falls asleep, to reappear only when he reawakens the child's world is thus recaptured by a reversion to the thought process of childhood. (Inglis, p.405)

In the fourth stanza, the dawn comes again and the child wakes up to what paradise must have been like. The Christian imagery deepens dramatically. Invoking "Adam and maiden," the speaker conjures the image of the Biblical paradise of Eden—a comparison that becomes explicit in the fourth stanza. This comparison adds to the earlier hint that the speaker's happiness at Fern Hill will end—after all, Adam and Eve are eventually exiled from Eden. He also mentions the Creation and its aftermath—"the birth of the simple light." The fields themselves seem to "praise" God, and the stable is personified, "whinnying." Notably, he mentions the color "white," often associated with purity. This is Adam and Eve before the Fall. The farm comes to life again as though the miracle of the creation is being repeated.

In the fifth stanza, Thomas continues to rely on personification, as the speaker describes the "gay house" and his "wishes" that "raced," again emphasizing how alive the landscape of Fern Hill feels. But all of this must end, as the children follow time "out of grace"—a reference to the Christian concept of God's grace, the love and mercy that allows for salvation despite one's sins. The image also alludes to children following the Pied Piper, a figure from a German legend who led the farm comes to life again as though the miracle of the creation is being repeated. The farm comes to life again as though the miracle of the creation is being repeated a town's children away with his magical pipe. The sun, previously described as young "only once," is now "born over and over," and the clouds are "new made." But the renewal the natural landscape experiences is inaccessible to the child.

By the sixth stanza, the speaker is forever cast out of Eden, waking up to remember what he has lost and realizing that he is "dying." Again, his previous days are described as "white," characterized as a time of innocence and purity. Not how it feels to be young, the theme of Fern Hill is how it feels to have been young. Fern Hill is Thomas's victory over what he laments. The green and golden joy of childhood and the shadowy sorrow of maturity become the joy of art." In this manner, the loss to time is not total; it is

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possible to use art to recapture the happiness of innocent youth. In fact, revisiting the farm, Thomas is led by the ghost of his own childhood to the loft where he once slept. The glory of the farm has fled. Only now does he realize that he was the prisoner of time. But time was merciful and the child could sing in his chains. (Bunnell, p.55). The first thing to notice in the poem is the simplicity of the vocabulary, the absence of any difficult, learned words, the avoidance of the verbal daring and virtuosity which Thomas reveals at other times. He permits himself the playful twisting of colloquial phrases, or the compression of a simple idea into a brief image. It is sometimes argued that Fern Hill recaptures the mood which pervades the writings of Vaughan and Irahene and there are passages in the poem which recall the prose and verse of these seventeenth century mystics. Yet, there is one fundamental distinction to be drawn. The obsession with time which pervades Thomas' poem differentiate it sharply from the meditations of Vaughan and Irahene "time held me green and dying", this is the overwhelming burden of the poem; and it is in keeping with the whole tenor of Thomas' work. For Dylan Thomas the journey towards death begins at the moment of conception.

He was capable of an infinite gentleness of tone, and sometimes his poem descended to whimsy and sentimentality. His best works in a gentler mode, however, show him in his essential character as a modern Romantic untraced in visions and his recollections. The nostalgic Fern Hill is such a poem, buoyant and vivid in its memories of childhood but at the same time weaving into its scheme an ever more piercing adult sadness. One is first taken with the gay and fanciful note, with the singing : fluent liquids and sibilants. One hardly notices the casual, deceptive presence of time in the background. And besides, time is kind and permissive in the opening stanza. In the next he shows his power a little more openly. But the last two stanzas, though all is still gentle and melodic, the terror lurking in things has become as overwhelming as death itself. (Bunnell, p.56)

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Section two

And Death Shall Have No Dominion

This was the first of his poems to be published in 1933 and it shows that he began as he ended as a lyrical poet. Like an inspired preacher, Thomas is conducting a service for all the dead on the certainty of their resurrection. The repeated first line is an adaptation of St. Paul Romans vi-9 death hath no more dominion. Thomas wrote this poem at the age of nineteen. Its characteristics are Biblical echoes of death and resurrection. Its use of alteration and repetition and of images which convey feeling indirectly by the association of ideas. Its combination of elevated language and colloquialism, and its striding rhythm with irregular arrangements of stressed and unstressed syllables. The rhymes form no regular pattern. It is written in three nine-line stanzas in each of which the first and last lines are "and death shall have no dominion" (Bunnell, p.58)

In the first stanza, he prophesies that even though man's bones are bleached and disintegrated, sunk in the sea, still death will not be supreme. When we die, says Thomas, we "shall be one with the man in the wind and the west moon." That is, we shall become part of the stuff out of which new men will be made. A typical transposition of the man in the moon and the west wind. That which once the bodies of men is not lost, but flies as dust on the wind and is the same substance as that which makes the moon. The dead—their bones picked clean—will be re-created on Judgment Day. They will be joined to the wind and stars in a united creation even if they were mad when they died, they will be sane when they rise again. The stars are heavenly things, symbols of the brightness and beauty which we may become after death.

In the second stanza, he declares that despite any torture the world can inflict on men "they shall not break". The image of the "windings of the sea" suggests the movement of fish and water and unknown paths in the mysterious depths of the sea. There is also no doubt an allusion to winding-sheet, in which a corpse is wrapped for burial "Windily", the colloquialism "blown to the four winds", meaning utterly destroyed. Though men may "break" under torture "racks", after death they will be "unbroken". So martyrs will rise again, even if they lost faith when they were tortured. The "Unicom" is a symbol of evil like the Devil, the Unicom is horned.

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In the third stanza he decides that though men hear gulls and see flowers no more, yet flowers are men's characters, and as long as they grow "death shall have no dominion". Thomas is not saying that individual people rise to a new life as the same people after death but that, though individuals pass away, their death nourishes new life and life will go on "till the sun breaks down". They may not hear gulls and waves or see flowers; they may be mad and dead; but they will rise from the dead continually. "Characters" is colloquial for "people". Dead men force their way into life again as daisies whose buds burst open in the sunlight. "Hammer" means force their way upward through the surface of the sail. (Bunnell, p.59). The poem is an affirmation of a belief in resurrection. Death cannot triumph because men become one with nature, with the wind, the moon and other elements. Life, not death, rules the universe. The poem is an interesting blend of Platonic idealism and theological resurrection; in essence, actually, a romantic departure from Thomas' more frequent affirmation of biological immortality in nature.

Section Three

Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night

A villanelle is a poem normally in five tercets and a quatrain. It was only two rhymes, which form a strict sequence, and the first and third lines are repeated in an elaborate pattern.

Thomas wrote this form during one of the illnesses of his father. It has been described as "one of the most moving tributes of a son to a father in all literature" (A reader's guide to Dylan Thomas).

The first tercet shows a subtle complex of ideas. "Good night" is a parting bidding (Thomas is using it with an awareness of its original sense) that it is natural end to life. The two rhyming words, "Night" and "Light", stand for death and life. Thomas urges his father not to accept death namely. Rage is an echo of several of Yeats' poems about old age. (Sampson, p.443)

In the second tercet, Thomas argues that philosophers accept death as a natural, inevitable end. Nevertheless, their examination of the ambiguities of language makes them realize the inadequacy of "words" in their search for illumination.

In the third tercet, Thomas claims that Puritans are not ready for death, because they at last realize they have missed opportunities to lead a full life. In other words, those words, those who have followed a narrow moral code. Thomas seems to suggest that, with the nearness of death "the last wave by", they realize their spiritual poverty, aware that they have missed joy in life.

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The fourth tercet suggests that those who have enjoyed the more physical and material pleasures of life in living for the moment. They realize too late that they have merely hastened it away; their joys are turned to grief. Hedonists cannot accept death socially.

The fifth tercet suggests that not only serious men, but those whose thoughts are concerned with death, poets like Thomas who have made death their main theme, who penetrate to the truth of things "with blinding sight" and believe that, if only the scales could be removed from the eyes of their fellow men, they would live lives of brightness and gaiety. But the duration of the poet's penetrating vision is also brief (meteoric) and the poet too must "rage". In other words, men who are grave, wise in a serious way, regret the approach of death because they see clearly how much old men might have achieved. The reference to "Blind eyes" is surely not without significance in Thomas' mind that Homer and Milton, types of the mighty poets, were both blind. This phrase also returns us to the particular subject of the poem, for Thomas 'father was blind towards the end of his life'.

Conclusion

Thomas' poetry uncovers the hidden causes of human life. It is full of joy and sorrow over childhood over death, and God, and the effects on human beings of the elemental forces of the word. Formally Thomas was one of the most accomplished poets of the century resembling Keats in the flawed perfection of his lyrics. Like Keats' poetry, Thomas' lines have an emotional force, expressing an attitude toward some aspects in life, death is one of them.

'Both religious fervor and animal heat' were in his poetry as Edith Sitwell, a modern poetess said (Legouis, p.1092). His language was, to use the words of Walt Whitman, "fanned by the idea of death". The world to him, however, was "God's rough tumbling ground," (Ibid, p.1095) and poetry to him was prayer. Thomas' major theme was the unity of all life. He saw in all of nature the continuing process of life and death, and then renewal, which linked one generation to another. That is why he spoke to death in a defiant voice.

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