
CHAPTER-II: INFLUENCES ON THOMAS'S VIEW OF DEATH AND
THE VARIOUS THEMES OF THOMAS'S POEMS

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Dylan Thomas is one of the well-known poets in the twentieth century English Poetry. Though he started writing poetry from his childhood, his books were published in his twenties. From the first book 18 poems published in 1934, he became famous. But it was his second book of verse Twenty-Five poems, published in 1936, that gave him wide fame. His originality in respect of style and imagery is at once striking. Kenneth Allott in the book English Poetry 1918-60, which he has edited with an introduction writes: "The verse of the more extreme neoromantics was either dark, prolix and unnecessarily involved - this was the commoner fault - or a lisping silly sooth ... while all this 'poesy' was being produced and praised in the forties Dylan Thomas was independently travelling a long way from the riddling darkness of his earlier poems in the direction of greater discipline over his considerable gifts, and in the direction of continuous rather than spasmodic, attempt at narrative meaning. Here his weak imitators were unable to follow him."¹

Thus, Dylan Thomas is a significant modern romantic poet. He gave a new direction to the art of poetry. With his native Welshness he appeared as a tour de force in the world of English poetry. The distinctive characteristics of Thomas's work are its lyrical quality, its strict formal control, a romantic

conception of the poet's function, and a religious attitude to experience. The first impression of his earlier poems is their originality.

unsubstantiated
conclusions used
as premise

It is true that Dylan is a class in himself, but he was greatly influenced by the environment he lived in, certain personalities he came into contact with, and particularly the books and poems he read. In addition to this the influence that his native place exercised over him was not of small importance in the making of his poetry. It was quite natural for a sensitive boy like Dylan Thomas. The influence of Wales is an important one among the things that influenced Thomas greatly.

Widely
used

Though Dylan Thomas did not learn the Welsh language, the impact of Welsh environment was one of the most important factors in his career as a poet. John Ackerman has given three aspects of Welsh influence: "First and foremost, there was the direct and inevitable influence of a particular community with particular traditions. Secondly there was the influence of other Welshmen writing in English ... The third influence was the tradition of culture existing in and through the Welsh language. Since he (Thomas) knew no Welsh this influence came through two channels already mentioned: contact with the Welsh-speaking relatives and friends and through translations of Welsh poetry and Prose."²

When Thomas was writing in English there were other Welshmen too, writing in English. They were: Cardoc Evans, Gwyn Jones,

Vernon Watkins, Alun Lewis, R.S. Thomas, Gwyn Thomas and Glyn Jones. These contemporaries were Thomas's friends. Among them Vernon Watkins was his closest friend. When Thomas wanted to consult Watkins about his own poetry, he wrote letters to Watkins which are a helpful source for a researcher. Later Watkins published all these letters in the form of a book, Letters to Vernon Watkins with his own introduction.

As John Ackerman has rightly pointed out, ^{was a source of inspiration} the three aspects of Welsh influence, Dylan Thomas was deeply influenced by Welsh environment and Welsh tradition.

Many times the critics of Thomas call him "a religious poet". He called himself "a holy maker" whose poems are written in praise of God. But he was not a christian in a conventional sense. As a boy Thomas attended Sunday School and chapel with his grandfather. His familiarity with the Bible starts from his school days. The Bible influenced Thomas and proved helpful in making his imagery beautiful and rich with many symbols. God and Christ are often present in Thomas's poetry -- not in their conventional types or concepts, but as images of nature, the poet himself or the destructive and creative powers.

He was brought up in Swansea and had his education in Swansea Grammar School. The situation of the town and the school was very typical. Suzanne Roussillat writes in her article: "To walk in the districts of Swansea where he was brought up is

of 1st class
Algeria
1957

revealing; interesting discoveries can be taken back. The
 (unique situation of the school must have attracted the young
 poet of Form 3, more than his master's teaching ... From everywhere
 in the Upland, you can recapture the same vision above the
 serrated rows/chimney pots ... Beyond the band of low town, too
 narrow to be seen, the sea again stretches, on the right hand to
 the rock end of Mumbles Pier where the light house ... takes the
 place of the castle as soon as the day light fades away ...

see * ex p 17
 Contradiction

Quite
 central

? "Are these vistas of the ever-recurring sea as distant background

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 the
 pile end

responsible for the sea-imagery so rich in Dylan Thomas's poetry?

Are they the origin of the frequent associations of the deep with
 the universal womb?"³ The statement of Roussillat reveals the

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fact that Wales left deep impression on Dylan Thomas in his
 boyhood. The bardic tradition of Welsh was also an important

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factor in his development. There was a love-hate relationship
 among Anglo-Welsh writers and Wales. Thomas was also one of them.

In an address to a Scottish Society of Writers in Edinburgh,
 delivered after he had moved from Wales to London, Thomas gave

the reason: "I am a Welshman, who does not live in his own
 country, mainly because he still wants to eat and drink, be

Source?

rigged and rooted, and no Welsh writer can hunt his bread and
 butter in Wales ..." The reference of the talk goes to the

economic depression after the war. Though Thomas does not dwell at
 length over his dissatisfaction in Wales, obviously he does not

seem to be happy there.

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The London literary circle contributed greatly to the development of Dylan Thomas as a poet. It was in London where he met a number of literary personalities. His monetary needs compelled him to go to America. Although he was occasionally obliged to undertake the tours of America for his poetry recitations, he often returned to Wales, Laugharne. It is sad that the man who loved his country and his home so greatly and intensely, had to die in a foreign country like America.

link

Reference

The war also affected greatly the literary world of Thomas. His war poems give the impression of horror, fear and helplessness of the man caught in war. In his letter to his father Thomas wrote, "These are awful days and we are very worried. ... If I could pray, I'd pray for peace. I'm not a man of action, and the brutal activities of war appeal me - as they do every decent thinking person."⁴ In another letter to Charles Fisher, a friend, Thomas wrote: "I am not doing anything about the war, resigned to personal neutrality, I wait until I am called up and then I will probably scream and wheedle and faint."⁵

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show that badly mind

what could she

Thomas was sometimes criticised or branded as the Communist. But his friend Augustus John writes, "At one time Dylan joined the Communist Party. ... On finding that as a Communist he would be expected to use his poetic gift for propoganda purposes, he wisely detached himself and returned to his favourite bar, a free citizen once again."⁶

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Secondly he was influenced by his childhood and the places where he spent his vacations. He often went to his aunt Ann Jones to spend his holidays. His aunt owned a farm in North Carmarthenshire. This part of his life was the happiest because he grew in such natural surroundings. The influence of these days can be seen in "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog". "Fern hill" is a poem which celebrates these childhood days. The death of his aunt also influenced him greatly. The poet has immortalised her death in his poem "After the funeral" (in memory of Ann Jones).

Thomas, a Welshman, was impressed by his home, his father and his family. Home was the root for Thomas. It is true, he never liked Wales. But again and again he returned to Wales. His father was a very learned person and his library was rich with many famous books. The evenings in Thomas's home were spent with the general readings of Shakespeare's plays or poems of famous poets. "In the later years the illness of elder Thomas, his progressively worsening cancer of throat and tongue affected Thomas very greatly, in his teen age. The prescience of death imbedded itself deeply in the imagination of the young poet and never left him."⁷ His poem "Do not go gentle into that good night" is one of the moving tributes of son to father in all literature" as Tindall remarks in his A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas.⁷ Due to his illness he could not go to school early. This illness and the symptoms of tuberculosis in later years influenced Thomas greatly. Constantine Fitzgibbon writes: "His health is a master



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of great importance if one could understand his character or his poetry ... in his early days at least his tuberculosis, the occasional spitting of blood, and the belief that he had only a very short time to live provided a favourite conversational theme."⁸ He bore to his bosom that he could not live a longer life. He said to his wife that he would not see the fortieth year of his life. How tragically true he was! His constant awareness of death has left deep impressions on his verse. Most of his poems depict the theme of death and destruction. Eventhough he wrote on other themes such as womb, birth, childhood, sex, death is dominant in most of his poems. It is considerable that the poems that are described as good ones are mainly the poems about death or destruction.

His letters also reveal the impact of destruction, [his *darkest* *place* own disease.] In a letter to Bert Trick, written in 1935 Thomas wrote: "I'm at home and the blood's split, but only until the pricked veins heal up again and my water and sugar turn red again, and the body and the brain, all the centres of movement, must shift or die. It may be a primary loneliness that makes me out-of-home. It may be this or that, and this and that is enough for today. Poor Dylan. Poor him. Poor me."⁹

His poems reflect his various moods and his contemplation on the theme of death. Some such poems are "Before I knocked", "The force that through the green fuse", "When like a running grave", "This bread I break", "The hand that signed the paper",

"Deaths and Entrances", "A Refusal to mourn ..." etc.

Before Dylan Thomas looked seriously to the writing of poetry he had already read many famous poets. He had read Hopkins and Pound, Blake and Yeats, and other famous writers and poets. All these great masters influenced him now and then. It is very natural for a young writer, sensible to life and literature, and for whom literature is an organic part of life, to have been greatly influenced by the socio-cultural ethos around him.

Before discussing the literary influences it is necessary to look at some of the characteristics of Anglo-Welsh writing. According to Ackerman, "The process of a writer, depends however, not only upon his own canalisation of energies, but also upon the prevailing climate of influence and taste."¹⁰ In the writing of Dylan Thomas we can find those typical characteristics of Anglo-Welsh writing. These qualities are: lyrical quality, strict formal control, richness of metaphor and dominantly sensuous imagination, romantic concept of the poet's function and a religious attitude to experience. Apart from these characteristics one most distinguished characteristic of Anglo-Welsh writing is a deep, pervading pathos. Anglo-Welsh writers enjoy sorrow, death theme is a favourite theme with these writers. All these characteristics are reflected in the work of Dylan Thomas and,

more or less, in his contemporary Anglo-Welsh writers also.

> link?

When Thomas was a school-boy he had read great writers and poets. His article on modern poetry is a brilliant piece of his scholarship. The general readings of Shakespeare's plays and great poems by great masters acquainted him with the rich tradition of English literature along with celtic mythology, the knowledge of the Bible made his imagery rich and striking.

The poets that influenced him and his concept of death are great masters of English poetry such as Donne. The influence of Donne, the great Metaphysical poet of the 17th century, is an important one. There is a great deal of similarity in the writings of Donne and Dylan Thomas, on the themes of sex, religion and death. There is an intense consciousness of death in both of them. Donne preached "Death's Duell", in his "Last Sermon". Thomas's poems show a similar obsession with the fact of death.

Then why omit his name from the list on p. 21?

The two poetry passages quoted below show us how Donne and Dylan Thomas shared some common interests:

I sit and watch the worm beneath my nail

←

Why this since?

Wearing the quick away.

or

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb

How at any sheet goes the same crooked worm.

Donne writes, "And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee." Thomas, in "Ceremony After a Fire Raid", writes,

Myselfes,
The grievers,
Grieve,
Among the street burned to tireless death
A child of a few hours.

Thomas's poem "And death shall have no dominion" reminds us of Donne's "Death be not proud".

Yes, but the quotation does not prove that

Thomas was also influenced by the style and startling imagery of Hopkins. William T. Moynihan in his book writes, "By fifteen Thomas was analyzing modern poetry for his school magazine ... In one of his essays he emphasised the influence of Hopkins, the Sitwells, and Eliot. Modern poetry, he wrote, has its roots in Hopkins's "compressing the already unfamiliar imagery" and in the realism of Eliot's "Preludes". It seems somehow significant that Thomas should stress Hopkins' imagery rather than his rhythmic and auditory techniques."¹¹

There is no telling where the original quote ends or whether begins

Hopkins's 'Jack self' becomes "My Jack of Christ" in "If I were tickled by the rub of love". The emotional impulse of the language is a main link in the two poets. Hopkins's influence is clear in the imagery, language, use of metre and religious attitude in poems such as, "The force that through the green fuse", "This bread I break", "If I were tickled by the rub of love"

etc. Henry Treece, in his book, Dylan Thomas: Dog Among the Fairies, has devoted a special chapter to the influence of Hopkins on Dylan Thomas. He writes, "It has been fashionable during the last generations to cite Hopkins as a dominant influence wherever the work of a new poet has been under discussion ... But the case of Thomas is one where the derivation from the earlier poets is so organic and as profound as to deserve close attention."¹²

Thomas had studied Blake as a school boy. Therefore the influence of Blake is seen from early poems. Moynihan writes: "When one looks back from the vantage point of the complete work, Blake's influence looms large in Thomas's attempt to find fresh symbols for the old forms of chapel and country."¹³ He further writes, "For Thomas the Blakean destruction of the material was finally a means of overcoming the dread of death - a means - not completely successful: In one letter for example, (to Henry Treece) he remarks how easy it is for him to say, as Blake did, "Death to me is no more than going into another room". But how difficult for him to believe it."¹⁴ Thomas was influenced by the simplicity and musicality of Blake's poems and chose Blake's poems for poetry reading on the B.B.C.

Keats influenced Thomas greatly not only because of his poetry but also his life. Keats died of consumption in early age and Thomas's belief in transitoriness of life drove him nearer

to Keats. Keats's poetry is full of creativity and finds joy in the midst of sorrow. Thomas's poems, "Poem in October", "In country sleep", "Over Sir John's Hill", "Poem in October", etc. celebrate the joy of life as some of Keats's poems do.

don't say many poets do like some?

Yeats fascinated Thomas with his fanciful imagery and lyrical quality. Yeats's clarity of idiom was marvelous. His images such as 'tower' occur in Thomas's poems and Thomas's "Lament" reminds 'a tattered coat upon a stick' of Yeats.

grammar?

One more writer and poet influenced Thomas greatly - Thomas Hardy. Dylan Thomas considered Thomas Hardy (as) a great poet of the century. He has described his poem "The tombstone told when she died" as 'Hardy-like' in one of his letters to Watkins. As Hardy's 'darkling thrush' sings in the gloom Dylan Thomas's birds are 'dark vowelled.' Hardy's war poems such as "The Soldier" must have influenced Thomas very greatly.

incumbent

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[In addition to the influence of English poets, Dylan Thomas was also influenced by poets as Rimbaud.] His contemporaries also left their impact on Thomas more or less. His friends such as Vernon Watkins and Daniel Jones show this akinness. Daniel Jones says in one of his articles, "We read aloud to one another, usually our own poems, and exchanged criticism and some of the time was always spent in writing either separately or in collaboration."¹⁵

grammar?

The poetry of Dylan Thomas is mostly described as obscure, ?

link?

difficult to understand and even difficult to interpret. His readers always find his poetry challenging. Although much has been written about his poetry much more remains to be explored from it. Louis Mac Neice remarks, "Yeats described the poet as one who knows 'that 'Hamlet' and 'Lear' are gay'. No poet of our time was a better example of this than Thomas. ... Many of his poems are concerned with death or the darker forces, yet they all have the joy of life in them. And many of his poems are obscure but it is never obscurity of carelessness. ..."¹⁶

> link?

Thomas was widely praised as well as condemned by critics. Tindall remarks that, "nothing by Thomas could be plainer than this debate between embryo and mother."¹⁷ Grigson feels Thomas's poems "Sprawl loosely below the waist".¹⁸

Thomas, however, established himself as a great poet. It is true that he has written some stories or books of prose work, but his popularity chiefly rests on his poetry.

As a thorough Anglo-Welsh poet, Thomas wrote on the themes of birth, childhood, sex, and death. He remained curious, always, of the process in the womb. His remarkable poems on birth theme are "Before I knocked", "In the beginning", "I dreamed my genesis". In one of his birthday poems "Twenty-four Years" the poet imagines himself as an embryo.

Childhood is an important theme in the poetry of Dylan Thomas. It is said that Thomas always remained a boy, an

adolescent one. His childhood days in schools and his holidays with his aunt Ann Jones are the main sources of his poetry and prose. He celebrates these golden days in his remarkable poems "Fern Hill" and "Poem in October". Many stories of Dylan Thomas reveal the theme of childhood. "In Reminiscence of childhood", Thomas writes about his childhood days.

Sex, according to Thomas, is a creative as well as destructive force. But he uses sex theme as an agent of destruction in human life. "I see the boys of summer", "Our eunuch dreams", "If I were tickled by the rub of love", and such other poems show the force of sex as destructive. But the poems such as "Ballad of a long legged bait" convey the idea that life is a happy companionship.

His war-poems are also unforgettable. "When I woke", "Ceremony after a Fire-Raid", "Dawn Raid", "A Refusal to mourn" such and other poems reveal the horror, helplessness and death of innocent people in war.

Dylan Thomas has also depicted the plight of infants caught in the horror of war. His two poems "A Ceremony After a Fire Raid" and "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" painfully and vividly bring out the agony of war even to the infants.

In all these themes, the theme of death and destruction is

centrally placed in most of the poems. It may be a poem on birth or childhood or sex, Thomas sees its destruction from various angles. The process of destruction from the womb in "Before I knocked", the destruction continues, in the form of sex in "I see the boys of summer" or other poems. The infants burnt alive in the war become immortal in Thomas's poems. Thus the theme of death becomes a dominant and important theme in the poetry of Dylan Thomas.

The theme of death in the poetry of Dylan Thomas gradually passes from one phase to another, say, from fear and obsession to a sense of defiance, finally culminating into the acceptance of it. Dylan Thomas does not confine his obsession and fear of death only to the human world. He also envisages its working in the vegetation and a world of nonliving things.

An attempt has been made here to throw some light upon the development of the concept of death in the poetry of Dylan Thomas.

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