
CHAPTER-III: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF DEATH

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Paradoxically enough, Dylan, a bohemian poet, appears to ^{why?} be constantly obsessed with the idea of death in his poetry. He looks at various stages of death in life and from various angles supposing it to be something mysterious and something unavoidable. He might have walked in the streets of London like a dandy, or might have conversed with the people so as to show to others that he was never a serious person by temperament; but when actually he was in the vein of composing a few words or lines he was almost weighed down by the sense of mutability, the everlasting reality of continuous decay and death in all the forms of earthly existence. His obsession with the concept of death has been so extensive and intensive that he not only tries to define it but also to divulge the mystery of it. The attempt is a sort of his journey from 'darkness to light'. He has, in his poems, indicated the main reasons of decay and death. These reasons are mostly natural as well as unnatural. Similarly, he has plumbed the depths of various kinds of death in all forms of life. The concept of death, however, is divided into two forms, decay or destruction, and death. Decay or destruction can be slow or sudden but death is the last step of decay or destruction. It is seen from his poems that Thomas sometimes refers to human death or animal death, and even sometimes to the death of aesthetic-poetic-powers in a creative artist.

Dylan Thomas deals with the idea of death quite intricately and with intricate words which act as symbols for many things. The depth of vision of death reaches almost all the stages of animate and inanimate objects in the universe. Sometimes, as in "The force that through the green fuse" he tackles the theme of vegetable decay; and sometimes he refers to decay and loss of poetic sensibility in "On no work of words".

Thomas's poetry reflects a variety of deaths. Right from the conception of a person or an animal, death can eat away time and sap. For instance in "When like a running grave", death is witnessed in the stage of adolescence. In fact it indicates growth, as in "I see the boys of summer". He has also thought of sudden or accidental deaths such as death in war. Thomas has written many war poems: "Ceremony After a Fire Raid", "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London", "The hand that signed the paper", "When I woke", "Among Those Who Killed in the Down Raid was a Man ^{Aged a} / Hundred" etc. Death is considered as the natural catastrophe in such poems as "Lament" and "Over Sir John's hill". Death or decay due to age is also a natural process which is shown by "After the funeral".

The reasons of death can be multiple but the agents are only three. They are Time, War and Sex. Among these three, Time is the most important. Thomas's 'Time-sense' is conveyed in many poems: "Grief thief of time", "When like a running grave", "In country sleep", "Here in the spring", "It is the sinner's dust

tongued bell", "Then was my neophyte", "Find meat on bones", "Was there a time", "The tomb-stone told when she died", and his four birthday poems, "Especially when the October wind", "Twenty-four years", "Poem in October" and "Poem on his birthday".

The second agent is war. War affects the every day life of a common man. The deaths in war left their impression on Thomas. His war poems such as "Ceremony After a Fire Raid", "The hand that signed the paper", "A refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London", "Among Those Who Killed in the Dawn Raid" reflect his feelings.

The third agent is sex which destroyes men. Poem "I see the boys of summer", "If I were tickled by the rub of love", are the poems on the theme of destruction by sex.

The poet not only points out the kinds, reasons or agents of death but he also points out the effects of death in poems such as "I see the boys of summer", "The force that through the green fuse", "Find meat on bones".

Dylan Thomas often tries to relate death with other cycles of life. It is true that death is the last stage, the "full stop" to the life which can be seen and felt by the senses. The poet feels the existence of death in every stage of life — human life as well as vegetable or animal life. His poems, "Before I knocked", "If my head hurt a hair's foot", "Twenty-four years" convey an embryo and its process of destruction that starts

from the womb. In poems like "I see the boys of summer", "The force that through the green fuse", he expresses the existence of death in youth.

Writing about the concept of death David Daiches writes -
"If we ignore the cosmic round to seize the moment when we think we have it, we are both deluded and doomed:

I see the boys of summer in their ruin
Lay the gold tithings barren,
Setting no store by harvest, freeze the soils;
There is in their heart the winter Floods
Of the frozen loves they fetch their girls,
And drown the cargoes apples in their tides.
Those boys of Light are curdlers in their roly,
sour the boiling honey; ...

This is from an early poem; and several of these early poems strike this note - the note of doom in the midst of present pleasure, for concealed in each moment lie change and death."¹

He himself said that his poetry is the record of his individual struggle from darkness to light. Dylan Thomas in his poetry tried to overcome the process of death. From death, another life starts. This concept of 'regeneration' is seen in his poetry. "This bread I break", "And death shall have no dominion" express these feelings. Even he enters the grave like Donne. In the words of Elder Olson, "Death is no terminus for him; he descends into the grave and suffers the strange and

secret existence of the dead, suffers the resolution of body into its elements and the transmutation of those elements into other forms of life."²

Thomas looks at the concept of death from various angles. Sometimes he thinks death as a journey from womb to tomb and again to womb. Even in his birthday poem "Twenty-four years" the poet thinks of himself as an embryo, preparing for death, 'Sewing a shroud for a journey'. Sometimes he feels death as the end of life. This concept of death obsessed the poet's mind from his teen age. In his poetry we can see the 'journey' of poet's thoughts from fear and obsession to acceptance. The poems that show the fear are "I see the boys of summer", "The force that through the green fuse".

Gradually Thomas's mind turned to the defiance of death. In poems such as "And death shall have no dominion", "Now", "Do not go gentle into that good night", "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London", the poet expresses his feelings of defiance of death.

In the last phase of the thought of death, the poet seems to accept death. In his birthday poems we can see his awareness of death and death as a continual, gradual and inevitable process. In addition to these birthday poems there are other poems like "Deaths and Entrances" that reveal his acceptance.

The stage after the acceptance of death is the concept of regeneration. Thomas believes that any object in the universe reforms and thus takes new birth. The theory of regeneration that Thomas uses is not only in religious terms but also in terms of a natural process. The concept is explained in "This bread I break", "And death shall have no dominion" etc.

I

Thomas has gone deep into the depths of various kinds of death in all forms of life. He was always attracted towards death that occurred in various forms in universal life. In some of his poems he has dealt with human death and destruction at various stages in human life.

Thomas feels existence of death at every stage of life. From womb to tomb, death can be witnessed in its various phases. In fact Thomas uses the words 'womb' and 'tomb' for contrary meanings. In Thomas's poems 'womb' is 'tomb' and 'tomb' is 'womb'. Poems that point out the subject of the process of death and destruction that starts from the womb are "A process in the weather of the heart", "Before I knocked", "If my head hurt a hair's foot", "Twenty-four years", "A saint about to fall", "This side of truth".

"The process in the weather of the heart" is a poem that

shows the poet's awareness of death as part of life. The theme of the poem is the gradual process of death starting from the womb in human life and its connection with nature. The process starts from the 'freezing tomb' i.e. womb.

A process in the weather of the heart
Turns damp to dry; the golden shot
Storms in the freezing tomb.

The 'golden shot' is 'sperm' in the womb. The weather turns damp to dry, the images stand for life and death. Dark weather in the eye foresees the 'blindness' i.e., the darkness of the bones in the tomb. The womb brings out the death with every birth:

and the womb
Drives in a death as life leaks out.

In the third stanza the 'womb' is mentioned as 'the fathomed sea', which breaks on 'unangled' i.e. unmeasured land. The weather in the eye is 'half the light', it means half the knowledge is dark i.e. not understood.

The weather in the 'flesh and bone' becomes damp and dry as that of the weather in the heart. 'The quick and dead' means alive and dead, are dead and both become ghosts before the eye. Thus the 'process of the World/Turns ghost to ghost', and 'each mothered child/Sits in their double shade'. The 'curtains of the skin' i.e. lids of eyes fall upon the eyes - the comprehensive and essential part of the body.



And the heart gives up its dead.

This poem indicates the process of birth and death.

The process of death starts from womb and through the knowledge of the weather of the heart, of the eye, flesh and bone and the natural process goes to the 'tomb'.

'Before I knocked', a typical Thomas poem, discusses the theme of creation and destruction. The persona in the poem is a 'shapeless' vital liquid, which has not assumed the shape even in the womb. But this shapeless liquid foresees eventhough it is a very primary step of any human being. Before 'knocking' the persona is as shapeless as Christ's Jordan, or as the shaping water in the jordan i.e. chamber pot. It is so shapeless that it has yet to get the sex:

Was brother to Mnetha's daughter
And sister to the fathering worm.

'Mnetha' as Olson points out, is a character in Blake's 'Tiriel'. 'The fathering worm' is the worm which is responsible for continuous generation. It may be the serpant of Genesis, who brought death into the world. The persona knows not the sensory perceptions of spring and sun, nor sun or moon; but he 'felt thud' within 'flesh's armour'. He can understand winter, darted nail, childish snow - and -

My veins flowed with the Eastern weather;
Ungotten I knew night and day.

The fourth stanza describes the preoccupation with death:

And flesh was snipped to cross the lines
Of gallow crosses on the liver
And brambles in the wringling brains.

'The gallow crosses' signify crucification. The brambles are the thorns, in the thorny crown of Jesus. As Christ suffers the thirst on the cross so the persona knows the thirst in his pre-structured skin of throat in the womb. In the same way his 'heart knows love' and his 'belly, hunger'. The line 'I smelt maggot in my tool' is the identification of death. Gradually time shapes the liquid into a 'mortal creature' and leaves 'to drift or drawn upon the seas' of life. Thus born of 'flesh and ghost', he is neither flesh (man) nor ghost (Christ), but mortal ghost, who will die in future. Christ is an image for every man in the world. The embryo is mortal so it says -

And I was struck down by death's feather.

In the last stanza the poet tells to pity Christ:

Who took my flesh and bone for armour
And doublecrossed my mother's womb.

Christ is an image for every man. It means that with every birth Christ repeats His miracle. He takes the poet's (embryo's) 'flesh and bone for armour' for doublecrossing the mother's womb. William York Tindall interprets these lines: "'To doublecross' means to deceive or betray. God deceived Mary and denied her by

ghostly begetting. Any father deceives any mother by engendering death. Two crossings of the maternal gate, one is in and one out, two knockings at the gate, and the double crucifixion of birth and death, of man and poet are also present in this condensation."³ Thus the poem ends with the note of future death of the shapeless liquid in the womb.

"A Saint about to fall" is written when Caitlin was expecting their first child. The poem was first called "Poem in the Ninth Month". A Saint is the unborn child who will fall on earth like Adam. The reference is of course of the 'first-sin' of eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The child will fall like Adam, on earth which is full of dangers and cruelties. The poem is written during the war period. So there are the references of fire raids (flats of heaven hit and razed). In a letter to Watkins Thomas wrote:

"Remember this is a poem written to a child about to be born - you know I'm going to be a father in January - and telling it what a world it will see, what horrors and hells"⁴. The father tells the unborn child what to expect while entering this world. He says to the child:

From an odd room in a split house stare,
Milk in your mouth, at the sour floods
That bury the sweet street slowly, see
The skull of the earth is barbed with a war of
burning brains and hair.

Come into this life in my house with sweet milk in your mouth. You will see the human cruelty and unkindness. 'The sour food' of the unkindness of human being buries 'the sweet street' of heaven from where you are coming. See that 'the skull of the earth' is becoming analogous - Wake and feel the experience of mortality. The father tells to 'strike in the time-bomb town' indicates two things, one is the war period and second is the mortality that the Time brings. Thus the father 'introduces' the world, its cruelty, mortality to the unborn child.

"If my head hurt a hair's foot" is also a poem about an unborn child. But here the unborn child is talking to its mother. Thus it is a conversation between the unborn child and its mother.

The unborn child wants to stay in its present condition i.e. in the womb because its birth would give its mother pain and suffering.

'Ball', in Thomas's poems, means life. Here the process of birth is imagined as violent like a bouncing ball. In the third stanza it says -

If my bunched, monkey coming is cruel
Rage me back to the making house. My hand unravel
when you sew the deep door. The bed is a cross place.
Bend, if my journey ache, direction like an arc or make
A limp and riderless shape to leap nine thining months

The 'bunched, monkey coming' is cruel because 'The bed is

a cross place' for the mother. So the unborn child tells its mother to rage it back in the 'making house' i.e. womb. It tells the mother to 'bend' its unborne form like an arc if its journey to this earth aches the mother. Or 'make a limp' and make me disappear in 'nine thinning months; as the nine months gave me shape, make me 'shape-less'.

From the fourth stanza the mother replies and tells her embryo not to say like this. She tells that the process of life must be continued to end:

No. Not for Christ's dazzling bed
Or a nacreous sleep among soft particles and charms
My dear would I change my tears on your iron head.
Thrust, my daughter or son, to escape, there is none,
none, none,
Nor when all ponderous heaven's host of waters breaks.

The mother tells her unborn child that she would not exchange her 'tears' i.e. her pains at the time of birth 'on your iron head'. The head is 'iron head' because it would give a lot of pains while begetting. It is inevitable, thrust out your 'iron head' though it costs a lot of suffering for me. There is no escape, the word 'none' repeatedly indicates the process of birth as well as death. There is no escape even 'when all ponderous heaven's host of waters breaks'.

In the fourth stanza she says you have lived in the womb with protection. Now you 'must couch and cry'. The last stanza

again repeats the inevitable process:

No return
Though the waves of the fat streets nor the skeleton's
thin ways.

There is no escape from 'the fat streets' (flesh') and
'skeleton's thin ways' (bones).

In this way the mother tells the mutability of the
unending process of life and death.

A short poem 'Twenty-four years', though a birthday poem,
holds a little of the theme of the process of death that starts
from the womb:

I crouched like a tailor
Sewing a shroud for a journey
By light of the meat-eating sun.

The journey of human life starts towards death from the
womb. The 'tailor' image is one of the famous images by Thomas.
He expresses the preparation for death even from the womb. Like
a tailor he is 'sewing a shroud for a journey'. He is 'dressed
to die', here the dress is the sewed shroud, skin.

Apart from the theme that conveys the death process from
the womb, Thomas, in 'This side of truth' shows his innocent
child of six years' old, the other side of truth. The child may

see good and beautiful side of the world with 'King' of his 'blue eyes', but he is blind to see 'That all is undone

Under the unminding skies.

Before the child looks to 'innocence' and 'guilt' they will split away into the 'winding dark' of the life.

In the next stanza the poet tells two ways -

Good and bad, two ways
Of moving about your death.

If the child will live a good life he will have a good death. If the child will live badly he will have a bad death. 'The grinding sea' is life. But the process of living and dying, the natural circle of life and death is continuous and inevitable.

Death can be witnessed even in the stage of adolescence and youth. Both adolescence and youth are the periods of growth in human life. Thomas presents, in some poems his view of the deathly destruction even in the growing stages of human life. 'I see the boys of summer' conveys the theme of destruction of young boys. The persona sees the 'boys of summer' in their ruin. The word 'summer' signifies the season of growth and fulfilment. But the speaker sees their ruin. The boys

Lay their gold tithings barren
Setting no store by harvest, freeze the soils;

The lines signify the sterility in the life of the boys. All the boys are the victims of time. The speaker fears

I see that from these boys shall men of nothing
Stature by seedy shifting ...

In the second part, the boys are protesting as
'But seasons must be changed' ...

In the third stanza the speaker says:

I am the man your father was

The speaker thus changes his appearance. He becomes a man like the father of the boys. He talks about his fear of the destruction of the young boys.

This fear of destruction of youth is expressed clearly in Thomas's celebrated poem, "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower". This poem won fame for Thomas for the first time. The theme of the poem is the destruction and creation of human as well as natural life by one powerful force. The poet is frightened to see the mighty force which works in human life as well as in nature. The force at once gives life to a human being and natural objects and takes it away. The force through the green fuse of the tree gives life to a flower. The flower is symbolic of a new blossom, the youth of the tree. The same force flowers the 'green age' of the poet. But the same force makes the rose 'crooked'. And it is the same force that 'bent' the youth

of the poet. Looking at the destruction the poet is 'dumb to tell'. He is struck with fear and cannot tell the truth of destruction. 'Crooked rose' signifies death in life. It reminds us of Blake's "Sick Rose".

Death caused by old age is a natural process. "After the funeral" and "Elegy" are the poems which throw light upon the natural, gradual destruction and death due to age. In "After the funeral" the poet celebrates the death of his aunt Ann Jones - on whose farms in Carmarthenshire Thomas as a school boy, had spent his rich and golden holidays. The aunt died of old age 'Ann is seventy years of stone'. In the first few lines the poet describes the situation of the room where Ann Jones's body is kept. Then he describes other mourners. But the real mourner is Thomas himself. He becomes a 'desolate' boy who does not cry but sheds 'dry leaves' of poetry, the elegy written on her death.

As in the traditional elegy, he calls all the seas to service her. The boy remembers -

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

The poet mourns the death because his aunt Ann Jones was the golden thread which bound him to his rich childhood. Her death is silent like a 'still drop', her body lies 'dumb and deep'. Her death owes much to Thomas as a boy and as a poet.

"Elegy" is an unfinished elegy on his father by Dylan Thomas. Before the death of his father he wrote "Do not go gentle into that good night". However, he could not publish it until his father's death. After some days he published the poem with this elegy.

Eventhough the elegy is unfinished, it is simple and moving.

Too proud to die, broken and blind he died
The darkest way, and did not turn away.

Thomas describes the death of his father. In his note after the "Elegy" Vernon Watkins has given the note in which he has included a note:

"(1) Although he was too proud to die, he did die, blind, in the most agonising way but he did not flinch from death and was brave in his pride.

(2) In his innocence, and thinking he was God-hating, he never knew that what he was was: an old kind man in his burning pride.

(3) Now he will not leave my side, though he is dead.

(4) His mother said that as a baby he never cried; nor did he, as an old man; he just cried to his secret wound and his blindness, never aloud."

The whole meaning of the elegy has been given by Thomas himself in these notes. His father died of old age and cancer, never 'leave' his side, in his lifetime.

Death, that has made itself clear in all forms of life is, however, natural. Death may occur in man's life in the form of accidents. The poems, Thomas has written on war, can fall in the group. Though Thomas has not written on any kind of real accidental death, the deaths in the war period are unnatural. The war disturbed the life of common man. Thomas was a pacifist. He always opposed war. But it was impossible for him not to be affected by the death of innocent people. These war-time deaths affected him greatly. His feelings of fear, terror, restlessness, helplessness and isolation can be witnessed in his war poems: "Ceremony after a fire raid", "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London", "Among those who killed in the dawn raid was a Man Aged a Hundred, etc.

The poem "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" describes the condition of the streets, homes and people 'After a Fire Raid.' The poem creates the pathetic impression of the death of a newly born child on its mother's breast. The poet calls it a 'ceremony', a ritual. The child, its mother and all dead people are sacrificial objects. He describes the child for whom

the grave

The mother dug, and its arms full of fires.

The line gives two meanings - the child was in the womb before birth and after only a few hours it dies and goes to tomb. Second, the process of death ironically starts from birth in the case of the child. The second stanza describes the situation of

homes and streets in London after the fire raid. London is described as an 'altor', on which, as it is described in the third stanza, the ceremony of sacrifice of the child was to take place. The sacrifice of the child includes all deaths in the war. The priest is the poet himself. There is a musical chant in the third stanza to sing the 'sacrifice'.

In short the poem mourns the death of the innocent infant as well as all the deaths and the destruction of inanimate things like homes and streets in London.

"Among Those Who Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred" tells us the story of an old man of hundred. He, as usual, wanted to go to walk but -

He put on his clothes and stepped out and died.

In this simple line the poet successfully describes the horror of the war. The old man was living on that street for hundred years. He knew the street very well. He, perhaps went for a morning walk every day. But that particular morning turned out ominous for him. In fact he was so old that he could die at any moment. He had nothing to do with the war. But, though innocent, he died. He died at a point of the road which he loved much. Both the poems mourn the death of innocent people in war. As the infant is helpless, the old man is also helpless. It means that the war left nobody to destroy - either infant or the man that lived his full life.

"A Refusal to Mourn the Death by Fire, of a Child in London" is again a war poem. But this time it is different in mood. Here the poet is not mourning but refusing to mourn. Again the death of an innocent child caused by bombing is the theme of the poem. The child is killed in the fire raid in London. The poet does not mourn because the cycle of life which includes creation and destruction, reconstructs life and the child will be reborn because -

After the first death there is no other.

Thomas refers to the first death on the earth. There is no other death means other deaths are mere reflections of the first death. And as the child will reborn in the form of either bird or flower, there is no death.

Thomas's war poems express the horror felt by the spectacle of cruel massacre. He feels pity and terror. His poems present naked reality of death in all times of war.

Only the human being is not subject to death. Every object in the universe is destined to be destroyed in this or that form. In some of his poems Thomas indicated the destruction of animate and inanimate things. For instance, "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower" describes the mighty power which works alike in creation as well as in destruction of all human and natural objects. The force that gives life to a flower and the 'green age' of the poet 'blasts the roots of trees' and

destroys the life of the poet.

In the second stanza the poet compares water in rocky streams with blood in veins. The force or 'the mouth' here, 'sucks' the water in the stream as well as the blood in the veins. The nature is related with human life. In the third stanza, the poet draws the image of a pool in which the water is whirled by the same force which 'stirs' the quick sand". "Quicksand", as Tindall interprets, "unites the quick and the dead. A quicksand engulfs us as quicksand in an hourglass marks destructive time." ⁵

The lips of time leech to the fountain head; 'The lips' of time 'leech' the creation of the universe. The last two lines convey bitterness and despair:

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

The 'lover' is the representative of creative process and his 'tomb' is the representative of destruction. The 'crooked worm' is ^{the worm} of destruction. The poet speaks about his fear of destruction. 'The fathering worm' of "Before I knocked" has become 'crooked worm', reminding us again of Blake's "Sick Rose". The poet is dumb with fear to tell the stark reality of the end of universal life - death.

In this very finely constructed poem the poet is able to show the parallel process of creation and destruction in human

life and nature. It is one of the finest poems by Thomas.

In "A process in the weather of the heart" the poet has used images from nature to describe the process of life towards death. Words such as 'weather', 'storms', 'night to day', 'living worm', 'darkness', 'fathomed sea', 'unangled land', 'the sea' etc. are used very intricately. The word 'weather' is used to describe the process of the heart, of the eye, flesh and bone and at last the weather of the world - which turns ghost to ghost, symbolic of mortality of every object - human as well as natural. The words 'freezing tomb', 'fathomed sea', 'unangled land' are used for the womb. 'Living worm' is the sperm in the womb that creates 'storms' in the womb. Another 'sea' image is symbolic of life. Thus the human and natural life is related to each other in both processes of life and death.

Another type of death in nature is the death of little birds killed as a prey. It is an imposed death of these birds by a big and strong bird. "Over Sir John's Hill" conveys this idea. This is the elegy for the birds. Sir John's Hill, which is called 'St. John's Hill' and the river Towy, are the parts of Laugharne landscape, much familiar to the poet. Like God, the poet observes the 'fall' of little birds from the distance. The heron is his companion, which signifies purity in Thomas.

Over Sir John's hill,
The hawk on fire hangs still,

The opening lines describe the hawk on fire, meaning the sunlight on the wings of the hawk. It also means destruction (of the little birds). "Hangs still" means flying smoothly in the sky. Thus the hawk becomes the hangman, who will decide the destiny of sparrows. The sparrows, not knowing the destiny are flying in the sky, squaking happily and playing. The word 'gallows', according to John Ackerman, suggests "a certain guilt on the part of birds; as it with their warring and wrangling, they are, allegorically, heirs of the original sin"⁶.

The hawk is a hangman executing the birds, since the hill is called 'fiery tyburn'. The heron, symbol of holiness, is fishing in the river Towy. It remains outside this ceremony bows down in the river Towy as if to mourn the execution of small birds. But ironically enough he is also killing the fish in the river Towy.

In the second stanza the hill is described:

-Flash, and plumes crack,
And a black cap of jack -
Dows Sir John's just hill dons and again the gulled birds
hare
To the hawk on fire ...

The hill is 'just' because it is a judge and hence it wears 'a black cap of jack dows'. The reference of 'New Testament' where the Christ is described as the 'fisher of men', comes in elegiac fisher bird:

There

Where the elegiac fisherbird stabs and puddles.

The 'loft hawk' calls the birds 'dilly dilly',

'come and be killed', suggesting that there is no

escape from the action.

The third stanza opens with the description of the sea-shore. The 'husk' shell is a sign of mortality because it signifies the home of a living creature. The poet, too, hears death bell in the sea sand of the 'buoy's bell'.

All praise of the hawk as fire in hawk-eyed

dusk be sung,

When his viperish fuse hangs looped with

forms under the brand.

Ding, and blest shall

Green chickens of the bay and bushes cluck, dilly dilly

Come let us die!

In the first part, the poet and the heron praise the hawk as it is working for the duty. The word 'green' reminds 'The force that through the green fuse'. The word is used as a sign of life as 'green age' in "The force that through the green fuse". But the chickens indicate coming death - 'let us die'.

The heron is described as a saint remaining away from the place of action, rather, execution. The poet also observes the action from a distant place.

In the fourth stanza both the poet and the heron observe the fall of the birds:

It is heron and I, underjudging Sir John's elmed
Hill, tale-tale the knelled
Guilt
Of the led-astray birds whom God, for their breast of
Whitles,
Have mercy on,
God in his whirlwind silence save, who marks the sparrows
hail
For their soul's song.

The poet and the heron mourn the death, but from the safe
distance. The heron:

.. grieves in the weeded verge
and the poet -

Through
windows
Of dusk and water ...

In the last stanza the poet tells that no 'green' bird
could have survived the windhover. In the silence only the noise
made by the heron while fishing on the river Towy is heard.

The poet is listening to the music of
'slow/Wear-willow river and is thinking of the process of death.
He is moved by the death of small birds.

The death of the sparrows is metaphorical. They are the
sinners and must be punished. The death of the birds is used
as a metaphor for the death of man who has come in this world
for his sin and is punished by death.

II

Some of the poems of Thomas on the theme of death form a group - the poems on the agents of death and destruction. These agents are Time, War and Sex.

Time is the most important and dominant agent of death. It is in the flux of time that every object goes to its end. It is a natural process that in the span of time a thing is born and vanishes. The poems that convey this idea are: "Grief thief of time", "When like a running grave", "In country sleep", "Poem on his birthday", "Then was my neophyte", "Sonnet VII" of "Altarwise by owl light", "It is the sinner's dust tongued bell", "Was there a time", "The tombstone told when she died".

The theme of the poem "Grief thief of time" is the destruction in the flux of time, old age. The thief of time is grief. This thief 'crawls off' the man from the 'moon-grown grave', womb. It means that the time with a lot of suffering and sorrow takes the man from womb to tomb.

The poem expresses the idea with the image of old 'sea men'. It is the time that makes forged 'the old' the 'seafaring years' and 'the sea-halved' faith'. Clark Emery interprets: "The assumption of the first will be that the seafaring years have ended, the old seamen have kept faith (the sea-halved faith) with the sea and are now not unhappily spending their days ashore"⁷. But as it is the 'grief', thief of time the interpretation of Emery does not

suit. The time reminds to the 'old' the years of their action and they become sad.

The second stanza 'Jack my fathers' indicates the forefathers that are all the victims of time. The thief is 'crook' as the 'crooked worm' of "The force that through the grass fuse". This crook steals down the stallion grave 'with swag of bubbles in a sweedy sack'. It is the indication of sex. Tindall remarks, "Time the thief is sex, and sex, the thief of time is grief"⁸. Tindall completes the cycle of the things those destroy the man in this or that way.

"When like a running grave" is a poem written in early years. The major theme of the poem is the destructive activities of time. Time 'the running grave' indicates womb as well as tomb. In the second stanza the poet uses the 'tailor' image as in "Twenty-four years". But here the 'tailor' is Time, who cuts life short.

Comes, like scissors, tailor age,

Time is 'foolish fancy' says the poet, but in fact, he wants to say that time is no fool. The hammer (of time) that descends, destroys creation. In the ninth stanza the poet speaks of the end of everything -

Everything ends, the tower ending and,
(Have with the house of wind), the leaning scene,
Ball of the foot depending from the sun,
(Give, summer, over) the cemented skin,
The action's end.

'The wind' and 'sun' are the representatives of Time. Everything ends in due course of time. The poet talks about summer (Give, summer, over). The summer is giving way to winter - the season of destruction. 'The action's end' is the action, the movement of flesh also comes to an end. Thus time is the destroyer of all living and non-living objects.

"In country sleep", the poem is written for his daughter by Thomas, reminds of Yeats, "A prayer for my daughter". Here the father is giving way to his feelings of being a father.

He tells his daughter not to fear the wolves and fearful fairy tales, and asks her to sleep without fear of dreams and witches ,

Never and never, my girl riding far and near
In the land of hearthstone tales, and spelled asleep,
Fear or believe that the wolf in a sheep white blood
Loping and bleating roughly and blithely shall leap,
My dear, my dear,

He tells there is nothing melancholy in nature, it is holy and the house is safe. The real thief is time. The daughter can sleep until death tolls her to final sleep. Time is the thief

'as meek as dew'. The thief of Time will fall upon the girl. This is nothing but the inevitability of death.

Yet out of the beaked, web dark and pouncing bought.
Be you sure the Thief will seek a way sly and sure

The thief often finding out a way will come towards the daughter. In fact the thief is behind the daughter not only from 'this night' but also from 'each night since the falling star you were born'.

The thief will find a way from all seasons - snow falls,
rain falls, dew, windmilled dust, the flowers,- he falls -

As the world falls, silent as cyclone of silence.

In the second part of the poem the poet tells more about the thief. The night in the country-side darkens more. The nature, the trees, birds, hills as the sinister agents of the thief, prophesy her death in course of time is a natural process.

The last lines of the poem indicate that the thief is 'knowledge' which in due course of time steals away the innocence of the child -

But her faith that each vast night and saga of prayer
He came to take
Her faith that this last night for his unsacred sake
He came to leave her in the lawless sun awaking.

As the baby will grow her innocence will disappear and

knowledge will take its place. It is also a kind of destruction. The flux of time destroys first the innocence and gradually the life.

In the "Poem on his birthday" the poet deals not only with his own life but also the natural life of which he is a part and parcel. The scene is Laugharne having the river, the sun, 'the switch back' sea, animals etc. The poet looks at death from the view point of natural decay.

But dark is a long way
He, on the death of the night, alone
With all the living prays

Time will change but the poet fears and prays 'with all the living '.

The poet will not be alone because with him every object will come to its end in due course of time. Thus the poet is aware of the passage of time on his birthday:

'As I sail to die' - the last line of the poem indicates the journey towards death.

"Then was my neophyte" shows the dominance of death. Ironically it is printed in the book Collected Poems just after "And death shall have no dominion".

'I saw time murder me' in the last line of the poem. It reveals the theme. The neophyte 'embryo' is the unborn child

in the womb who suffers destruction right from its first stage.

In the first stanza the human life is compared to a snail who leaves sea for life. Like the snail the embryo leaves the womb for life. But the flux of time destroys the life gradually. 'The green child' in the second stanza expresses the innocence of childhood, which is stolen away by time.

The images of photographs and films are used for the knowledge that the 'child' will get. 'He films my vanity' - He may be Christ, or time. The projects on the screen is a memory of childhood on the screen of time.

In the fourth stanza the poet talks to somebody - it may be Christ.

Time kills me terribly.
'Time shall not murder you', He said,
'Nor the green nought be hurt;
Who could hack out your unsucked heart,
O green and unborn and undead?'
I saw time murder me.

'He' denies that the time shall murder the poet. Because the 'green nouth' the cycle of life cannot be stopped. The 'unsucked' sacred heart cannot be sucked out. You are yet 'green' 'unborn and undead'.

But the poet saw time murder him, it is the inevitability of death.

Moonfall and sailing emperor, pale as their tide print,
Hear death's accident the clocked and dashed down spire
Strike the sea hour through bell metal.

The 'sailing emperor' is the sun. The moon, the sun, are engaged with deadly process.

"The tombstone told when she died" is a poem on a mad woman. The tombstone tells the time of the death of that woman. In a graveyard the poet sees a grave. On the grave there are two names - a virgin name and a name after marriage. The poet has heard about the woman in his childhood, because she died long before Thomas was born.

Before I heard in my mother's side
Or saw in the looking-glass shell
The rain through her cold heart speak
And sun killed her face
More the thick stone cannot tell.

The virgin gets married but she must have died after a life of frustration that drove her mad. The poet hears more about the woman and thinks about the erotic and obstetrical fancies of the mad woman who died 'before she lay on a stranger's bed'.

The line 'More the thick stone cannot tell' tells us the horror that the woman faces after marriage. In the second stanza the poet hears the woman, as if seeing a hurried film, talking with Death. She hears her womb 'bellowing' and feels a 'blazing red harsh head' of her child. Time never gave her the opportunity

of being a mother.

War has destroyed human and natural world from time to time. Dylan Thomas saw the Second World War in his lifetime. It had adversely and profoundly influenced him. His war poems express his feeling of horror. The war-time deaths, particularly of innocent people presented for Thomas a stark reality of thorough destruction in war period. Thomas's poems convey the concept of war as an agent of death and destruction of animate and inanimate objects.

Some of the poems convey the idea of war time deaths imposed by men upon men. 'There was a saviour' is a poem written like a story. According to Tindall, the saviour is Jesus Christ himself. The saviour is

Rarer than radium
Commoner than water, crueller than truth;

'Crueller than truth' is perhaps the other side of the saviour. Children found warmth and love in his teachings. These children are all kinds of children who are the believers, 'prisoners' of their own prayers.

Prisoners of wishes locked their eyes
In the jails and studies of his keyless smiles.

In the second stanza the 'lost wilderness' is the wasteland, destroyed by cruelty of war.

'Now in the dark there is only yourself and myself'.
Now in the dark of war, when men died.

In 'lost wilderness' there is only 'yourself and myself', perhaps the 'blackened brothers' of the fourth stanza. The boys are blackened by the ashes of burning objects or are blackened in black-out. The boys now 'break a giant tear' for the 'little known fall' of men and their 'Fire neighbour', the strangers. The boys feel themselves on an island, without love, exiled.

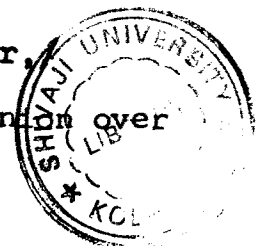
'The hand that signed the paper' shows the cruelty of men at the helm of affairs. Without even thinking of humanity the hand signs a fatal paper and destroys animate and inanimate things. The hand is as it were disconnected from head and heart. "In a quick series of photo-flashes, as at a film, we see the hand signing the fatal paper which will lead to war erupting across a continent. Film like too, the activating hand is shown impersonally, without a head attached, so that the inhuman aspect of action becomes more evident."

The hand that signed the paper felled a city;
Five sovereign fingers taxed the breath,
Doubled the globe of dead and unhalved a country;
These five kings did a king to death.

The fingers are described as mighty kings who destroy any king, kingdom and 'taxed the breath'.

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The hand is so powerful that it bred a fever,
And famine grew, and locusts came! It holds the dominion over



man and brings destruction to the world. The last stanza is very moving. It conveys the cruelty and destruction during the war period. The fingers 'count the dead'. But the other use of hand, to serve the wound, cannot be fulfilled by the hand. It is because the hand could not see and

Hands have no tears to flow.

Some of the war poems express fear, anxiety and helplessness of people caught in war. In 'A saint about to fall' the poet tells the harsh reality of the cruel world. Thomas wrote this poem for his six year old son. The 'kings of blue eyes' of his son are 'blind' because the son could not see the ugliness of the world and the destruction caused by war. He tells his son to

Strike in the time-bomb town,
Raise the live rafters of the eardrum,
Throw your fear a parcel of stone
Through the dark asylum,

'Holy spring' is a poem written on springtime in the war period. The spring is holy because the persona is alive after the destruction by fire raid. But he must make himself ready for the war of another day. The poet wakes up out of a bed of love which becomes 'that immortal hospital', for the 'cureless' body of counted dust. The army is 'the barbed and shooting sea'. The poet says:

I climb to greet the war in which I have no heart but only
That one dark I owe my light

'That one dark' is the dark night of fire raid to which the poet owes his light of life. The war may be the mirror of unending sorrow that reflects the poet's mind. Tindall says, 'It would be fine, the poet modestly says, to have a 'wise mirror' to glow with light after this dark night', but there is none around'. It is because that 'dark night was 'the god stonning' night, indicating the air raid and bombing.

And I am struck as lonely as a holy maker by sun.

The second stanza opens with 'No', as the first with 'O'. When these two words are kept side by side - 'O! No!' - they signify the expression of deep-struck horror and sorrow. In the second stanza the poet does not praise the spring time bright as 'Gabriel' an angel, nor does he praise the morning that quickens 'Out of the woobegone pyre' after the cruel night. The 'pyre' is London, and the mourners' tears cease 'on the weeping wall': The poet praises the 'prodigal sun the father', the creator, the image of God, whose 'quiver' is full of the infants of pure fire. The infants are not the 'burning baby' with arms 'full of fire' in 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid', the fire is the fire of love and life. The poet praises the 'father sun' and wishes -

But blessed be hail and upheaval
That uncalm still it is sure alone to stand and sing
Alone in the dark husk of man's home
And the mother and topping house of the holy spring,
If only for a last time.

War has enabled him to 'stand and sing alone' in this dark night, 'If only for a last time', because perhaps the next day he would die.

'On a Wedding Anniversary' is a short poem. The subject of the poem is condemnation of war. This is the anniversary of two 'who moved for three years in tune/Down the long walks of their vows'. War is the enemy of marital life because it destroys all things that marital life stands for. 'The sky has torn across' this couple and destroyed them.

'Now their love lies a loss' because the 'Death strikes their house' from the sky. 'The crater carrying cloud' is symbolic of air raid-bombing. Love roars with his 'patients' who are 'chained'. Perhaps these are mad men, who become mad because of bitter sorrow.

The third and the last stanza is unforgettable and touching. Now it is too late because nothing is saved from the 'crater carrying cloud'.

Too late in the wrong rain
They came together whom their love parted:
The windows pour into their heart
And the door burn in their brain.

The couple is thoroughly destroyed with their house. Windows and doors of their house burn in their head and heart. But who are they? How had their love parted? 'They' can be the

survivors who came to save the couple. 'Their love departed' suggests the death of the couple, and 'it is too late' arrival of the survivors who try to save the couple.

'When I woke' describes the outbreak of war. The poet wakes up from the dreams of night to the bitter reality of the war. It is clear in concluding lines -

Where birds like leaves and boats like ducks
I heard, this morning, waking,
Crossly out of the town noises
A voice in the erected air,

The voice is the news of war. The poet 'drew the white sheet' went to sleep, the sleep of death. The word 'shells' suggests bombs and destroyed cities.

The war disturbs everyday life of the common man. Many innocent people are shot dead or killed mercilessly. These deaths moved Thomas's 'decent' mind. The poems that reveal this idea are 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid', 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London', and 'Among Those Who Killed in the Dawn Raid', 'Was a Man Aged a Hundred'.

For Thomas, killing the people was almost impossible and beyond his imagination. In his letters to his friends, he condemned war. Perhaps he felt very happy when he was declared unfit for the war. In his letter to Bert Trick, he writes, "My little body (...), I don't intend to waste for the mysterious

ends of others."¹⁰ Though he did not kill, it was inevitable for him to see the death around him caused by war. 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid' is a poem about the killing of a just born infant. Clark Emery remarks, '... no one has successfully expressed the pathos of the loss of the newly alive. It must be assumed that his sight of the burnt child was one of the most shocking events of his life."¹¹ The poem is a 'ceremony'. The child of few hours -

With its kneading mouth
Charred on the black breast of the grave
The mother dug, and its arms full of fires.

The description of the child is just unforgettable. The first stanza serves as a hymn and prayer, the second stanza is a sermon and the last one is a musical chant. The celebration expresses horror, shock and pathos felt by the poet.

In 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London' the poet again writes about the death of a child in a fire raid. He strongly refuses to mourn the death of the child because he seems to satisfy himself with the thought of resurrection. The poet is shocked. This shock makes him defy the death. The London daughter is not dead because

'After the first death there is no other'.

'Among Those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred' tells the story of an old man of hundred. The old man

just 'put on his clothes and stepped out and died'. 'He dropped where he loved'. The man lived on that particular street for hundred years. He knew every inch of the street. He was shot dead on the place he had loved. 'The locks' of his life 'yawned loose'. The power of 'blast' blew them wide.

He would not greet the morning as he was in his life time.

The morning is flying on the wings of his age. And a hundred storks perch on the sun's right hand. Then the morning and the life of the old man are inseparable and the sun takes him on to its 'right hand'.

Sex, according to Thomas is one of the agents of destruction and death. Particularly sex destroys the youth of man. 'I see the boys of summer', 'Find meat on bones' are the poems which show the destruction by sex.

'I see the boys of summer' as discussed earlier, is a poem on the destruction of young boys and their youth. The young boys 'fetch their girls' in their dreams. The action is symbolic of the fear and failure of sex. Francis Scarfe remarks, "Dylan Thomas's imagery is predominantly masculine, to the point of onanism and homosexuality. And although the male sexual images are bold, harsh and triumphant, there is a sense of impending tragedy of a frustration" -

I see that from these boys shall men of nothing
Stature by seedy shifting
Or lame the year with leaping from its heats.

The poem 'Find meat on bones' is parallel to 'I see the boys of summer'. Here is the conversation between a fatherly figure and a young boy, perhaps the son. The father, we can say, advises his son to enjoy his life, before it will be gone.

Find meat on bones that soon have none:
Before 'merriest narrow' and loveliest
breasts are doomed to 'winding sheets'.

The old man advises to rebel against nature, flesh and bone and enjoy sex.

In the third stanza the son answers the father. Following his father's advise he feels heart break and loss of weight. It is an ambiguous condition.

A merry girl took me for man,
I laid her down and told her sin,
And pat beside her a ram rose.

Perhaps the girl took him 'for man'. But it means that she deceived him. He 'told her sin'. The son denies the advise of his father in the fourth stanza.

The last stanza is the recapitulation of the poem. It assures that life is not enjoying sex by rebelling against nature, and flesh and bone. But it is a happy accompaniment of light and

The third stanza proceeds with the metaphor of money with the words 'treasures' and 'currencies'.

To lift to leave from the treasures of man is
pleasing death

'To lift' means to steal from the 'treasures of man', the poems of predecessors, is a 'pleasing' death. To take their 'currencies' (poems) is to deceive your gift of 'the pounds of manna', creativity. It is the decay of your intellect as well as your poetic gift.

'To surrender now is to pay the expensive ogre twice.' But to surrender, your own gift by stealing other's is to die twice. So that the poet takes an oath with the 'ancient woods' of his blood never to take or imitate this world 'which is each man's work'. Each man is creative in this or that way. The poet must search his own way of using his 'gift'. He will not destroy himself nor the world. But now for three 'lean months' the world fails to come to him.

III

Thomas once remarked that his poetry was the record of his individual struggle from darkness to light. In his poems on the concept of death this struggle is expressed in various ways. His poems on the death theme convey his struggle from the fear of

death and obsession of death in his teen age to the acceptance of death as a man mature in his thoughts. His poems convey these stages. Thomas's concept of death holds two sides - destruction and death. Destruction starts from the creation of the objects. Death is the last step of this destruction which can fall upon any object, at any time.

The poems that express Thomas's fear are written from his early age. His obsession with death in his personal life and environment made him think of death from various angles and in various aspects. Constantine Fitzgibbon in his book Selected Letters of Dylan Thomas comments: "He certainly had weak lungs and a consequent tendency towards bronchitis, and he was certainly asthmatic, which was aggravated by chain smoking, but it is almost unlikely that he ever had tuberculosis. He was, of course, intensely sensitive, to the extent that at this period of his life he seems to have been afraid lest he were going mad."¹²

"I see the boys of summer" expresses his fear of destruction of young age. The boys 'lay golden tithing^S barren'. In their dreams they 'fetch their girls'. This shows sexual decay and fear of sex in his mind of young boys.

The boys in the second part oppose the critic. 'But seasons must be challenged' or 'We are the dark deniers' convey their opposition. But the youth and the physical power cannot overcome the powerful process of destruction. In the third part the critic

becomes an old man as the father of the boys. The old age of the critic is symbolic of the process of destruction. Thus he unites the living and the dead, father and sons.

In "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower" this fear is expressed in very simple and powerful words. The force which creates all objects, animate and inanimate, is also destructive. It destroys the living or nonliving objects from time to time. It 'blasts the roots of the trees' and bends the youth of the poet. The same force dries up the mountain streams and turns the blood in the veins of the poet into wax. The poet is dumb to tell 'how my clay is made of hangman's lime'. He is awe-struck and is unable to tell the lover's tomb:

How at my winding sheet goes the same crooked worm.

The process of universal destruction is the same and continuous.

His obsession of death is conveyed very powerfully in "If I were tickled by the rub of love". Tindall interprets: "Adjustment to reality seems the theme of this adult poem ... A voice from darkness, fearing what he wants, reviews frustration and desire. Adjustment to reality, the ultimate rub, must be that of man as well as poet".¹³

If I were tickled by the rub of love
I would not fear the apple nor the flood
Nor the bad blood of spring.

The poet expresses the sexual disgust with bitterness and frustration. In this stanza the poet says if he would believe in sexual love, he would neither fear the loss of innocence (the apple) nor the punishment (the flood). In fact, he fears the sexual activity. For he knows that with sexual love associations of guilt and fear and, of course, death will come. 'Bad blood of spring' indicates the 'original sin' of man. The poet knows it very well that what attracts him will also destroy him.

In the second stanza the poet imagines himself as an embryo, and says he would not fear death, but as usual in the first stanza, he does fear. In the third stanza he points out another aspect of sexuality; but it is in the fifth stanza that his fear becomes clear:

I sit and watch the worm beneath my nail
Wearing the quick away.

The speaker in this poem is in love and wants to get the joy of love. But it is not the love in the romantic sense. His love is anatomical. He is 'daft with the drug' of sexual nature of the girl. In his sexual desire he shares the world with the devil. It is the devil that has planted the sexual love in the girl. This is the moment of attraction as well as repulsion. The poet thinks the bitter reality of human life - death. He thinks of the old age and death -

An old man's shank one marrowed with bone
Lastly he concludes, death is the only rub that
tickles - 'Death's feather on the nerve'.

"I in my intricate image", the first poem in Thomas's second book of verse Twenty-Five Poems, is one of his most obscure poems. It is so obscure that one of the earlier critics of Dylan Thomas comments on the very last line, 'And my images roared and rose on heaven's hill' that, "Heaven may understand, but I do not"¹⁴. In this poem the poet writes on two levels - a man and a poet. Clark Emery interprets the theme: "But, unlike the God which he has imagined and to which he compares himself, he is not of one piece and therefore, until he learns to harmonise the contraries of which he is compounded, not at peace. Spirit in flesh, death in life, human in animal, female in male, organic in inorganic, liquid in solid - it is such entanglements that make the "I" (in appearance so like the numeral 1) so perplexing and perplexed on organisms."¹⁵

In the second part of the poem the poet thinks of death. Death is described here not as an end but 'instrumental' of the continuous process of the cycle of life. Tindall interprets these stanzas as 'a gloomy parenthesis on death', for womb to tomb'. The fear of death makes the poet to defy death.

The title of the poem "My world is pyramid" clearly tells us the theme of the poem. Pyramids are famous architectural tombs

of ancient Egypt. Though it looks dark inside it is not so sunless. The poem is a meditation on the mystery of division and embryo. In the words of Elder Olson, "My world is pyramid" is a strange meditation on the physical child and the 'secret child', and resolves the problem of death in these terms, through the discovery that 'the secret child' survives". In some of the poems as "Before I knocked" or "Twenty-four years", the poet imagines himself to be in the womb. This time he is inside the pyramid. The poem is divided into two parts as if to indicate the meditation over the mystery of division and of a divided embryo. Again the womb is tomb.

The first part describes the creation of the world which develops gradually from sperm to a concrete form of a being.

The second part opens with the title of the poem - 'My world is pyramid'.

As Tindall interprets - "For Egyptians the pyramid was a symbol of the sun and aspiration for it ... Uniting time with eternity, a pyramid keeps the dead for rebirth".¹⁶

The poet's fear of death gradually changed to the defiance of death. Like Donne in his sonnet "Death be not proud" and in his last sermon, "Death's duell", Thomas challenges death. In his poems "And death shall have no dominion" he denies the dominance of death and tells his father "Do not go gentle into that good

night". Instead of accepting death with sad and nihilistic approach, Thomas refuses to mourn in, "A refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London".

"And death shall have no dominion" is a 'hymn of praise' as Tindall interprets it. The first and last lines of each stanza keep on repeating and powerfully convey the firmness in the thought of the poet. He says -

And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the West moon;
When their bones are pricked clean and clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane
Though sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.

Though the people have to confront all the calamities of destruction through age or sudden death, they will be one with the nature and thus they will be reborn in other forms. David Daiches writes in his article "The Poetry of Dylan Thomas", "The force that drives the flower and the tree to full burgeoning and then to death would destroy him also. Only later came the realization that such destruction is no destruction, but a guarantee of immortality, of perpetual life in a cosmic eternity"¹⁷. The strong belief in regeneration enables the poet to defy death. 'Though they go mad' means unnatural destruction. They will be

sane again and they shall rise from the sea. The last two lines make the defiance clear. The lover is the symbol of creation. Though the lovers are lost the power of love will remain unmoved in the world. It will give power to other people and then 'death shall have no dominion'.

The second stanza depicts the sorrow and the struggle of life:

Twisting on rocks when sinews give way,
Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break.

People in this world have to face many difficulties like 'twisting on rocks', 'yet they shall not break' in the struggle of life.

In the third stanza, the poet shows that the natural cycle of life never ends. The title of the poem seems to be derived from St. Paul (Roman 6:9), "death hath no more dominion" which refers to spiritual life of man. But according to Moynihan, "Thomas's poem has nothing to do with a soul, nor with resurrection ... His poem is simply and absolutely a highly imaginative statement of the scientific fact that matter cannot be destroyed"¹⁸. The third stanza proves this interpretation:

Where blew a flower may a flower no more
Lift its head to the blows of the rain,
Though they be mad and dead as nails,
Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;
Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,
And death shall have no dominion.

The poem reveals the poet's vision of life in death and death in life. According to him the flower is not a flower merely but the 'heads of the characters', those have destroyed their former form, 'hammer through daisies'. Though they are mad or dead as nails they will reappear again in another form of nature. Thus 'death shall have no dominion. The transformation of the objects in new forms continues the cycle of life.

"Now" is the poem on creation. The 'yesman' says 'yes' to death and death responds. To say 'yes' to death is also a kind of challenge and in this way it is the defiance of death.

In "Do not go gentle into that good night" the poet requests his father not to accept death so easily and mutely. Death cannot dominate the dying person. The poem was written during his father's illness. Unfortunately, the poem remained unpublished until the death of his father. Later Thomas published it with the extension of an Elegy.

In the first stanza the poet tells the old man:

Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light
Do not go into that 'good' of the night,
Which is death, but defy the 'dying light'.

The next four stanzas give examples of other types of people who do know their destruction but they in their own try to defy death.



'Wise men', the men of knowledge know that 'the dark is right'. The word 'right' signifies the process of death as natural and inevitable. Again the word indicates the frustration of the wise men:

Because their words had forked no lightening they
Do not go gentle into that good night

'Good men' in the next tercet may indicate moralists, who avoiding the dancing waters in life's 'green bay' cry how bright the 'frail deed' were. They are sorry for not enjoying the life. They cannot accept death so easily after such a life. 'Wild men' are the lovers of life. They are the men of action. They sing the song of the sun in Height. The sun is symbolic of life. They cannot imagine the setting of the sun when they understand the futility of their song and when time has stolen away their lives, they grieve on its way. Time is an agent of death in Thomas's poems. Because of age they are approaching death. Time has passed away gradually and it is not the time for them to end the life. They also do not accept death quietly with the 'setting of the sun'.

'Grave men' indicate the men of letters, rather the poets. They are grave because they are concerned with depths of life (Dylan Thomas was concerned with womb and tomb), and now they are confronting their death.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteorors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

What the artist is looking at 'with blinding sight' is the vision of life. It is a meteor who blazes brightly but only for a short while. The vision of the artist might blaze like meteors for a short while with gaiety and happiness. They too, like other men in the poem, defy the 'dying of light'. Here the light is the meteoric vision of the artist.

In the last stanza the poet comes back to his father who was 'there on the sad height'. The word 'height' indicates the coming of death and also indicates the distance and darkness between life and death. He prays his father to curse 'with your fierce tears' or 'bless' but not to accept death so quietly.

William T. Moynihan interprets the poem as the dread of the poet about death. He says, "Thomas shows his dread of silence most clearly in "Do not go gentle into that good night", where the inability of his father to speak, is equivalent of death, nonentity. ..."¹⁹Writing this, Moynihan had had in mind the bitter cancer of throat and tongue that elder Thomas was suffering from. Though the fear of death is clear, the poet does not accept it naturally. He gives examples of men of various type and how they react to death. Nobody accepts death quietly though everybody knows that there is no escape. In this

way it is the poem on the defiance of death.

In "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London", the poet proceeds to refuse death. In the previous poem "Do not go gentle into that good night", the poet does not accept death. In this poem he clearly refuses to mourn the death of the child. The theme is that of "And death shall have no dominion". The poet has a strong belief in his mind that the death of that child is not a single one. The suffering and pains of death initiate from the First Death on the earth. After the first death other incidents of death are mere copies of the first death. So -

After the first death, there is no other

The child is burnt in the fire raid in the war period. But as the poet denies to mourn, the poem throughout expresses his idea. The poem opens with the sense that the mankind is a part and parcel of nature and it reconciliates with nature from time to time.

Never until the mankind making
Bird beast and flower
Fathering and all humbling darkness
Tells with the silence the last light breaking
And the still hour
Is come of the sea tumbling in harness
Darkness signifies our origin as well as end

Throughout the poem there are religious references. The

death of the child has religious importance. The unity of bird, beast and flower is indicated with the creative darkness, "Fathering and all humbling darkness". It is this creative power 'the force' that fathers bird, beast (man) and flower.

In the second stanza the poet describes himself as a representative of mankind on the Doom day. He must return to the seed and water 'the darkness' of the first stanza. 'Zion,' 'synagogue' suggest the holiness of natural water and seed.

The third stanza makes clear

I shall not murder

The 'grave truth' is the death of the child, is representative of the death of all mankind.

In the last stanza the burning baby is described -

Deep with the first dead lies the London daughter,
Robed in the long friends,
The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother,
Secret by the unmourning war
Of the riding Thames.
After the first death, there is no other.

The London's daughter lies with the people who died first in the fire raid. But all the deaths are replicas of the first death.

'The grains beyond the age' are the seeds of time.

The river Thames symbolises life. The last line has stimulated some critics. Some critics find in it religious reference, some critics think that the moment when one dies, there is no other pain of death. Or as the first interpretation is given, after the first death of either Christ or Adam and Eve, there is no other death. The concept of resurrection also hints at religious significance. The man dies and is reborn either as a bird or a flower. This belief of the poet makes him refuse to mourn the death.

"Especially when the October wind" is one of the famous early poems by Thomas. It is the first of his four birthday poems. It is written when Thomas was twenty. The poem expresses sorrow of a new poet who sees everything around him in terms of words. Thomas writes about death and destruction. The October wind 'punishes' his hair with 'frosty finger' i.e. cool wind. When he walks by the seaside the 'crabbing sun' casts his shadow. He hears 'the raven cough in winter sticks'. 'The raven' and 'winter sticks' signify the process of death. The poem is about the process of literary creation. He has in his heart the desire of creating poetry, he is burning - 'on fire; though the weather is cool. He himself is shut in his 'tower of words' (Tower in Yeats is a symbol of life). He looks as it were through the spectacle of words. He looks -

On the horizon walking like trees
The wordy shapes of women, and the rows
Of the star-gestured children in the park.

All things take 'wordy shapes'. Women become 'wordy trees' and the children 'star-gestured'. The park reminds him of his childhood. 'The vowelled beaches', 'Oaken voices' are wordy shapes. More than that in the last line -

Some let me make you of the water's speeches.

'The water's speeches' may mean moving speech like water. However, the image is simply beautiful.

In the third stanza the 'clock' and the 'weather cock' signify the coming of winter.

Behind a pot of ferns the wagging clock
Tells me of the hour's word, the neural meaning
Flies on the shafted disk, declaims the morning
And tells the windy weather in the cock.

The coming of the winter is symbolic of destruction. The 'wagging clock' tells the poet the 'hour's word' of coming destruction. The clock signifies the passage of time. The sign of winter-meadows and the 'signal of grass' which is drying is the sign of winter-destruction in the nature.

At the end of this first birthday poem, Thomas sees -

The heart is drained that, spelling in the scurry
Of chemic blood, warned of the coming fury.

By the seaside the 'dark vowelled' birds sing. The whole world is moving towards the winter - i.e. destruction.

October is the month of the birth of Thomas. Perhaps the month makes him aware of passing years of his life and his words. But his desire to create poetry is not satisfied. In this poem his attempt to throw off the fear of time is expressed.

As years went by the thought of death in the mind of the poet changed its direction. From fear and obsession to defiance of death he started accepting death. His two birthday poems convey this idea. The one "Twenty-four years" is a short poem. The poet is aware of the flux of Time. October is the month of autumn, destruction of vegetal world and ironically it is the month of birth of the poet. The poem starts with tears:

Twenty-four years remind the tears of my eyes.

The poet feels sorry for his life which has passed away. Clark Emery in his book The World of Dylan Thomas interprets the tears in three ways:

"Time has stolen his three and twentieth years brings tears in his eyes; his tears are reminded that the function of the eyes is to weep; this day of recollection calls to mind the tears shed in the past²⁰". The second interpretation is not satisfactory. The second line of the poem is into the bracket and a little obscure.

(Bury the dead for fear that they walk to grave in labour).

Both kinds of meanings - about life and about death - can be derived from the line. If the word 'grave' indicates 'womb', the burial of the 'dead' is the begetting of a child. 'Labour' is a curse of Adam or Eve or sufferings and pains of child birth. Similarly 'fear' is fear of death and also of life. From the third line the poet talks about himself. Here he becomes 'a tailor' in the womb, an embryo -

In the groin of the natural doorway I crouched like a tailor
Sewing a shroud for a journey
By the light of the meat-eating sun.

The poet uses an image of a tailor. It signifies two things. As a tailor tears a cloth in various shapes and prepares a new dress, the embryo shapes itself from 'vital liquid' into a form and enters in the world as a child. Or as a tailor sews a dress the embryo sews a 'shroud' with its skin for a journey - a journey towards death. His journey will be under the 'light of meat eating sun' of time. Thus he is 'dressed to die'. It seems that the journey towards death means destruction - by other agents of death - time and sex. It becomes clear in -

The sensual strut begun,
With my red veins full of money.

In this sense the poet is 'dressed to die', is dressed

to make love.

In the final direction of the elementary town
I advance for a long as forever is.

The 'final direction' is the tomb, or as 'elementary town' it is the womb. The poet is living to die. The poet will be reborn, a natural cycle of life and death is, thus, a journey.

'Poem on his birthday', is a longer poem than 'Twenty-four years'. It is the last of the four birthday poems. The poem is written in the later years of his life (five years before his death). It shows the development of his attitude to death. In "Twenty-four years" he speaks of physiological death. In the present poem the poet, with his own death is concerned with the world around him.

In the mustardseed sun,
By full tilt river and switchback sea -
Where the cormorants scud,
In his house on stilts among beaks
And palavers of birds
This sand grain day in the bent day's grave
He celebrates and spurns
His driftwood thirty-fifth wind turned age;

The poet is celebrating his thirty-fifth birthday in Laugharne. It is, of course, the month of October, autumn. The sea is looking red like a 'mustard seed'. It is the evening. 'This sandgrain day in the bent day's grave' the poet is

celebrating as well as despising the day of his birth. In the 'fall tilt' river and 'switchback sea' the 'cormorants' are hopping. The poet is in his house 'on stilts among beaks and palavers of birds'.

The second and third stanzas continue the description of nature ending with the mention of herons, the holy birds in Thomas's poems. The animals are doing their duty as they are living. The hawks catch finches, and other kill fish who are gliding.

'Through wynds and shells of drowned
Ship towns to pastures of otters.'

The herons, the saintly bird of 'Over Sir John's hill', 'Walk in their shroud'. All these examples signify poet's acceptance of death.

The fourth stanza describes the deaths of birds. 'The livelong river's role' is the grave for herons. The minnows (little fish) 'pray' for their lives and become 'prey' of herons. The dolphins 'dive in their turnturtle dust', seals will be food for larger fish, or those who 'fish for seals'.

The poet thus becomes one with the dying animals and birds:

Thirty-five bells sing struck
On skull and scar where his love lie wretched,
steered by the falling stars.

The singing, of the bells is symbolic of death in future. The scar, wound, and skull where the bell struck is the indication of the difficulties that the poet had to face in this world. The love which is 'lie wretched' is steered by the falling stars - the falling stars show the way of death.

Now the poet goes -
In the unknown, famous light of great
And fabulous, dear God,

The God is dear as well as fabulous - imaginary. The poet thinks that the God or Heaven are mythical. The way to God and Heaven is dark:

Heaven that never was
Nor will be ever, is always true.

Though the God or Heaven are imaginary they are 'always true'. The poet thinks of faith.

The poet or the persona, wanders on the sea-shore with the spirit of the dead. Thomas has attraction for graveyards. The 'horseshoe' bay is full of the dead crabs and starfish. But he is not peaceful with only imaginary God and His Ghost.

'The way is dark and long.' He is lost in.
'On the earth of the night alone'. He is aware of the coming destruction by the future wars:

Who knows the rocketting wind will blow
The bones out of the hills.

Thomas's dark Nay signifies his faithless but optimistic approach to the light - the God and His Heaven - 'that never was nor will be ever'. He prays 'with all the living'.

In the ninth stanza the poet comes back to himself. He is praying and mourning:

Oh, let me midlife and mourn by shrined
And druid heron's vows
The voyage to ruin I must run,

Again he refers to the voyage (as the journey, in "Twenty-four years") he must run.

The poet counts blessings in tenth and eleventh stanzas. The blessings in the tenth stanza are temporal: four elements, five senses and love - which live in this 'spun slime' - the body of man. The other blessings are 'the moonshine domes' of imagination; and the last of these blessings is the sea, 'that hides' the 'secret self' of man. The last and great blessing occurs in the eleventh stanza - that is the delight in nature. The poet, as he moves closer to death, feels the ecstasy of nature -

That the closer I move
To death, one man through his sundered hulks,
The louder the sun blooms.
And the husked, 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.

The poet feels that the sun is blooming more 'loudly', the sea is exulting and thus the whole world seems beautiful to him 'with more triumphant faith'. All the world seems to have changed. He hears the 'bouncing hills'. He is no more alone:

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

The poet accepts the voyage towards death with his 'shining men'.

The acceptance of death is optimistic, because it is through death that the regeneration can be possible. The natural circle of life remains continuous because of death.

The poem speaks of his strong faith in resurrection which is expressed in "And death shall have no dominion" and "A refusal to mourn". The next stage, then, is regeneration. "This bread I break" and "Deaths and Entrances" express this idea. Destruction

is helpful for new creation.

"This bread I break" is a short poem of three stanzas. In the first stanza the poet describes that the bread and the wine were once oat and grapes or some other fruits. Those were their natural forms. But

Man in the day or wine at night
Laid the crops low, break the grapes joy,
Man destroyed their natural forms and created new ones.

The second stanza describes the happiness of oat and fruits in their natural forms:

Once in this wine the summer blood
Knocked in the flesh that decked the vine
Once in this bread
The oat was merry in the wind.

The plant or crop of grape or oat is the creation exploited from four elements - earth, air, water and fire. The earth gave the seeds its soil to grow properly, the air and water are helpful for their prosperity and fire here the sunshine is an essential element to be alive. Thus the plant and the crop are the transformation of four elements in new form. The wine and the bread are the transformation of grape and oat.

From the destruction of one thing the other takes its form. The bread and wine are necessary for mankind to be alive. One's sacrifice is another's life. The cycle of destruction and

creation does not stop. A thing in one form, after its destruction takes another form. It is not a poem of destruction, but of a change in one form of existence, immediately followed by another. Nothing perishes totally.

In the third stanza the poet talks about himself, to the other 'you'. This stanza is about making of a poem. The poem is created from 'flesh and blood' of the poet. 'you' may be a reader who 'drink' 'my wine'. But as the natural cycle does not stop, the creation of new poetry does not stop.

The title "Deaths and Entrances" is taken from Donne's Sermon "Death's Duell". It is a meditation on the subject of death, and birth. The poem is written in 1940. The fire raids were frequent in London around 1940. This poem expresses the feelings of the poet after a raid on one evening. The reference to the situation is expressed with the words such as 'almost', 'incendiary eve', which speak of impending war. In the poem several near deaths of many kinds of persons are described. In the first stanza it is one of the best friends of any one man - 'you'. In the second stanza it is your neighbour, yourself or an enemy. The poet becomes one with these people in their deaths. The stranger 'enemy' is a German who is bombing. 'The murdered strangers' are the dead Londoners. The repetition of the first line becomes particular in the last stanza. The eve becomes the eve of 'deaths and entrances'.

On almost the incendiary eve
Of deaths and entrances
When near and strange wounded on London's waves
Have sought your single grave .

In "And death shall have no dominion" the poet speaks of resurrection clearly. Any object in the universe never perishes but changes the form either 'bird' or 'beast' or 'flower' - 'The heads of the characters hammer through daisies'. The daisies are not merely flowers, but they are the new form of some 'characters' who are destroyed.

Thus the poet again and again speaks of resurrection. It is his optimistic view that nothing in the universe perishes, but takes new form. That is why he condemns death and 'refuses to mourn' death. Because according to him death is no dominant power in the cycle of life. It is but one step of reformation.

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