



Cultural impact of America in the poetry of Dylan Thomas

Astha Pratap

Assistant Professor, Department of English R.B.D. Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

These lines were written by John Donne into a very different reference but here we can use these lines to show Dylan Thomas' passion and love for the United States of America. This paper deals with the cultural impact of America in the poetry of Dylan Thomas. He was renowned Welsh poet who was highly impacted not only by American culture but also with diverse British Cultural trends of literature. Though he visited America only four times throughout his life, but the impact of American culture is deeply enrooted in his poetry, which we can clearly figure out with the help of his famous poems. His poetry deals with American Romanticism as well as with Transcendentalism. It is remarkable for the stress on individualism or free will also it deals with mysticism and symbolism of American poetry. He was highly impacted by famous American writers like Emerson, Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost etc. This paper is an attempt to discuss Dylan's poetry under the influence of various American writers as well as the cultural trends of America.

Keywords: American cultural trends, American dream, transcendentalism, individualism, mysticism and american romanticism etc

Introduction

Dylan was always in love with the United States from the very young age. Earlier he liked it for its cowboys and cartoons and later he epitomized American culture as the best culture and country because of its capacity for innovation, humor and liberty with surprise. We all agree that America is the land of dreams and prosperity, and this place is ideal for living as it is a liberal country with immense opportunities and success. The people of high ambitions and aspirations always want to visit this place to fulfill their dreams and fantasies. This exactly happened with Dylan also. He did not know much about American culture initially but for him it was the place of great vitality and a place where he could earn a decent living and fulfill his dreams. Thomas was fascinated with America since his childhood as he had read many American writers in his early age and from there he developed a concept of 'American Dream' in his mind. As he grew up, the desire of visiting America became stronger and he developed a firm interest in American culture. Though he had many reasons to visit this place, but there is no doubt that earning good money was one of them. His desire of visiting America was fulfilled in April, 1949, when John Malcolm Brinnin was appointed as director of the poetry center at the Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association (YM-YWHA) in New York. After coming across Thomas' poetry, he wrote him to invite him offering a fee of \$US 500 for reading at the center, as a part of the regular program of cultural events in his supervision. Thomas had accepted that offer in the hope of getting an opportunity of earning money and he also wanted to explore the possibility of setting temporarily or permanently there in America, the land of his dreams. Before we talk about the influence of American culture in Dylan's poetry, I would like to discuss Dylan's impact on Americans especially in poetry reading. Before his performances at Poetry Center, Dylan was nervous, but everything went in great manner and he started getting

applause of American audience. Thomas expressed his emotions passionately also he adopted a prophetic manner, which has its origin from Welsh culture, but it had an enchanting and magical effect on his American audience. His voice was so strong and enchanting that it woke up the sleeping poets of America, means the way he recited poetry, was loud, it was different from the conventional style of American poets like Auden and Elizabeth Bishop. Before Dylan's arrival on stage, the poetry gatherings were not so excited and enthusiastic as the tone of the poets was dull and impersonal resulting in lack of interest. But Dylan's poetry readings changed everything; he recited the poems with high spirit and intensity, and proved that poetry reading was just like a creative dramatic performance. For his great performances, he was even treated like Promethean God; this was the honor for which he always craved for. He made poetry reading more alive and his audience loved him and accepted him wholeheartedly for giving it new dimensions. Thomas reminded the Americans that poetry can be a passionate speech and it takes its origin from the life of an individual. To find out the impact of American culture we need to know some specifications of this culture. The prominent features are like: stress on individualism or free will, this is the land of freedom, and the people are more concerned on individuality comparative to society. The concept of individuality has been popularized by literary movements like 'Transcendentalism'. They believe in freedom of choice. They are self-reliant and believe in American dream, a belief that one can achieve success in one's life through hard work and taking risk in life, hence they believe in existentialism also. That can be taken as another feature of American culture. The Americans are self-reliant, rebellious and believe in equality. Before we start analyzing his poetry from American perspective we need to know about the emergence and various phases of American poetry. Primarily it was emerged first by the efforts of colonialists in the 17th century; later this poetry

had various strains like Romanticism and Transcendentalism in the 19th century. Realism and Naturalism and regionalism were followed by Modernism in the 20th century. And all these literary trends have their specific literary tendencies, which eminently affected American literature, art and culture. To analyze his poetry from American perspective we need to find out the impact of above mentioned literary movements that is clearly visible in his poetry. The first impact can be of American Transcendentalism and romanticism, these literary movements flourished in America from 1800 to 1860. For the very first time this term transcendentalism was used by Emerson in his essay "Nature", later it emerged as a philosophical, religious and literary movement in American culture. To understand this transcendentalism, we need to understand its concept and meaning, at its simplest level it is something far away from rationalism, it is a belief that one can understand the mystery of this world only through the intuition not through any kind of scientific knowledge or materialism. According to a transcendentalist one should believe in one's intuition rather than intellectualism, all this worldly knowledge is fatal for the truth of our existence. Hence they believe in personal freedom or individualism. They emphasized the theory of oneself- self- reliant:

"To go to the solitude a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society"

(Emerson, *Nature*)

When we try to look at Dylan's poetry from a transcendentalist perspective, we find it absolutely impacted by this literary trend. Dylan believes in intuition, he was not a rational poet, rather a poet of heart; he emphasized the importance of exalted emotions. He always finds a mystery in the lap of nature; also he believed in the idea of the oneness between man and nature which was always a source of regeneration for him. Apart from this he was also impacted by the individualism of transcendentalists that can be associated with American dream, it is a belief that one can attain success in one's life through one's own risks, sacrifices and hard work. This is based on the concept of individualism; according to it one should believe in oneself to attain something larger than life. Dylan believed in American dream and was highly influenced by American culture. His expectations from America were partially fulfilled as he died young. But there is no doubt that he lived there, like he never lived before.

The main ideas of transcendentalism gave emergence to American romanticism. Romanticism which is all about passion and emotions is also about the celebration of individuality and freedom of choice. American romantic poetry celebrates this relationship of man and nature. Dylan was a romantic poet indeed as he was a poet of passionate thoughts, whatever he felt, was intense and he expressed it with more sublime ideas and emotions. He stressed that the emotions of individuals shape our knowledge and experience of the world. Here we find a close resemblance between Dylan and the American romantic poets, like Walt Whitman, R.W. Emerson, Edger Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson and Nathaniel Hawthorne etc.

"The Force that through the green fuse drives the flower" can be used as a reference to Dylan's poetry which follows the American trends of romanticism as well as of

transcendentalism. This lyric celebrates the power of nature, which can be equally creative and destructive. It also celebrates man's relationship with nature or relationship of macrocosm and microcosm. Sometimes nature overpowers man. Such thoughts are preoccupied in the poetry of great American poet Walt Whitman. In "Songs of Myself", he states that grass is representation of human life and the cycle of life and death. He further says that: "the grass is very dark to be from the white heads of the old mothers (18)" and "And seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves (12)". Whitman's impact can be traced out in Dylan's nature poetry, he believed in transcendental aspect of life, he felt a unity between man and divinity:

"It is my aim as an artistto bringwonder into myself, to prove beyond doubt to myself that the flesh that covers me, is the flesh that covers the sun, that the blood in my lungs is the blood that goes up and down in tree."(Dylan Thomas, *EPW*)

In his "Poem in October", he celebrates his birthday with nature, we find a kind of pantheism in the poem- a belief that God is present everywhere, in every object of nature. He finds everything holy and is able to connect himself with birds, trees, water, air and everything that is the part of nature. He finds a unique bond between whatever exists and unites here.

Death is another theme which is common in American writers like Whitman, Emily Dickinson and Dylan's poetry. Whitman's poems like "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking", "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed", "O Captain! My Captain" and "Leaves of Grass" are the masterpieces which deal with the theme of death and immortality. He emphasized that death is an essential part of this Universe; it is responsible for new growth and immortality:

"I found that every place was burial place;
The houses full of life were equally full of death"
("Of Him I Love Day and Night")

Emily Dickinson also tried to solve this mystery of death and immortality through her poems. She was highly obsessed with death; she treats it like a lover. Her poetry shows her belief in immortality and God, which gives it a religious touch. She never considered death mighty and dreadful, rather she took it as a friend, lover or a way to reunite to God. Her poems like "The Last Night that She Lived", and "Because I could not stop for Death", the most quoted poem of her, fulfill all the conventions of a literary artist.

"Because I Could not stop for death-
He kindly stopped for me-
The carriage held but just ourselves –
And Immortality"
("Because I could not top for Death (479)", lines 1-4)

She used day –to- day imagery while giving the reference of her eternal walk. They passed by the 'School', 'Fields of Gazing Grain' and 'Setting Sun'. Through these images she has praised the beauty of nature. Hence we can see that she is not scared of death rather it is just a medium for her to reunite with the Almighty, to get immortality.

When we talk about death, it is not possible to skip Dylan's death poetry. He was the man who was more comfortable with the idea of death rather than life. He accepts death as an ordeal part of life, may be two World Wars played a decisive role in it. His poetry like, "Do not go gentle into that good night", "And death shall have no dominion", "After the Funeral", "Fern Hill", "The Conversation of the Prayer" A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" etc. are the finest examples of the poems which deal with the universal theme of death. His treatment of death makes us remind one of the qualities of American culture. Americans always believed in protest or we can say they are rebels, they always raised their voice against unjust. Same rebellious attitude we find in Dylan's poetry of death. He tries to resist the most powerful truth of human life, he is not in favor of giving up quite easily: "Do not go gentle into that good night" (1)/ "Rage, rage against the dying of the light (3)". He believed in the idea that one should not accept death calmly as it will make death feel proud. He was so obsessed with death that his birthday poetry also deals with the thought of mortality.

The war had a profound effect on the poetry of Americans poets like Whitman, he had witnessed the Civil War in America, he used it as a theme in his many poems. He finds war totally baseless which just causes loss of humanity and suffering. It leads us to physical conflicts, he faced the cruel realities of war as he worked as a nurse himself and he concludes that the wars are useless. His poetic collection, "Drum-Taps", 1865 deals with the poetry of war and its effects. "The Wound Dresser", "O Captain! My Captain", are some those poems which are remarkable for the vivid portrayal of war. Dylan had faced the same trauma of war during the World War-II. He was an anti-war poet. His heart was moved by the pathetic consequences of war, he tried to portray his agony through his poems like: "Ceremony after a Fire Raid", "Death and Entrances", "Among Those Killed in the Dawn Raid" and "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, of a Child".

"On almost the incendiary eve
Of several near deaths" (1-2)

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.....

"When near and strange wounded on London's waves
He sought your single grave" (26-27)
("Death and entrances", pp. 129-30)

Above mentioned lines are depict the pathetic conditions of the people of London during the war.

Another significant theme is eroticism used by American writers like Whitman, we know that he is known as a poet of body and soul, his keen interest in body led him to explore the theme of sexual frankness. His poetry deals with romantic as well as sexual love. He frequently talked about love and sex in his poetry:

"Without shame the man I like knows and arrows the
deliciousness of his sex,
Without shame the woman I know I like knows and
arrows her"
("A Woman Waits for Me")

Dylan also seems to be impacted by the frankness of Whitman in the treatment of sexual themes in his poetry. He

also used the vibrant sexual imagery in his poems like "Light breaks where no sun shines" and "Lament".

"Brandy and ripe in my bright, bass prime
No springtailed tom in the red hot town
With every simmering woman his mouse
But a hillocky bull in swelter
Of summer come in his great good time
To the sultry, bidding herds"

He even used Freudian imagery to make it more effective, "old ram rod" is a phallus symbol, used for male- sexual organ. "Ram" is also the symbol of he- goat or sheep that represents lust and sexuality. This lament is of an old man who has lost his sexual and physical strength due to excessive sexual indulgence. Even the title of his poem "Our eunuch dreams" has sexual depravity. He can find sexual implications in his other poems like "A Winter's Tale", and "My world is pyramid"- like "the loin is glory in a working pallor", (ii part) and other poems.

Dylan was not only impacted by Whitman but also by Robert Frost, who was the American poet of nature and rural life. His poetry is highly enriched with natural imagery, he was a pantheist also and most of his poems are significant for man's relationship with nature. His poetry is well known for its regionalism also as most of his poems are set in New England. Dylan Thomas also resembles him as a regional poet, he also used Welsh settings in most of his poems. Robert Frost's poems like, "The Road Not Taken", "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening", "Two Tramps in the Mud Time" and "Birches" etc. are well known for the illustration of nature. His portrayal of nature in the poem "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" is significant for the use of woods imagery. In the first stanza he mentions woods. He was fascinated with the beauty of woods and wanted to spend some time there to see the woods covered with snow. In the last stanza also he mentioned woods:

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep
But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep" (13-16)

Dylan was influenced by Frost as we can find frequent use of the imagery of woods and nature in his poetry like "Poem in October", "Fern Hill" etc., even he was known as a poet of 'the sea and the wood'. The lines quoted above are significant for the underlying interpretation of the journey of life. The woods may be lovely and tempting but they are not the destination of poet's life, as he has to move on to explore new things in life.

Man is always in the center of American poetry, though they prefer nature also but man is superior to nature. In most of the poems of Frost we find nature in the background to support the very ideas of man. Here also we find a close relationship between the two poets. According to Dylan "the joy and function of poetry is the celebration of man", that is also the celebration of nature and god, as man is the greatest creation of the Almighty. And in his poetry, he gives importance to the power of nature but superiority is for man. In his poem "Birches", Frost celebrates the theme of childhood. It describes the beauty of nature as well as two phases of human life, one of childhood and other deals with

adulthood. The theme of the poem can be nostalgia of how it feels to be young. Dylan's poetry also deals with the theme of child hood. How it feels to be young- is the theme of his many poems, and "Fern Hill" is one of them.

"Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green"
("Fern Hill", p.178-80, lines 1-2)

Indeed childhood was a blissful period of his life, he was fascinated by the beauty of nature like a passionate lover, and his happiness is compared to greenness of grass. As Frost gives superiority to earth and love in "Birches", "Earth is the right place to love" (52), similarly Dylan also says "Love is the last light spoken" ("Ceremony After a Fire Raid", i part, iv stanza), that conveys that love is ultimate, it is the last hope in the world to survive.

Emily Dickinson is one of the most prominent literary figures of America, whose poetry is remarkable for her mysticism, love for paradox and obsession for death. She was a keen observer of nature; her poetry is replete with the images of nature, love, religion, and God. Her poetry is also known for the universal theme of death and immortality, wonders of nature, individualism and love. Her style was unique; she wrote short poems almost with one speaker, most of her poetry deals with 'self'. As a prosodist, she experiments with metre, rhyme, capitals and dashes, punctuation etc. Being impacted by Donne, she also used 'unification of sensibility' in her poetry. Her wonderful description of nature can be noticed in her poem "I'll tell you How the Sun Rose". The poem describes the natural beauty of sunrise and sunset. She also talks about the difficulties of the world:

"But how he set-
I know not-
There seemed a purple stile"
("I'll tell you How the Sun Rose")

If we try to analyze Dylan's poetry, we can see that almost all the features of Dickinson's poetry are present in his poems. Like her, he was a writer of prosodies; he was a lover of metre, rhythm and sound and always experimented with the forms of poems. They both write with equal ambiguity and mystery. We know very well that he was a lover of nature and his poetry always celebrates nature as a theme. He also finds a mystery in the lap of nature that works against man, sometimes he finds nature quite indifferent to him. In "Poem in October", he enjoys his birthday with the miracles of nature, but very soon he realizes that it is just an allusion of his mind, he is no more able to enjoy his birthday as nature turns indifferent to him:

"There could I marvel
My birthday
Away but the weather turned around."
("Poem in October", pp. 113-15, lines 28-30")

It shows that they both were the poets of human pain and suffering, as they both deal with the fundamental problems of humans.

Dylan's poetry was also impacted by the realism of American writers like Walt Whitman, which focuses on the contemporary social realities. The main themes of American

poetry are: individualism or stress on free will, loss of innocence, celebration of nature or relationship with nature, alienation and isolation in society, theme of death and immortality, and disillusionment of the modern age. We can easily figure out these themes in Dylan's poetry, which reveal the impact of major American poets and literature.

Dylan was not only impacted by the American literature and writers, rather he was impacted by the cultural trends of America. The Americans never try to escape from the circumstances, they are self-made people, so was Dylan. He believed in individualism like Americans, they trust in themselves. Freedom of choice is one of the most important trends of American culture. They are more experimental and believe in personal space too. This culture is remarkable for its modern aspects. The people of America are rebellious and democratic, they believe in liberty. After analyzing selected poetry of Dylan Thomas, we realize that he had all the characteristics of American Culture. He was a self-made person, who loved freedom than rules and regulations and always experimented new things in his life. He was enthusiastic like Americans and believed in free will.

The American culture is known for its modern elements, like the realism of the age, frankness of attitude and portrayal of self. All these abilities of Americans make them different from others, they are not conventional. They are not the blind followers of tradition; they love new experiments and adopt new things easily. This can be noticed even in their literature also like Whitman's use of free-verse, which made him popular, Emily's experiment with metre, structure and rhythm of the poem, which made her unique. Also Emerson's concept of 'transcendentalism' which stresses on intuition rather intellectualism. When we closely study Dylan Thomas, we notice that he was also not conventional in his attitude. He experimented with everything like sounds, words and structure even poetry reading also. He was the man of intuition and was highly romantic. He was peculiar, which may be because of the impact of American culture.

Though he visited America to fulfill his fantasy and earn money but this place gave him what he had always desired for. He became acquainted with American literature. He won the hearts of the people of America with his sweet lyrical voice and secured for himself a place in the canon of major poets, even without taking into account his most famous poetry. His poetic output was not large in the last phase of his career, but whatever he wrote, is enough to greet him as one of the best poets of American Poetry, as he portrayed the American sentiments and thoughts through his poetry. Thomas was a poet of "the most exalted emotions, the most exalted grief of joy" (Ibid., p.22).

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