

Life in death a critique of Dylan Thomas select poetry

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Abstract

Dylan Thomas has a deep concern about the problems of life. Death, birth, rebirth or resurrection, according to him, is a part of natural cycle. His poems reflect man's fundamental problems in life. The struggle in the process of life, death owes for the future rebirth. Death energizes the soul after physical decay. He brings in the notion of physical death not to be mourned but to be celebration. These themes are deeply rooted in his religious and traditional influences. Biblical – crucifixion, prayers, sermons and pastors are intertwined with metaphysical imagery which made critics to question his religious beliefs. The objective of this paper is to analyse his attitude towards death according to his poems and critically view his convictions on resurrection, soul's unity with nature to be immortal and perfect submission to the power of nature.

Keywords: death, forces of natural power, physical vs. conscious, immortality, resurrection, metaphysical imagery

Introduction

Dylan Thomas' poems reflect the notion of "Life in Death". Death is the lens through which Thomas views the world of himself and of others. To him, death is beyond physical decay but an energizing soul to confront resurrection. There is life in death and life after death. Death is a very present sojourner in Thomas' poetry. Sometimes he appears to conquer, at other times to be warring only with himself, occasionally to be merely the agent for some conqueror of himself (natural forces).

A book titled "Bio centrism: How Life and Consciousness Are the Keys to Understanding the Nature of the Universe" published in USA has induced the notion of soul's regenerative power of escaping from the body to another universe. The theory implies that "death simply does not exist and is just an illusion. Consciousness exists outside of constraints of time and space." The book puts forth all the necessary findings as a proof that "consciousness does not perish after death and soul could migrate after death." It also proves that the consciousness is gathered in life and after death the same consciousness is drained somewhere else which is definitely another organic matter. This is the scientific base of quantum physics proved by physicists.

Death – A Myth

Death is a myth – a frightening myth according to the persona in "In Country Sleep". To Dylan, Death has to be conquered, sometimes to be surrendered to natural cycle and sometimes the persona seems to be struggling in the process of life and death. Death has to be embraced with love and central act of human creation. It is conceived as an act of holy and natural and not be grieved.

"In Country Sleep" addresses Thomas' younger daughter, Aeronwy. The child is asleep and the poet in fairy tale diction and with dense concentration of rather fantastic nature imagery, lullingly assures her that she need not fear harm during the night or ever thereafter "Until tolled to sleep by the stern/bell". But what does the child expect? the speaker says that "The thief as meek as the dew" will come. The meaning of the poem depends

upon the identification of the thief; if he is death, he is not merely death, extending the symbolic meaning of thief and death, as the poem progresses, the thief has different roles to play; the frightener, death, redeemer, protector and preserver of the child when she sleeps. The manifestation of death is whether the death is frightening or comforting the child. The thief or the fear of death in her mind does not allow the child to sleep but the poet's view of it is soothing – the death takes the man the next stage of life and redeems him from the earthly realities of life. The poet hopes that the thief will continue to come and will not forsake her "in the lawless sun awaking/naked and forsaken to grieve he will not come"

Thomas sees death even in non-living objects like scissors and knives. They are both life and death interwoven in them:

"His scissors oiled, his knife hung loose
 To cut the channels at their source."

(Where Once the Waters of Your Face, II, 4,5)

Scissors and knives, both play a role in operation to save the life of a man and at the time of cutting the navel-string. Likewise, they are the tools of killing. When they are made, both life and death are interwoven in them. In the same poem, Thomas finds corals, the symbol of life, in our beds; and at the same time, he finds serpents, the image of death too in our birth and growth. Life awaits our death and crosses our birth and growth.

"There shall be corals in your beds
 There shall be serpents in your tides,
 Till all our sea-faiths die."

(Where Once the Waters of Your Face, IV, 4-6)

Life is "like a running grave" (When, Like a Running Grave, I, 1). Life advances towards death "for as long as forever is". In life, the hidden death tempts and pushes us ahead and "tracks" us "down". Time is death-personified. It is a domineering devilish force. Everything is the victim of that time and "cadaver's trap". "Everything ends". Time tracks you down"

In "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines", the candle melting is symbolic of time taking away the life and death-drive. Thomas continues the process of life to end it with death. In death, "logics die" and man's only life is the life that his body shares with nature. In death, the "dawn" of consciousness remains. The light of understanding, a sense of illumination breaks in man's head, not in the external universe.

"Light breaks on secret lots
On tips of thought where thoughts smell in the rain;
When logics die,
The secret of the soil grows through the eye,
And blood jumps in the sun;
Above the waste allotments the dawn halts."
(Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines, II, 25 -30)

Thomas' understanding of his physical being is united with the outside world. The soul becomes the cosmos. Death paves way for new life in the entire cosmos. Physical death is a myth whereas the conscious becomes united with cosmos.

Living – Dying-Whole

All organic matter is living-dying-whole. Thomas' sense of himself was his sense of the world, but neither static nor changing. He reassures the lack of distance between "self" and "objective" reality. He tries to establish the relationship between life and death, creation and destruction, womb and tomb, flesh and spirit, youth and age as dominants of an ongoing process, "living continuum of the universe." Totality of consciousness is attained through the realisation that death is not a corrupting influence on the dignity of man but life is linked with death and creation is tied up with destruction.

Nature as Conferring Immortality

Thomas intensely felt that the processes of one's life are inseparably involved in the processes of external nature and man's birth, growth and death with the changes of nature, Thomas identified man-nature equation. It is to explore the relationship or unity of life and death and world as duality, the subject of continual creation of the world and of the individual. It is the problem of reconciliation of the individual with the general process.

Thomas sees life as a continuous process; sees the workings of physical as a magical transformation producing unity out of identity, identity out of unity, the generation linked with one another, the life with death and death with life and man with nature.

"In Country Sleep" confronts that the child had nothing to fear if she "retains her faith in nature, for it is obvious "by the sacrament of nature that it will transcend death." The thief, then, is the power of that nature, inspiring the girl as it does the sun and ready to take natural power that comes after death

Ackerman puts forth that "in nature's cycle, death brings re-immersion into its forms and forces and what is lost". The idea of death is a natural unalterable process ruled by the laws of nature. Death is seen as a natural process of plunge into nature. "This re-immersion into the physical universe that death occasions, following nature's pattern and order becomes an affirmation and celebration of that universe and man's unity with it"

"Over Sir John's Hill" is an epitaph to "the souls of the slain birds sailing" as the final line says that the birds are willing to

die. The hawk calls, "Dilly, Dilly...../Come and be killed" and birds reply, "Dilly, Dilly...../Come Let us die."The power of nature in "Over Sir John's Hill" depicts the acts through hawks upon sparrows and through herons upon fish. The theme of fire borrowed from the sun that illuminates the hawk is the symbol of natural power over life and death. The executioner bird is "the hawk on fire" and a "fiery tyburn". The symbol of "fishing holy stalking heron"(I 11) called "saint heron"(I 17)sings "All praise of the hawk" and grieves "as the blithe birds, never again, leave shingle and elm"(I 14) himself aware of the approaching "lunge of night", he engraves the sparrows' epitaph on a "time-shaken/stone"

William Arrowsmith referring to the power that controls life and death as "process", sees Thomas in this poem as "standing aside, neither wholly within the process nor wholly apart from it". The ruling attitude of the poem is of acceptance of what the hawk and sparrows represent.

"In the White Giant's Thigh", sexual attributes of the natural power cause long-dead women to "flame like fawkes". The women speak through the mouths of birds to express their longing for love and fruitfulness. The identification of the sexual force with the source of light appears in the "fawkes fires" image and in the use of a solar verb, the women "meridian" their love. The poem asserts nature's sexuality as powerfully as "In Country Sleep" does its holiness. In both attributes, Thomas sees nature as conferring immortality.

"In Country Sleep" poems portray the persona to some extent removed from the workings of the natural life-giving and generative force. The women "curlew cry me down" brings the poet into participation in the force. As Moynihan observes, "death wish" on the part of the poet but the death is envisioned as a continuation rather than a conclusion. The urgency of the women's creative impulses draws the speaker toward a union that is partly mystical and partly emphatic.

Thomas reflects on reality in his particular vision. His emphasis is on the physical concept of human energy. That is, the idea is translated in terms of body and cosmos. It is the "continuous realm" in which the tangible (physical) is merged with the intangible (conscious).

Metaphysical Imagery

Dylan Thomas isolated himself from a direct imitation of external realities, a mode dominant in his age. His main concern is to dwell in the inner depths of his experience. Poetry for him should bring to light the hidden cause, hence his personal interest to strip darkness and explore inward motives. To do this, he does not use one central image but a cluster of images; a constant building up and breaking down of images. In "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night", death is contrasted with life using a cluster of images like death images of "close of the day", "dying of the light", "no lightning" with the images of vibrant life of "sun in flight", "meteors", "green bay". In "Lament", the images are "old ram rod", hillocky bull" to "coal black soul" and "black sky" denotes the death of man's impotency as a stage of his physical death. In "A Winter's Tale", almost each line has an image; "snow", winter", "lake", "ferries", "floating fields", "cattle", "stars", "owl", star of faith", "firelit island", "mantled yards", "puffed birds", "dancing shade", "dancing perishes"(symbolic of death), "melting snow", "bird", "paradise" and so on. Thomas was able to use exemplary images by relying on a rich background of various trends through which his ideals passed serious

modifications. He worked with the romantic expressive spontaneity; the suggestiveness of the symbolists; the surrealists' mysterious liberation of the unconscious and emotional involvement in the dynamics of life which is part of the futurist style.

Thomas structured images to let the meaning flow unstated from the space between them. For him, the images lose its objectivity entirely and swamps in as intricate net of connotations. His free expression and the use of images are part of the influence of futurism on him. His poetry is turned to be pictorial or "concrete poetry". His sense of revolt against death to be the end of everything and its emotional involvement is the mark of futuristic style. His rejection of the past is reflected in the denial of Welsh diction influence but none would deny that it is reflected in his use of Biblical imagery but Thomas' poetry stands out to be ideal.

In "Poem on His Birthday", the poet is the only character except for the swarming natural life. He expresses a forthrightly personal expectation of a continuation of life and the most abundant symbols of that continuation are natural. The sun presides over activities but these activities are not exclusively sexual. The stalking images of hawks and herons appear and those of other predatory creatures are alluded. Always, a compelling force is in-charge of the living-dying whole. The poet watches as:

"Under and around him go
Flounders, gulls, on their cold, dying trails
Doing what they are told"

The poet himself "tolls his birthday bell" as he "loits towards the ambush of his wounds". Over the whole landscape of controlled nature, including the poet, the predatory herons "bless" as agents of the dominant force. The speaker mourns "the voyage of ruin I must run", but he counts his blessings.

The increased ability to perceive nature is not only sensory but also involves understanding that death is beautiful in its ultimate submission to the will of nature. The sun "blooms" and the predatory sea "exults" in Thomas' eyes because the poet sees that their taking of him into the new stage of existence that death cannot be so much an act of violence as one of an exalted gathering-in, and that the response decreed for him is of joy, just as the sparrows in "Over Sir John's Hill" rejoiced in their union with sunlit hawk.

The poems' special poignancy derives from the tensions of the opposites. The merging images of light and darkness, life and death illustrate the basic trope of the poem. This merging of the opposites intensifies the irony of process. The man who acts is also the man who dies a reinforcement of the confusion between actor and victim.

Influences of Romanticism and Surrealism

Thomas is obsessed with words, he is aware of the capacity of words to reflect reality and render the inner thoughts and insights. Such obsession is linked with his attempt to write within the romantic tradition. Like them, he turns his eyes towered the inner depths of imagination. Both agree upon spontaneity as the upmost principle. But his attempt to bring language to perform a more active role marks the main difference between him and the romantics. Unlike the romantics, he tries to get at the mystery of his own growth and being by his use of highly personal idioms and images.

The other source for Thomas expressive tendency is borrowed from the surrealists. The surrealists agree upon damaging the conventional forms of language to employ a non-literary way which helps the liberation of the unconscious. Hence, their language is free from any logical control through automatic writing. In Thomas' view, such automatic writing is "worthless as literature". It is true that the poet's images are intensive and mysterious which are surrealistic features, but beyond that there is full control over verbal texture.

Religious and Traditional Influences

Every religion would care for the spiritual well-being but not entirely of the physical well-being. In this sense, Thomas is truly religious wading away the criticisms on him that he is trying to question all the religious sentiments of the church. The soul goes through transmigration of different species with the force of nature. Nature has to decay the organic matter but the matter takes different forms and so the soul takes different species to live in. "Our soul passes through 8.4 million species before becoming human according to Padma Purana more than 5000 years old scripture" says Manjeet in an article on "How Modern Science Prove Hindu Species Theory to be Genuine" which has gained 7.5 K shares in social networks today.

A cluster of metaphors "holy books of birds", "leaping saga of prayer", "red fox", "pastoral beat of the blood through the laced leaves"(crucifixion), "skimmed yard of buttermilk rain on the pail", the sermon of blood"(gospels and sermons) reveal the natural objects associated with prayer, places of worship and Bible, pastors, priests and resurrected spirit (Christ), the crucifixion and the gospels.

According to Ackerman, the poet finds in nature the solution to the menace of death. The poet confesses his "faith in nature" when he describes nature as being "holy" as "the green good". Nature is seen as a sacred reality, totally filled with God's presence, accomplishing a religious and even salvific function. Thomas' belief in regeneration is not expressed entirely in terms of natural forces. The poet expects love to admit him into "the unknown, famous light of great / and fabulous, dear god".

Resurrection

Life after death has been confirmed by scientist of today. The consciousness escapes to the outer space and reaches another world and becomes united with another species. Religion talks about eternal life after death that assures of resurrection. A spirit that lives in a body searches for its fulfilment and purpose. The search does not get completed in a time period but it carries on to the different organic matter. Death is the celebration and preparation for the second life. Christianity affirms the resurrection through the resurrection of Christ and after the doomsday; the spirit takes a new life in God's place. Hinduism affirms by the seven lives a spirit undergoes to reach God and redemption of a spirit from the physical to become one with the part of cosmos. The conflict between the physical and conscious is what is called death. This conflict is clearly brought by Thomas in his poem "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" that the persona struggles to survive as the poet tries to infuse his physical being. The conscious escapes from his physical being at the end ("Dying of the light"). It shows the eternal life of the conscious as it wins over the physical mortal being.

The concluding words of the "In Country Sleep" profess the nature of the thief and Thomas entreats the child thus:

“Ever and ever by all your vows believe and fear
My dear this night he comes and night without end my dear
Since you were born;
And you shall wake, from country sleep, this dawn and each
first dawn.
Your faith as deathless as the outcry of the ruled sun.”

The assurance of resurrection of life or the assurance of redemption of a person is revealed through the image of dawn - “this dawn and each first dawn” The assurance given by the father creates faith in the child. The faith is described in terms of “the outcry of the ruled sun.” The return of the dawn is the force of nature or the return of life working through its natural cycle. Imagery of nature is the structure of the entire poem and the purport of the imagery on the whole is that nature contains all beings and all religions

Waking from country sleep is not just mere waking from sleep every dawn but waking up is a realisation that comes from life every time a person fails or more meaningfully waking from country sleep is a rise above the mundane earthly life caused by death. “You shall wake, from country sleep, this dawn and each first dawn”

Thomas is evoking the frustration of being, the shaping influence of a confused milieu. No longer does life seem so hard to live when compared to not being able to be alive at all. The poet’s intense and bitter realization of mortality concludes with his hope and confidence in the day of resurrection. Man lives eternally in the forms of nature, performing the traditional function of consolation. He is hidden in the dark earth, bears the secret of eternal life. Death bears with it a sense of entrance rather than exit. A sense of completion as one lives with his parents, the first dead, Adam and Eve. The dead are never truly dead but are part of the generative nature. Death comes to free him from the deep dark freeze that keeps pulling him down. He realizes that he is deeper and wiser as he becomes entangled in his own shroud, the soil.

Thomas’ revolt against death in the “Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines” and “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” finding a sense of completion and immortality of the soul after physical death. In “A Winter’s Tale”, it is the resurrection which is emphasized, taking death as a necessary step for the regeneration.

Conclusion

Thomas envisions the dead returning into the organic cycle, expressing no animosity that many of us feel toward the prospect of our inevitable extinction. In death, man continues the cycle. He grows in the dark earth as he grows in the darkness of womb. He dies to live, to contribute to the image of resurrection, a sign of the soul’s immortality. This is the consolation that Thomas offers an image of being gathered into the earth, embraced by the mother earth and becomes a body of earth with flesh of grain and veins of water.

Death is not a death or an end but it is inseparably linked and tied up with life in the process of creativity. It increases further realisation that the moment of birth ushers in the moment of death and the moment of death is a new kind of birth. It is an entrance into a new room of life. In the place of death-drive, Thomas finds the unity of man’s death with God and the universe (life) and establishes the unity of spiritual and physical self. It creates the celebration of this identity and immortality.

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