

Thematic analysis in two poems written by Dylan Thomas

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Abstract: The research attempts a thematic analysis in two poems written by Dylan Thomas, an English modern poet, novelist and playwright. It deals with the way that Thomas used to present the theme of death in two poems of Dylan Thomas. Thus, the aim is to attain how Dylan Thomas could describe death as a character in his poems: "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London," one of Thomas's more accessible poems that will be undertaken, illustrates well the almost sacramental view of nature that characterizes this later poetry. In, "And Death Shall Have no Dominion", for it is especially in this poem that he expresses his wide and deep love of humanity and the immortality of the sentiment that death shall never triumph over life.

Keywords: Thematic - analysis - poems - Dylan Thomas

Introduction

Death is a reality that can be interpreted in various ways. Some people fear the possibility of no longer living whereas others welcome the opportunity for a new life in the afterlife. Many poets have been inspired by death and thus, each poem casts a different form of light on the topic of death giving the reader a unique way to understand or to look at death But in Dylan Thomas death is a prevalent theme in his poetry. He examines it from a certain angle different from other poets.

Anyhow, Dylan Thomas, one of the most colorful English poets, is known throughout the world for his literary achievements as well as his notorious behavior. Thomas not only wrote poetry but lived a poetic life. Although he was irresponsible and his behavior was bohemian, most people fell in love with Thomas. As William York Tindall explains, "**he was our bourgeois idea of what a poet should be**". His words and explosive imagery intrigue his readers and challenge them to explore the depths of his poetry.¹

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) was born in Swansea, Wales, an area that is rich of folklore. He attended Grammar School in which his father was a master of English. Resembling his father, Thomas inherited the indulgence of reading poetic language especially Shakespeare and thus, he devoted his life in studying literature. Consequently, Thomas fell in love with words and their powerful, vigorous and manifold meanings. Both Dylan's father and his uncle were impressed by liberal movement of theology, a subject which attracted Thomas himself to be influenced in.²

As a child, Thomas was greatly charmed by his love to nature. He enjoyed vacations at his aunt's farm. Many times he spent to the farm at Fern Hill.²Therefore; the countryside for him was his shelter, his resort and his inspiration to write poetry full of understandable imagery and fluid lines. In his poem, "**Fern Hill**," Thomas presents an idyllic picture of childhood on a farm, filled with vivid imagery which presents a child's view of the world in the opening lines he describes the area as: **Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs / About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green**, (Fern Hill, Lines1-2)³.

From these lines, one could recognize the phrase "lilting house", how a house can be lilting but actually it is a metonymy. Houses cannot be lilt but it the people around them might. It is also a personification because the house is given the personality of human being. In fact, Thomas has his own view of nature which plays the role of location in his poetry. He finds his pleasure in it. The countryside for him is a part of his own world that is why his expressions in depicting nature have a deep meaning and establishing a new style which is different from other poets of 20th century. It is a style that is completely complex and perhaps difficult to be understood.⁴

It is safe to say that Thomas's poetry is marked by certain influences and different moments of his life and on different levels. He is possibly the most notable Welsh poet who is influenced by such modern movements as symbolism and surrealism, but he borrowed without adhering to any creed. He was particularly concerned with disassociating himself from the surrealist movement because he felt his conscious craftsmanship was contrary to the methods of that group.⁵ In the late 1930s and the 1940s a movement called the Apocalypse, which heralded myth and decried the machine and politics and Thomas mostly believed in its principles and he soon associated himself with its group.⁶

Moreover; Thomas can be seen as an extension into the twentieth century of the general movement called romanticism, particularly in its emphasis on imagination, emotion, intuition, spontaneity, and organic form.⁷ Some critics thinks that Thomas is a follower of Freud for using some images like, "ladder", "towers" and "water". They think that many of his poems are dreams and many constructed according to Freud's dream-work and once he was asked if he was influenced by Freud, he said that he did.⁸

To grasp Dylan Thomas's experience, it is possible to understand his own view of poetry which is for him as follows:

What doesn't matter that poetry after all?

*If you want a definition of poetry say, poetry
is what makes me laugh or cry or yawn that
makes my toe nails twinkle, what makes me
want to do this or that. All that matters about
poetry is the enjoyment of it, however tragic
that might be.⁹*

Accordingly, Dylan Thomas is described as a unique example of a difficult modernist poet. Not only his style is unique but the subject of his poetry is also unique. Particularly Thomas's poetry is specialized by a dominion theme which is controlled either by birth or death. That is why his early period of writing is called "womb-tomb" era to begin a new technique of writing using his own style and images which are usually called "vibrant images" to convey a complex emotion that matches his philosophical poetry. Thomas often sought to reveal aspects of life that are often overlooked in order to reveal important truths about them. Like many authors, his experiences influenced his writing and revealed many important themes such as the "**celebration of the divine purpose that he saw in all human.**"¹⁰

Thomas's early poetry is concerned with divine purposes such as birth, death, love and religion. Such poems are published in a collection called "**Collected Poem**" (1933). They are focused for this purpose and Thomas is greatly known of his involvement in writing themes and ideas outside the environment. He celebrates everything in all human and natural processes such as; the cycle of birth and flowering of love and death. He celebrates life in the sea and fields and hills and towns of his mother Wales thus claimed that his poetry:

*the record of my individual struggle
from darkness towards some measure
of light. To be stripped of darkness is to
be clean, to strip of darkness is to make clean.*¹¹

In this period of his poetry, Thomas described his spiritual response to the world around him. He concerned with man to be seen as he recorded his inner struggle from spiritual darkness towards the measure of light. It is important to remember that Thomas brought up in an atmosphere of war and witnessed the **Second World War** and the destruction it caused in the world including spiritual destruction in humankind. The series of war events cracked the poet's mind to deal with the agonies and the human wearisome conditions. Thomas reflects the concept of human energy and agony to create an overwhelmingly shocking effect on the reader's consciousness. In his mind, death established an elementary town to denote an anxiety that haunted his poems.¹² The most beautiful meaning in his poems is that his experience of the moment of death is a transcendental affirmation of life. That is why the most successful poems of Dylan Thomas are those embody the encounter of death.¹³

"A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London"

In "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" (1945), Thomas mused upon the absolute presence of death. Beginning with the long title of the poem, it refers to the refusal to mourn the child's death killed in the war. The refusal itself is a celebration of the innocent life but the matter is not of neglecting but it is about denial. Though death itself is absurd, in war it has become worse. Thus, the

poem reflects the senselessness of war which makes the situation worse because it includes the sense of the injustice of the world and raises questions of morality.¹³

The poem is written under the accident happened in one of the streets in London, where Thomas and his friend Vernon walking and suddenly a flying bomb fell in the street causing smoke and dusk everywhere and the result a girl is killed. The poem encounter with death not for mourning the loss of the child but for the celebration of a creative power of imagination to overpower death and the word "refusal" goes to be identified with "nature", besides, the "I" pronoun is significantly omitted as the subject of the imagistic statement. Instead of saying 'I refused to mourn, he says "refusal to mourn". The poet verbally identifies his own refusal to mourn.¹⁴ Reading the opening lines, we will find that the poem starts with a long sentence itself includes two stanzas and a line from the third:

Never until the mankind making
Birds beast and flower
Fathering and humbling darkness
Tells with silence the last light breaking
And the still hour
Is come of the sea tumbling in harness

And I must enter again the round
Zion of the water bead
And the Synagogue of the ear of corn
Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound
Or sow my salt seed
In the least valley o sackcloth to mourn

The majesty and burning of the child's death.¹⁵

In the poem, the poet literally refuses to mourn the death of a child he actually rejects the conventional ways of responding towards death not simply because death must be accepted as part of the processes of life and mutability in man and nature, but because he feels that mourning the death of the child is not a sufficient way to cope with death. In the first part or stanza the poet sees death as entering into the realm of nature.¹⁶

He describes the mysterious, abstract nature of death "**humbling darkness**"(1:3), "**silence the last light breaking / and the still hour**"

(1:4-5). He also depicts the unifying qualities of death by uniting "**bird beast and flower**" (1:2). So, what the poet does here is that he returns to the primitive state of the unconsciousness to be integrated in the

elements of nature. The darkness brought by death, at the moment of death, is presented in both positive and negative aspects. It is both destructive and constructive.¹⁷

In the second stanza, the poet makes Biblical allusions such as "**Zion of the water bead/And the synagogue of the ear of corn**"(2:8-9). He then goes on to say that "**to sow my salt seed/In the least valley of sackcloth**" will not do anything (2:11-12). So, 'water bead' and 'ear of corn' refer to the elements of cosmos which everything will return to at the end. A 'salt seed' in a literal sense when planted will not grow into anything and metaphorically stands for the tears or the mourning. Therefore, he is saying that crying or mourning the death of anyone has not to do with anything but rather it brings grief and sorrow upon the mourner. Mourning is merely "sackcloth" that will not bring someone back to life.

It can be say that in the second stanza; death is described as returning to place where God lives with creation, the place of prayer and adoration. The poet here transmits to "sacramental images" to give sacramental character to the reality of death as unity of all things and creations.¹⁸

The child, like the poet, enters the "synagogue of corn," the holiness of nature, at her death. Accordingly, the child's death is seen as a transition from organic into inorganic state, from individuality into generality, from consciousness into unconsciousness and from the human sphere into the cosmic.¹⁹ The death of the child represents the death of innocence, the death of a mind, therefore; the loss of such innocence requires something much more than simply mourning. Hereafter, in the third stanza, the poet continues and now he associates the death of the child with mankind. She proceeded with "grave truth". He is trying to convince himself that there is no 'grave truth' and there is an absolute truth. He attests to "**the majesty and burning of the child's death**"(3:13).

In the third stanza, we could find words like; 'mankind', 'blaspheme' and 'station of breath' which contribute in elaborating the meaning. They are also an allusion to the Biblical phrase 'stations of cross', signifying life's journey from oblivion to salvation.

I shall not murder

The mankind of her going with grave truth
Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
With any further
(3:14-17)

This reference is also a reminder to the suffering and the last agony of Christ. In this way, the various sacramental images applied in the poem to glorify the death of the child and then it is an "**Elegy of innocence and youth**"(2:18).

In the last part which is the climax of the poem, the poet reasserts the integration of the individual with nature.

It is then an echo to the first part:

Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,
 Robed in the long friends,
 The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother,
 Secret by the unmooring water
 Of the riding Thames.
 After the first death, there is no other.
 (4:19-24)

Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter. The "first dead"(line 19) might be refer either to the people of London who died before the girl or to Adam and Eve. "Long friends"(line 20) might be refer to the worms which are the element of corruption. They might also stand for the human race, the ancestors, those who have died before.²⁰

In this sense the dead have become the cover of the child. They surround her from every side. Towards the end of the poem, Dylan Thomas again reasserts the cyclic process of birth and death by suggesting the idea that after the death of the child, she returns to the source of all life. She re-associates and becomes united with the timeless cycle of nature. Here the poet gives us levels of death; first the death a girl resulted from bombing. Second the death of all humankind at the end of the whole world and third; the death of death. Consequently, there is no need to mourn since the child has lastly get the eternal life.²¹ Actually, the last stanza is a justification of the title and its assertion on the universality and inevitability of death. It is an attempt of consolation. In this stanza the poet asserts the organic unity of all creatures in their source which is nature. In the last line, Thomas makes his last affirmation that the creative consciousness is perceived within the immortality of life, "**After the first death, there is no other**". (4:6)²² Thus, the first three stanzas assert for not mourning the child's death whereas the last one celebrates the child's returning to the source of life which is nature.²³

The lines of the poem may carry a hint and an evident that the impact of war must have been a determining factor of human suffering and the question of the value of life. His refusal to mourn demonstrates his refusal to give into conventional ways of coping with death as he tries to find a more logical, meaningful way to respond towards the death of the child. In this respect, life for the poet is nothing more than a show procession of to death.

Death is a frequent theme in Dylan Thomas's poetry, especially in the corpus of his mature work. He employs different interesting images to present the different aspects of death.

And Death Shall Have No Dominion

In Dylan Thomas's poem "**And Death Shall Have No Dominion**" makes a part of that group of poems dealing with death. It was written in (1933) and published same year in *New English Weekly* and

then Thomas's *Twenty Poems* (1936), the poet does not tackle the death a specific person but he displays his own experience of life and the reality of death. The poem is worth for its richness of imagery and its cohesive structure. It is about the immortality. It tries to "**defy the forces of death and decadence**"²⁴.

Stylistically, the poem is written in a "villanelle" form. It is divided into three stanzas and each stanza begins and ends with the refrain "And death shall have no dominion" as the title of the poem It is about the affirmation of the individual in facing death. Connolly sees that the poem is divided in three parts. The first depicts heaven; the second depicts hell while the third tackles the principles of energy i.e., "the physical indestructibility of man".²⁵

The title of the poem is an allusion inspired from a Biblical saying a line from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (6:9), "**the dead dieth no more hath no more dominion over him**" which means he Christ, so, though the wages of sin is death, the gift of God is the eternal life²⁶.

This Biblical saying asserts that death shall have no domain is based upon faith in resurrection of the body and eternal life. So, the poem is a resistance against the domination of death and it expresses a hope that life and love will be triumphs against the destructive power of death.

*Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone.
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;(1:1-4)*

In these lines, the poet says that the dead men will be united to be one with forces of the universe like the wind, stars and west moon. Their bones will be completely dry and gone. But the men will be survived by the forces of nature after death in some way or another.²⁷

It is clear that the poet refers to the hope of life after death that though the bones will be sunk "**Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again**" (1:7), but they will rise again. The bones will revive to be persons again. The idea is also referred in Surat Ya`Sin "**He says; who will give life to bones while they are disintegrated?**" (Aya 78) where the prophet is sent to prophesy to the dry bones of the valley and to make them live again.

It is a clear image to suggest survival in nature. The poet believes in life after death in spite of the dominion of death. Here we have a resistance of life, "**though they go mad they will be sane**" (1: 6) and in spite they are being disintegrated by the sea "**they shall rise again**" (1:7). In the last two lines of the first stanza, there is a reference to the love which is another image of life as well as a symbol of vital feeling that related to human being. Love shall not be disappeared though the domination of death, "**Though lovers be lost love shall not/ And death shall have no domain**"(1: 8-9). By love the individual shall be redeemed.²⁸ It can be said that the dominion Thomas thinks about is the fear all men have when they think of death. Here, Thomas gives and illustrates the true identity of death and stripping it from the false mask being the

end of life Thomas unlike other people who believe that the dead will be lost to the void. He asserts that the dead men will enjoy unity with the universe. It is a new kind of life-cycle. When people think of the coming of death, they can easily go mad. Thomas, however, states that they shall be sane when they get to grips with the truth after death. Love is a new hope and a new life. Love remains forever to sustain people and every generation.

The second stanza carries another message with the same theme of death. He begins the stanza with the same phrase "And death shall have no dominion" (2:1) to asserts that it is nothing to do with what happened before. In the following lines there is a continuation of as focus on those who stay "**Under the windings sea/ They lying long shall not die windily**"(2:11-12). In the first stanza, Thomas takes us to the image of those who died by a shipwreck and their bodies settled in the bottom of the sea till their bones divest from flesh and they lost forever. Thomas continues his depiction to those men of the sea they "**shall not be die windily**"; yet, death shall have no dominion over them because their souls will remain and death have nothing to do with them. Thus those whose bones scattered and those whose bodies drowned in the deep sea shall not perish and they shall not be entirely dispersed by the winds of death.²⁹

The poet then turns to another image of death under violence and torture. It may be under fighting forces or it may be a result of martyrdom, "**Twisting on racks when sinews give way, /Strapped to a wheel,**" (2:13-14). This suggests that those people died courageously may be under torture or the wheel of time has broken them; yet, "**they shall not break**" (2:14). This suggests that the poet may have been enjoying reminding the reader of the main point that death has no dominion even the physical torture cannot destroy the soul.

In the third stanza the poet returns to images from the sea such as; "**No more may gulls cry at their ears/ Or waves break loud on the seashore**" (3:20-21) which visit the world of silence but in spite of the loss and the absence of flower (3:22) and in this sort of silence a new seeds of life will be emerged. Life is still possible even when it reached to the level of death.³⁰

It is obvious the poem "And death shall have no dominion" witnesses the ability of man's capacity to enter or to penetrate the boundaries of physical time. It celebrates the eternity experienced by the dead. It identifies that death is always present denouncing the limit of time and existence, yet; it shows the unity between both life and death which are near to each other. The day of birth is the beginning of death. By repeating the word "And" is no longer than assertion and emphasis of the eternity and the living connection between life and death. There is no beginning as well as there is no end. Life and death go on cycle.³¹

In the light of this argument and to sum up death is merely a moment in which creatures are transformed into a new form of living. Dylan Thomas tries to scrutinize that life as a cycle in which man cannot fear death. He also tries to inculcate the idea of eternity in the minds of the readers so as to give hope to those miserable souls suffering from the twentieth century spiritual aridity and the horrors of death represented in two world wars.

Notes

1. William York Tindall, *A Reader Guide to Dylan Thomas*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 4.
2. Annis Pratt, *Dylan's Early Prose: A Study in Creative Mythology*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1976), p. 5.
3. Christopher Kelen, "Metonymy, imagery and aesthetic ethos in the poetry of Dylan Thomas", **The Indian Review of World Literature in English**. Vol.2 No.1, January, 2006,p.2.
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5. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins, Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist poetry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.152.
6. Douglas Houston "Welsh Poetry" in *A Companion to Twentieth* ed., by Neil Roberts (UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), p. 332.
7. Houston, p. 333.
8. Tindall, p. 9.
9. Kelen in The Indian Review of World Literature in English.
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13. Gladir da Silva Cabral, "Death in Dylan Thomas' Poem "A Refusal to mourn the death, by fire, of a child in London" and its relation to the Christian tradition". A journal of human science (Brazil, 2005), p. 9.
14. Wolfe, p. 128.
15. The text of the poems is taken from <http://www.poets.org/>
16. Cabral, p. 10.
17. Cabral, p. 10
18. Cabral, p.11
19. Cabral, p.11.
20. Cabral, p.13.
21. Cabral, p. 13
22. Wolfe, p. 127.
23. Wolfe, p. 124.
24. Gladir da Silva Cabral, "Dylan Thomas's Poem 'And Death Shall Have no Dominion'", ARTIGOS, 2005,P. 84.
25. Thelma Louis Baughan Murdy, "Sound and Meaning in Dylan Thomas's Poetry"(A Published Ph.D Dissertation: University of Florida, 1962), p. 37-38.

26. Clark Emery, *The World of Dylan Thomas* (Miami: Miami University Press, 1963) , p.210.
27. Cabral, p. 85.
28. Cabral, p. 86.
29. Cabral, p. 86.
30. Cabral, p. 87.
31. Wolfe, p. 120.

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ملخص البحث :

يتناول البحث دراسة موضوعية و أسلوبية لقصيدتين للشاعر ديLAN توماس الأولى:
(رفض للبكاء على طفلة تمت حرقا في لندن) والثانية (لن يكون للموت سلطان). ان ديLAN توماس هو أحد أبرز الشعراء الإنكليزيين في القرن العشرين وينتمي الى الحركة التنبؤية التي تآثرت بالحركة السريالية. سيتناول البحث تقييم القصائد من جانب موضوعي أخذاً بعين الاعتبار أهم الموضوعات التي تطرق إليها الشاعر في قصائده مثل الحياة والموت والحب والطبيعة حيث ان الشعر في مفهوم توماس ليس فقط علاقة الانسان بالشعر وانما الحقيقة الروحية له رافضا فكرة الموت كنهاية للانسان بل هو البداية للحياة الابدية.
