

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY

Religious Glimpses in Dylan Thomas's Poetry

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by

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LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

This is to certify that Mr. Dhurba Prasad Baral has prepared this thesis entitled **Religious Glimpses in Dylan Thomas's Poetry** under my guidance and supervision. I, therefore forward to consider it for final evaluation, approval and acceptance.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A Brief Account on Dylan Thomas's Life and Work

Dylan Marlais Thomas was born at 5 Cwmdonkin Drive, Swansea, in Wales on October 27, 1914. He is widely regarded as one of the Twentieth Century's most influential lyrical poets, and one of the finest poets as such of all time. His acclaim is partly due to his hallmark of idiosyncratic and surreal introspection, and partly by his startling imagery that is brilliant and inspirational. Although Thomas was primarily a poet, he also published short stories, film scripts and publicly performed his works and conducted radio broadcasts. He was also familiar as a short-story writer and playwright and was renowned for the unique brilliance of his verbal imagery and for his celebration of natural beauty.

It was in the family house on steep Cwmdonkin Drive in Swansea's Uplands that Thomas spent his infant years, leaving it only to explore leafy Cwmdonkin Park and to attend a private school in nearby Mirador Crescent. It was in this house that Thomas penned several hundred poems. He began writing verses when he was eight years old. At the age of eleven, Thomas attended The Swansea Grammar School, where his father was senior English Master. There Dylan was much revered for his enthusiastic and impassioned reading of literature. His father began to inculcate in him a love of the English language. Dylan spent much of his time in reading his father's study, which was particularly rich in its collection of English poetry. He had been reading Shakespeare and other English poets from his early age and had chosen his vocation that was to be a poet (Ackerman 25). Some of the poems he wrote between the ages of 14 and 19, the most creative writing period of his life, are full of affectation and quite derivative. In the academic field, he could not gain much success. He tended to mould himself as dedicated

devotee to the art of poetry. By the age of fifteen, Dylan became a competent critic, with a remarkable knowledge of both contemporary and earlier English poetry.

Thomas failed the Central Welsh Board exam and left school at the age of sixteen. In 1931 he started employment with the *South Wales Evening Post* as a reporter, in which capacity he showed as much regard for the imaginative as for the factual interest of what he wrote (Davies 2). As a reporter his knowledge of life was greatly extended. During this very productive writing period, he also became known locally for the offbeat jokes, stories and obscene limericks he told in the pubs at night. He passed his spare time drinking alcohol and being careless about his health. Thomas decided to be a poet so he left Swansea and moved to London for the first time in 1933. There he met his pen friend Pamela Johnson. But, the relationship between Thomas and Pamela did not exist longer because of his drunkenness and repressed sexual motive. This became the cause of a sudden end of the budding relationship.

By 1934, Thomas started to publish his work in poetry magazines but hoped to achieve a literary reputation outside of Wales and avoid being regarded as a provincial poet. In order to further his career, he moved to London. Where he was introduced to the London poets and editors and got a new inspiration for further progress in his career. In London, Dylan quickly secured the publishing deals he craved. His first book *Eighteen Poems*, subjective and sensuous, was published on December 18, 1934. The main themes of the book are the poverty and hopelessness of Swansea young boys in frustration, adolescent frustration and youth's repressed desires. At this early age, Thomas revealed unusual power in the use of poetic diction and imagery. Thematically, these poems seemed obscure because they contained elements of surrealism and personal fantasy. But the freshness and vitality of Thomas's language draw the reader into the poems and reveal the universality of the experiences with which they are

concerned. His first volume was beginning to evolve into a distinctive and original style that characterized his poetry. With the first publication of poetry, Thomas achieved immediate acclaim.

It was necessary for Thomas to live in London for making a name for himself as a poet. There he got a lot of chances to meet influential poets and to enjoy the company of other young writers. There he came in contact with a number of literary figures including Constantine Fitzgibbon. Two years later, in September 1936, his second volume, *Twenty-Five Poems* appeared. The book gave him more praise and fame and established his reputation as a poet. The ideas included in the collections were both acceptance and refusal of death, sex, sin, and the isolation of the individual. The book is centered on the uncertainties of life and creates more objective pattern of feeling. There was a deepening sense of religious experience. Biblical thought and imagery remain the real foundation of the poetry.

On the eve of Second World War, in 1939, Thomas published *The Map of Love*, which contained sixteen poems together with seven short stories and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940). It was a collection of largely autobiographical sketches, paying homage to James Joyce. *An adventure in the Skin Trade* (published posthumously in 1955) is a collection of fiction with powerful inheritance of Welsh mythology and wild imagination.

Thomas gained much fame in literary circles. Although his poems appeared freely flowing and visionary, his work sheets reveal him as an impassioned, even obsessional craftsman. His romantic, rhetorical style won a large following. The war atmosphere and lack of money stopped him from writing, and he went on searching for a better job. He started as a film-pioneer in sound film production. Because of the money crisis he sold his four *Swansea Notebooks* in 1941. He also worked on documentaries. He achieved name and fame as a script

writer and continued screen writing till 1948. His creative pursuit is diverse. He turned to continuous freelance work such as writing scripts and readings for BBC radio. The work on film and broadcast scripts ousted the writing of new poems for Thomas.

Dylan Thomas spent most of the years of the Second World War in Wales, coming up to London from time to time to see friends and meet publishers. During this period Thomas produced many poems that led to establish him as one of the greatest poets of that time. In 1946, when Thomas's another volume *Deaths and Entrances* published, his popularity exploded. Critical acclaim for the volume confirmed his reputation. Thomas used religious imagery and took its subjects from the bombing of London during the period of Second World War. A series of successful poems notably different can be found in this volume. In this collection, Thomas tended to turn for the central themes for his poetry: a vision of his Welsh childhood, a transformation of money into vision, and a vision of lost paradise regained. The poems expressed the mature human awareness, celebration of religion with sacramental imagery that tell about birth, copulation and death. This led him as a genius and a great poet.

In 1948, fourteen years after he had left Swansea, Thomas insisted that he could only write poetry in Wales and returned to the country of his birth, possibly because it was his greatest source of poetic inspiration and it was during return visits there that his writing had been most productive.

After the Second World War, Thomas was a literary commentator for BBC radio. During this period Thomas's additional new poems were collected in the volume *In Country Sleep and Other Poems* (1952). His *Collected Poems* was published in 1952. This was hailed as a major literary achievement. In addition to all these, Thomas also wrote *Under Milk Wood* (published in 1954), a play for voices, which records life and love and introspection in a small Welsh town. .

In May 1953, the writer first performed *Under Milk Wood*. Although unfinished at that time, the outstanding evocative quality of his 'play for voices' gave him the greatest success of his career and earned him deserved fame. Noted for his readings of his own verse, Dylan undertook the first of three lecture tours featuring his writing to the U.S., which became legendary. It was during this period he achieved enormous international acclaim, not only for his work, but for his charismatic public performances.

Abruptly, Thomas collapsed in New York from exhaustion and excessive drinking while on his third tour in the U.S. in 1953. Shortly after his collapse, he slid into a coma, consumed by alcoholic poisoning and an injection of morphine. At the age of 39, Thomas died in St Vincent's hospital, New York, on November 9.

Thomas's poems express great love and what people would do for each other. They are not all confusing and hard to understand but lovely description of what he had done. His religious background influences most of his poems, and others are from his personal experience. Thus, we can find religious, sacramental and spiritual themes in his poems.

CHAPTER TWO

Religious Criticism on Dylan Thomas's Poetry

Dylan Thomas's poetry has been analyzed by many scholars and critics on its thematic aspects and meanings. The common charge against Thomas's poetry is that it is clotted with over excited imagery and obscurity. Because of this, Thomas has been identified with the surrealist movement, where images and language violate the rules of logic, frequently imitating the landscapes of dreams and even nightmares.

The much discussed analysis of Dylan Thomas's poems is complex, obscure, and apocalyptic and possesses the impact of surrealism. Dylan Thomas was declared the Shelley of the 20th century as his poems were the perfect examples of 'new-romanticism' with their 'violent natural imagery, sexual and Christian symbolism and emotional subject matter expressed in a singing rhythmical verse. Philip Tonybee, one of the critics who admire Thomas believes that he is a craftsman of words and that his poetry was from a clinical towards a religious purpose.

Considered by some critics as the most important English poet of his time, and hailed by some of his first readers as the most prominent figure of contemporary English Literature, Dylan Thomas is one of the most passionate and complex poets of this century. Some critics think Thomas a second Eliot (Tindall 20). He was exalted because of the exuberance of his rhetoric, his handling of language, the musicality of his poems, the originality of his images, his metaphors, and the mystic impression of his poetry. But, he was also criticized because of the excessive concentration of his images, repetitive themes, the complexity of his syntax, taken by some critics as symptoms of superficiality and irresponsibility. Critics like Elder Olson, describes Thomas' poetry as characterized by unusually powerful and original conceptions, formulated in symbols difficult in themselves and complex in their interrelations (Olson 229). He

considers Thomas's poetry very difficult to understand, sometimes almost irrational, and lacking the necessary discipline. David Daiches, in spite of acknowledging the difficulty with the interpretation of Thomas's poems and the limited number of his themes, images, and phrases, considered Thomas's poetry to be "magnificent, as well as original in tone and technique, and that he was growing in poetic stature to the last" (24).

Dylan Thomas's poetry was marked by several influences in different moments of his life and on different levels. One can enumerate names like Blake, Freud, Jung, Joyce, Rimbaud, Kierkegaard, Donne, and many others. "He was influenced by surrealism, there are in fact some points of contact between his poetry and the poetry of Rimbaud and Hopkins" (Bayley 140). Although Thomas did not recognize being influenced by surrealism and even denied it in his "Poetic Manifesto," arguing that the surrealists' formula was to juxtapose the unpremeditated without creating images consciously (qtd. in Fitzgibbon 372).

Resulting in a kind of automatic writing, he was in fact acquainted with the surrealist movement and ideas and even attended the "Great International Surrealist Exhibition" in London in 1936 (Fitzgibbon 21). In my opinion, in reading Thomas's poems one can recognize that he wrote consciously, creating some very complex rhyme schemes, using coherent verbal patterns and using a very rich imagery, however packed and complex. His poems intend to communicate and they do.

Regarding the quality of his poems some commentators have said that Dylan Thomas's eloquences, his rhetoric, his individual idioms and style tend to cloud his meaning, and have also claimed that his poetry is 'drunk with words'. Likewise, other critics have taken his poetry as nonsense and full of violence. "Dylan Thomas's poetry is always centred on his own self, showing always his own attitude towards the suffering of the other" (Olson 23). However, he is

supposed to be a craftsman of great poetic skill of his age. In this regard, T.S. Eliot, one of the famous poets and critics, estimated Thomas as a “Poet of considerable importance” (qtd. in Tilak 106).

Some critics have attempted to associate Dylan Thomas with the surrealist movement. One of them is David Holbrook, who regards Thomas’s poem as non-sensical verbal batter. He argues:

Poetry has its logic: and good poetry must be good prose- Dylan Thomas and writers such as Edith Sitwall and Stephen Spender have achieved a method of defying these requirements in order to delude the reader into believing that he has before him some new form of poetry and that it would be stupid for him not to see that it is poetry. This is sometimes concealed by a great, deal of nonsensical surrealist theory about the autonomy of the symbol and so forth. (Holbrook 90-91)

Holbrook points out that Thomas’s poems are vague and nonsensical and they can’t be changed into prose. But this charge against him is groundless and superficial because the readers who understand his poems in depth do not accept such blame.

There is no doubt that Thomas’s poetry contains various images, which seem obscure and puzzling. But patterns and critical attention toward such images really help to elucidate the themes of the poems.

Undoubtedly, Thomas seemed strange and difficult to the contemporary readers because his ideas and languages had very little in common with his contemporary poets like T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats or W.H. Auden. Thomas called himself a holy maker whose poetry was written in praise of God (Fraser 10). Unlike surrealists, his attitude to experience was far from anarchic and

he sought in his poetry to create values by shaping the words or putting the words in order. His view on the method of poetry writing which he expressed in a letter to Henry Terrace, quoted by William York Tindall suggests that he was more concerned with the use of images in his poetry:

A poem by myself needs a host of images, because its centre is a host of images. I make on image...let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict. Each image holds within it the seed of its own destruction, and my dialectical method, as I understand it, is a constant building up and breaking down of the images that come out of the central seed, which is itself destructive and constructive at the same time. (Tindall 26)

From this statement, it is obvious that the juxtaposition of heterodox images is a method of Dylan Thomas and this very process is systematically dialectical. His images are constructed with enormous care and are related to the unfolding of meaning.

There is unity of all life, and death is a part of a continuing process involved within nature. His poetry regards nature as having intrinsic force that attracts everything towards its tent and regulates every aspects of natural world. The same force controls growth, decay, beauty and terror of human life. No one can escape from it.

Thomas' treatment of God is parallel to nature. God and Christ are always around in Thomas' poetry- not in their proper capacities, however, but as "metaphors for nature, poet and their creative powers" (Tindall 17). Later, Thomas in his prefatory notes to his *Collected Poems* (1952) says, "These poems, with all their crudities, doubts, and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God" (Davies 90). On the basis of this statement critics regard him

as a religious poet and moreover his poetry is full of references to the Bible- Genesis, the Garden of Eden, the fall of Adam, Jacob, sin and so on. Regarding the poetry of Dylan Thomas, Mundra, J.N. and S.C. Mundra say:

Dylan Thomas was at heart a religious man. His vision of life was fundamentally religious and his faith burnt clearly and brightly in *Death and Entrances*. His poetry indeed conquered Death in wartime, and ‘opened Entrances to a fuller life.’ Dylan Thomas believed in immortality and perpetual life in cosmic eternity. He had the religious faith of a mystic who viewed the whole universe in a comic unity. It was his mission in poetry “to embrace the unity of a man with nature, of generation which each other of the divine with the human, of life with death, to see the glory and wonder of it” (601).

In so far as Thomas sang about the human condition, it can be said that his poems are written in praise of God, and love of man which Thomas has also stated. His God is cosmic energy and not the Old Testament God of Judgement. His God is immanent, all pervasive spirit, which is both creative and destructive. God is considered to be the spirit that permeates everything and not only creates but also destroys.

The examination of man’s intimate relationship with God and the role of religion in devastated world can be clearly observed in his poems. In Thomas poetry, he has raised the issues of fundamental problems such as the problems of birth and death, creation and destruction, God and the mystery and the holiness of nature. In this regard David Daiches states:

As Thomas developed, and his imagery became more disciplined, the theme of unity of all life and of life and death as part of a continuing process in which the whole world of nature was involved, became steadily more discernible. So did the ritual and sacramental element in his poetry. “After the Funeral” (1938), an elegy

on an aunt in which he sees the sad shabbiness of her life and environment transfigured by love, is a triumph of compact emotional suggestion, every image having its place in building up the transition from mourning to comfort. (Daiches 1144)

For Daiches, Dylan Thomas's poetry is the means to unite two distinct zones: human and non-human. Thomas uses images for the service of a number of clearly conceived themes the relation between man and his natural environment. In many of his poems, imagery creates a kind of parallelism between man and nature, man and animal, and nature and animal. Human activities are compared to natural activities, and natural activities are spoken in terms of human physiology.

Thomas's treatment of God is parallel to nature. God and Christ are always around in Thomas's poetry. The attitude in his poetry are sometimes Christian, sometimes anti-Christian, but even when the feeling is anti-Christian in attitude it is religious in temper. Racial Nonconformist spirit has given him a religious sense of profane existence. He seems to be quarreling with God and His Church, but belief in reality of God and Christ is always there in his poems.

The perception of a radical relationship between human and natural life in Thomas's poetry sometimes leads to a mystical sense of the unity between all forms of life, sensitivity towards animal and vegetal life. A related concern in his poetry is the attempt to fit this sense of the unity of human and natural life into the developing pattern of religious thought and feeling. Thomas opens to many secular influences in his environment, but T.S. Eliot has suggested that unity of religious background is more important in Thomas's poetry.

From this, we can obviously claim that Thomas's poetry is rich in holiness and religious themes.

CHAPTER THREE

Dylan Thomas and Religion

3.1 Religious Influences and Welsh Background in Thomas's Poetry

The progress of a writer depends, however, not only upon his own canalization of his energies, but also upon the prevailing climate of influence and taste. Likewise, Thomas's poetry was also the product of a strongly individual imagination fostered by ways of thoughts and feelings of Welsh origin. Dylan Thomas once said, "One: I am a Welshman; two: I am a drunkard; three: I am a lover of the human race, especially of women" (Ackerman 1). This shows that he was aware of the extent to which his temperament and his imagination were the products of his Welsh environment.

Dylan Thomas was also profoundly influenced by his Welsh origin, from which he acquired a distinguished eloquence and a very developed notion of rhetoric as well as the ability of using and creating metaphors, together with his personal and natural sense of humor full of enthusiasm and energy. An important element of the Welsh influence on Thomas is the religious experience which gave him sensibility to the sound of the words, and the rhythm of phrases, the cadence, the musical feelings, and the impressive rhetoric.

The reading of the Bible contributed to enrich Thomas's repertoire of images, as he himself recognized, "The great rhythms had rolled over me from the Welsh pulpits; and I read, for myself, from Job and Ecclesiastes; and the story of the New Testament is part of my life" (qtd. in Ferris 399).

The Welsh religion, a kind of rural Protestant Puritanism with its preaching festivals, its revivals, its hymns, gave Thomas a personal salvation, a very intense conscience of sin, and the notion of God's presence in the world of man and nature. His religious experience emphasized

the spoken word and the importance of the individual in direct relation with the Almighty God, the creator and preserver of the world of man and the nature.

Thomas's religious heritage gave him the force of themes and approaches, the richness of language, images, and rhythms. The Welsh language had also an important influence on his poetry. Nevertheless, the Welsh mythology, the ancient and contemporary Welsh writers, and even the common people of the village, the Welsh miners and labors have to be included in the list of influences. Another important contribution of Thomas's Welsh heritage is his craftsmanship in the use of the poetic language, his constant work and improvement of the word.

Religion figures largely in his work, but it would not be a mistake to assume that his God is the merciful being of the New Testament, or even the stern deity of the Old. In his writings the dark presence of primeval gods often takes a prominent place, the pagan gods of the Celts who were cruel, violent, and savage in their retribution. Certainly, there is little promise of future salvation in his work. Death is inimical, inevitable. He wrote, in an introduction to one of his books of verse, that his poems were written to the glory of God. The boy who later became one of the most famous poets of Wales was the product of two directly opposed natures and cultures. Despite early maternal guidance, Dylan was influenced most strongly by his irascible father, who refused to have Welsh even spoken in the house. Thomas's father, David John Thomas was steeped in the diverse and poetic language of Shakespeare, which he often recited to his son. These sonorous recitations undoubtedly had a lasting effect on Dylan. Long before he began writing, he fell in love with words - powerful, vigorous, and beautiful in their manifold meanings.

From the beginning, there was not much doubt about Thomas's future career; he decided he was going to be a writer at a young age. His father's constant efforts to involve Dylan in English

literature, at the highest level, were bound to bear fruit. The only subject in which Dylan was interested, and indeed the only one at which he excelled, was English.

It is important to consider certain theological concepts in this outline of Welsh influences and relationships in Thomas's work which inform much Anglo-Welsh poetry. These ideas have shaped the religious attitude to experience. In particular, the celebration by the poet of all natural life, animal and vegetal, a celebration expressed usually in sensuous terms, is derived from specific theological concepts. The basis of this attitude is a sense of the unity of all creation, and this identity of all created forms is religious in character. Dylan Thomas is aware of a sacramental universe in which the common things of life serve to illustrate profound mysteries. There is a Hebraic element in the Welsh character which stems the belief that everything in the world is, for its own sake holy. Platonic notions of the Idea behind external objects have hindered English poetry and English Christianity. In the Hebraic conception of life each object is in itself holy. Each is part of a sacramental whole, not an imitation of some idea.

The Welsh character possesses a feeling of awe, a sense of the wonder of creation, to which is allied a sensitivity towards external nature and a sense of pristine innocence. In the formulation of this attitude to reality, contemporary Anglo-Welsh writers, including Dylan Thomas, have been influenced also by the work of Blake. When reading Thomas's poetry one is reminded constantly of Blake's 'For everything that lives is holy, life delights in life'.

Anglo-Welsh writings generally have been influenced by the religious poets of the seventeenth century. Thomas has several important features in common with them: an interest in childhood as a state of innocence and grace; a deep sense of guilt and of separation from God, alternating with moments of vision; a liking for wit and paradox; and the use of Christian imagery and symbolism. The Anglo-Welsh writer found in South Wales at this time a

background of creative vitality and social ferment. However, Thomas was primarily concerned not with political, but with emotional, religious, and sexual man.

An important area of sensibility shared by the Anglo-Welsh poets of the twentieth century and the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth is the religious attitude to experience. This produced a poetry characterized by religious conflict and, on the positive side, religious vision. The religious mysticism in the work of Vaughan, Traherne, or Thomas is very different from the mystical aspiration in the poetry of Wordsworth or Shelly. The keen introspective analysis and extreme subjectivity which the seventeenth-century poets brought into literature is often revealed most satisfyingly in the poetry of religious vision. About the influences of Welsh in Thomas's poetry John Ackerman opines:

The Welsh influence was present in three forms. First and foremost, there was the direct and inevitable influence of a particular community with particular traditions. Secondly, there was the influence of other Welshman writing in English. These Anglo-Welsh writers helped to create a national consciousness, the sense of a life being lived that was peculiar to Wales: with them Thomas discovered a community of ideas and outlook. The third influence present in his environment was the tradition of culture existing in and through the Welsh language. (Ackerman 3)

Dylan Thomas is a 'Welsh bard' so he represents the natural life of Welsh, Welsh childhood and Welshness along with the "bees, flowers, rock and the mountain". He regards himself as "a Welshman". The world he represents in his poems is mainly the Swansea or Laugharne where he lived. Swansea was on a steep suburban hill, opposite of which were a field,

a school, and a park. So, his poetry is “more or less Welsh in character and feeling- almost as Welsh in respect of theme as the poetry of Hopkins” (Tindall 15).

Welsh Nonconformity, since it stressed the importance of ‘personal salvation’ and was concerned with the personal relationship between man, as an individual, and God, created a climate of intense and introspective religious fervour. It also encouraged the reading of the Bible. Two important characteristics of Welsh life at the beginning of the twentieth century were therefore determined: the presence of an articulate, religious people: and in them the existence of an introspective, puritan and, at its most fertile, divided conscience. The Bible is a most important influence in Anglo-Welsh writing, and is the source of a great part of Thomas’s imagery. Likewise the Nonconformist ethic, in its concern with the individual conscience, sin and salvation, provides the moral tension that characterizes Thomas’s work.

The popularity of the new religious movement was also due, undoubtedly, to its emotional appeal. The preaching festivals, the frequent impassioned revivals, and the great feasts of hymn-singing provided the excitement and inspiration to an emotional and passionate people. The solitariness and the passion of Welsh hymnology are born of, and answer, a profound need in the Welsh character. From the Nonconformist movement came ‘the great preachers of Wales, the seasonal preaching congresses reminiscent of bardic meetings, and that singing or chanting eloquence known as *hwyl*. This is a manner of speech much used by Welsh preachers, both in Welsh and English, and much loved by their congregations. In this regard, as quoted by John Ackerman, T.Rowland Hughes, one of the welsh novelist defined:

In preaching, or extempore prayer, sometimes even in descriptive speech, the speaker, under stress of emotion or deep conviction, instinctively and

unconsciously lapses into this from of fervent declaration, which makes an instant appeal to the hearts of Welshmen. (Ackerman 12)

Another feature of Anglo-Welsh writing is that it tends to be subjective, and consequently introspective. It is characterized by permanent romantic attitudes: a posited belief in intuition, in the vitality of strong and passionate emotions, and in the influence of external nature. Its favourite themes are the exploration of childhood, death and the sexual nature of man. Thomas was aware of this tendency of the Anglo-Welsh writer, both in poetry and prose, moved away from interest in the sophisticated and intellectual. About the Welsh environment, as quoted by John Ackerman, Geoffrey Moore writes:

Without being hopelessly mystical about race, one can with some confidence assert that both it and environment have an effect on the nature of a people and the art that springs from them... the spirit of place and of country is an inescapable influence. To this degree, and to the degree that Dylan Thomas *opened himself* to the scenes and people and manners of the place in which he was born, it is meaningful to talk about the Welsh quality of his work. (Ackerman 3)

Thus, the religious element in Thomas's poetry is the key to its correct interpretation which was the most important result of Welsh influence.

3.2 Nature in Dylan Thomas's Poetry

Dylan Thomas's poetry mainly deals with dominant issues of religions such as life and death, human and non-human elemental world of nature and so on. The two entirely distinct zones: human and non-human are brought together and interassimilated in his poetry so as to reflect an organic vision of nature.

Dylan Thomas reflects natural consciousness in his poetry challenging the cerebral orderliness of the fashionable poetry of the time and going beyond the modern desolation. His poems are largely concerned with human attachment with the elemental world of nature affecting it and affected by it, thereby making a kind of organic unity of all life. This ecofriendly attitude leads him to proceed towards the interassimilation, interconnectedness and integral relation of man and nature, and search for the symbiosis between the human and non-human entities so as to recover the age-old human alienation from nature and cure the environmental degradation inflicted by human beings.

The dominant aspect of Thomas's poetry –a nostalgic view of lost innocent childhood and the sanctity of nature, appears mostly in his later poems such as “Fern Hill”, “Poem in October” etc. The use of landscape in such poems makes the readers aware of the body nature in pure and sanctified state equal to the child existing on the lap of nature. So, he longs for the lost childhood as well as the pure nature in order to get mental solace out from the sense of alienation created by modern man's detachment from the world of nature. Therefore, he wishes to return to the nature through imaginative reconstruction in poetic lines.

Thomas opposes the utilitarian value of nature. Utilitarian concept makes human beings forget their moral obligations and ethnical responsibilities to the non-human entities. It forces us to subdue and exploit nature for endless material gain in the name of religion and ethics. Utilitarian values are not a sufficient basis for environmental protection and that environmental activists should argue on non-utilitarian values as well.

So, the utilitarian traditional Judeo-Christian basis has been criticized or ignored by the environmental intelligentsia as Thomas who takes bio-centric view of the nature ranging from a

vague feeling of oneness between humanity and nature to the idea that nature has rights and deserves justice.

Man-nature equation is reinforced by the idea of death in Thomas's poetry as he regards death as a natural process of life leading one closer to nature to make one with the organic nature. His treatment of death is common and indispensable to search unity and totality in the sanctified world of nature as well as the respect and awe for nature at the center of Thomas poetry. His poems represent nature from ethical perspective giving prior focus to environmental ethics where the distinction between instrumental value and intrinsic value has been of considerable importance. Such ethics ultimately poses a challenge to tradition anthropocentrism that has enhanced the modern environment degradation.

To negotiate between human and non-human world, ecocriticism "puts one foot on literature and the other on land" (Glotfelty: XIX). On the Vedic attitude of relation between man and earth, Raimindo Punikarm writes:

In Vedic attitude towards the earth springs from mankind's primordial experience of being on the one hand-a guest and the other an offspring of earth. The Earth is undoubtedly mother and close to man. But at the same time, she is alien, other and aloof. The Earth is the foundation of, the basis out of which emerges all that exist on which everything rests. The earth is the basis of life. (Punikram 120)

Therefore, earth is the source of everything. Even man as a part of it depends on the earth in every respect. Ecocriticism embraces the opinion that no branch of knowledge can ever be devoid of ecocentric implication. Every knowledge follows the earth; nothing can be understood in the absence of any spatial or temporal point of reference. Because of this reason ecocriticism

establishes the earth as crucial for the understanding of ethics and religion, art and literature, philosophy and physics, culture and politics, and all other disciplines.

Thomas's poetry regards nature as having intrinsic force that attracts everything towards its tent and regulates every aspects of natural world. Similarly, the same force controls growth, decay, beauty and terror of human life. No one can escape from it. So, human beings cannot be separated from this force that inevitably binds us with nature. On the other hand, human attempts to be away from such force become vain project since it leads human beings towards the alienation from nature, so happens to modern man as Thomas claims. And, thus appears crisis in human-nature relationship. Regarding this, G.S. Fraser comments:

Thomas is massively identifying the body of man with the body of the world. The forces, he is saying, that control the growth and decay, the beauty and terror of human life are not merely similar to but are the very same forces as we see at work in outer nature. Man is part of nature; is that a new startling idea? (12)

The man nature equation here gains strength from inter-transference of qualities between or more strictly, of our emotional attitude towards man and nature.

Dylan Thomas strongly projects how human and non-human entities are related to each other. He does not simply regard nature as luring and enchanting force rather treats nature as the transforming force. Nature is not only a benevolent force to humans but also a force that empowers human beings with creativity and knowledge. Human intimacy to nature turns them to be satisfied, prosperous and enlightened beings. In this regard, David Daiches posits that there is always willingness to represent the world of nature and celebrate the very world as organic whole in Dylan Thomas poetry. He says:

His breathless and daring imagery with its skulls, maggots, hangmen, wombs, ghosts, and thighs, his mingling of biblical and Freudian imagery, of the elemental world of nature in the raw with the feverish internal world of human desires, human secrets, human longing and regrets [...]. He uses images for the service of a number of clearly conceived themes- the relation between man and his natural environment, the problem of identity in view of the perpetual changes wrought by time, the relation of the living to the dead and of both to seasonal change in nature. (Daiches 1142)

For Daiches, Dylan Thomas's poetry is the means to unite two distinct zones: human and non-human. In his poetry, the natural processes of linking man and nature comfort him.

M.H. Abrams in his editorial, views Dylan Thomas's poetry as thematically bound to the unity of all life so as to enhance the organic vision of the nature. Expressing his views Abrams comments:

Dylan Thomas was a master craftsman and not the shunting rhapsodist that some had taken him to be. His images were not carefully ordered in a patterned sequence, and his major theme was the unity of all life, the continuing process of life and death and new life that linked the generations to each other. Thomas saw the working of biology as a magical transformation producing unity out of diversity, and again and again, in his poetry he sought a poetic ritual to celebrate this unity. He saw man and woman locked in a round of identities with the beginning of growth also the first movement towards death, the beginning of love leading to protection, new growth, and so in turn to death again and to life again and because of this view he comforted himself with the unity of humankind and

nature, of past and present, of life and death and so 'refused to mourn the death of a child'. (Abram 2510)

To Abrams, Thomas's poetry is the poetic ritual to celebrate the natural world. It is the poetry of place that dwells upon the earth. His poetry unconceals the essence of nature. All sets of polar opposites are, for Thomas, at some level equally holy and necessary; holy is the "hawk", holy the "dove". So, there is no separation between human and non-human natural world. Rather there is interrelationship, interconnection and interassimilation among all the ingredients of the nature.

There is unity of all life, and death is a part of a continuing process involved within nature. William York Tindall points out "Life and death are parts of a natural process that link man with what surrounds him inner with outer, above with below" (48). Further, he posits that "we come from nature and return to it for secular renewal with the bees and flowers [...] to establish the idea of nature and romantic holiness and to make mankind one with other living and dying creatures' (Tindall 192).

Similarly, Walford Davies focuses mainly on the vision of organic process of nature in Thomas's poetry. Davies explicates that "the un-stated claim of the earlier poetry seems on reflection to have been that there is around us this organic nature, and we share in it directly through our bodies and there is nothing else" (80). Davies further asserts "The more conceptual view is one in which human consciousness itself is now more than merely 'natural', having access to religious concepts and modes" (80). Thomas is evoking a close identity between the events of nature and event without the human body. His physical organic life is given a kind of elemental grandeur.

Thomas is equally conscious of ongoing environmental crisis due to the western anthropocentric vision in the Christian world. For this, he pinpoints the fault of irresponsible human activities. Human beings are distracted from nature and, thus breaking external and harmonious bond between human and non-human. Thomas, regarding himself as biocentric, rejects crime against nature committed by human anthropocentrism. He upholds the horizontal relationship between man and nature and discards vertical relation rooted in Christian world. Treating nature as organic whole in itself and man as a part of it, Thomas seeks to acknowledge the power of nature and human communion with the elemental world of nature.

Thomas locates man and nature in a very intricate web to find out solace in the desolate world. Modern World is the world of 'frustration', 'depression' and 'sexual repression'. It is what Eliot calls 'the spiritual wasteland'. In such world, there is inevitable alienation of human being from the nature under ecological crisis. Behind this, technology has the greater role that encourages the pervasive war and destruction. In order to be away from 'derangement' and 'alienation', to find 'solace' out of the 'bitterness of external life', and to get pleasures of the internal imaginative life, Dylan Thomas turns to nature and regards human beings as a part of it. The desolation and alienation of modern man, as Thomas takes, are in partiality. But in totality man is bound to nature that is organic whole of every living and non-living entities. Man, if taken culturally, religiously and ideologically, indulges in frustration, but within nature, there is always blissful existence. Thus, Thomas wishes to entangle himself in the very stand in order to escape from the external realities.

3.3 Death and Its Relation in a Christian Tradition in Thomas's Poems

In the poetry of Dylan Thomas, the reality of death has a fundamental importance, becoming its most recurrent theme and concern. In his poetry it may be possible to identify his

major attitudes and viewpoints about the reality of death. In these poems one can find not only his own experience and personal impressions about mortality but also some echoes of his cultural background, the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The theme of death has central importance in Dylan Thomas's poetry, which can be observed by the frequency of its occurrence and by the intensity of its images. "I feel all my muscles contract," he confessed, "as I try to drag out from the whirlpooling words around my everlasting ideas of the importance of death on the living" (qtd. in Fitzgibbon 135). His poems do not only reflect the fear of death as a presence full of menace and terror. Thomas's poems suggest an alternative to the menace of death, they portray a reaction, and they present an affirmative attitude. Thomas's attitude towards death is expressed poetically through psychological, biblical, and astronomical images.

Dylan Thomas's attitude towards death can also be interpreted in relation to his religious background, taking in consideration the Christian heritage so evident in his poems. Sometimes he seems to present death as a unifying experience with the natural world, sometimes he seems to suggest a very Christian orthodox concept of resurrection and faith. Sometimes the reality of death is so strong to Thomas that he can perceive it even in the birth of a child, suggesting that there is some sort of unity in the movement of life and death, as if they were part of the same process. "Birth," says Thomas "is the beginning of death" (qtd. by Shapiro 176).

Thomas uses the Christian images and rituals in order to celebrate the dead, showing the importance of a dead person can have to the living, and how the living can deal with the reality of the death of the other. Thomas communicates a sense of solidarity with the dead one, an impression that the living is directly affected by the death of the other. Contrasting with the Christian tradition, in spite of using Christian figures, images, and language, the poet goes to the

opposite direction of the orthodoxy and even sacrileges the reality of death. Death becomes for the poet not something unclean, but holy in its very essence. The dead one becomes a saint, his/her image is idealized, and his /her individuality is transformed and sanctified by the process of dying.

For the Christian tradition, death becomes a sacred act only through martyrdom, which is a sacrifice in the name of faith. For Thomas, the dead are all saints in their death, and they are martyrs. They are elevated from the state of mortals to the state of saints. Thomas makes death purify the individual, instead of making him/her impure. One of Thomas's clearest concepts is the overcoming of death through the integration of the individual into the forces of nature.

Thomas suggests that the individual can overcome the fear of death by plunging into the world of nature. He suggests that the individual can survive and live in the elements of nature, in the tree, in the stream, in the flower. The biblical perspective is different, it teaches that the individual can overcome the reality of death through faith in the resurrection of the body, which is the revival of the individual's body, recreated and perfected by God's direct interference in the natural process.

Of course this concept transcends the limits of reason and can be expressed and accepted only in terms of faith. The idea of surviving in nature is not present in the Christian tradition. It seems to partake of some oriental religious ideas, such as the notion of the reabsorption of the individual into the whole. Thomas's plunge into the elements of nature seems to guarantee the continuity of life. The loss of the individual seems to suggest that it is taken only as an interruption in the cyclical organic unconscious movement of nature.

Dylan Thomas takes the present life as a painful experience and death as a return to Eden, to a state of non-self-consciousness, a return to true life. Death liberates the individual from his

own consciousness and places him in the realm of unconsciousness. Therefore the poet takes the death as a sacred, majestic phenomenon.

3.4 Freud and the Bible: Sexual and Religious Themes

The major theme of “man” in Thomas’ poetry is variously accompanied by the minor themes of religion and sex, which are often side by side. Although Thomas declared himself an atheist, his poems reveal a strong religious influence. Biblical references are plenty although his references are likely to be characterized more by rebellion than conformity.

The poet’s attitude towards sex is central and closely connected with the allied themes of religion and man. Man for Thomas is man from seed to grave, with the emphasis on the grave, and the poet constantly attempts to view the entire progression simultaneously. Genesis, the Garden of Eden, the Fall, Adam, original sin, Cain, Job, Jacob, Abraham, Lazarus, the legends of Christ and Mary form the bulk of the reference matter, and even subject matter of the *Twenty-Five Poems*.

Thomas called himself a “holy maker,” whose poems are written “in praise of God.” (Tindall 16). Indeed, God and Christ are rarely absent from his service; and the later poems, abounding in bells, books, and candles, are as ritualistic as anything by Hopkins or Eliot. His familiarity with the Bible, which remained a principal source of his imagery, dates from his Sunday school days. In “Poem in October” God is mythical, and as to “Death Shall Have No Dominion,” whatever its ritualistic manner, it certainly is far from orthodox (Tindall 8). The Rituals often appear in his poetry in different forms, hovering around the central themes of life, death, and resurrection. In William Y. Tindall’s words, “Imagery of worship (steeple, bread, wine and masses) conspires with Freud’s to summon glory” (Tindall 614).

If, as Freud says, myth is dream, and if we admit the Bible to be myth, then the connection between Thomas' Freudian and Biblical images becomes plain. The Biblical images of the early poems -- water, towers, snakes, and ladders -- must owe something to the interpretation of dreams. Poetry must drag further into the clear nakedness of light more even of the hidden causes than Freud could realize. Dylan Thomas has been influenced by Freud. Indeed the poet's interpretation of sex is still as close to the Old Testament as to the psychology of Freud.

The philosophy is simple that implies the universe is sexually dynamic. Bird, beast and stone share the same sexual life with man but, forever conscious of a sense of sin. The sex-sin problem in Dylan Thomas is as unresolved as the life-death problem. These dualisms are reminiscent of the theological dualism, body-soul.

CHAPTER FOUR

Religiousness in Dylan Thomas Poetry

We can like a poem even if we do not understand it. Poetry rests on imagery rather than meaning. In poetry, meaning isn't everything. A poem, indeed, does not necessarily have to say anything. Poetry does not exist so much to be understood as it does to be appreciated. Dylan Thomas, the leading figure in neo-romantic poetry of 1940s in England, reflects religious consciousness in his poetry. He challenges the cerebral orderliness of the fashionable poetry of the time and going beyond the modern desolation.

Dylan Thomas has written many poems regarding the themes of God and religion. To take all his poems and analyze is not practicable. So, here, I have taken some of his poems which are rich in religious and spiritual themes.

"Before I Knocked"

This is the poem which is in the collection of 18 poems. In this poem, Thomas is seeking to define the relation between immediate reality and archetypal religious symbols. Fore-knowledge of life and death and man's condition is the theme of the poem.

Before I knocked and flesh let enter,
With liquid hands tapped on the womb,
I who was shapeless as the water
That shaped the Jordan, near my home.
Was brother to Mnetha's daughter
And sister to the fathering worm. (1-6)

Here, Thomas is speaking of existence before it takes the form of human life. The role of ambassador between the life that begins with conception in the womb and previous existence in

nature. Before knocking with the liquid of hand on the door of the womb, this pregenital liquid is shapeless as shaping water in Christ's Jordon. Life is taken as part of an organic whole.

Existence is a unity which is broken when life is conceived, but to which the body returns at death. While imaging the experience of life the poet sees himself as both male 'brother' and female 'sister'. The reference to the Jordan suggests the identification of man and Christ. The 'fathering worm' expresses the vision of life as a progress towards death. Paradoxically, it refers to the sense that life makes death possible.

I, born of flesh and ghost, was neither
 A ghost nor man, but mortal ghost
 And I was stuck down by death's feather
 I was mortal to the last
 Long breath that carried to my father
 The message of his dying Christ. (7-12)

Here, Christ in terms of the Virgin Birth is in a real sense born both of the flesh and ghost. His incarnation was neither human nor divine entirely. Any man is Christ and God's flesh, pity every man and God. The line 'And I was stuck down by death's feather' means that Christ was subject to death and 'death's feather' is the feather from the wings of the Angel of death. 'Father' refers to the God. Our general father, God, repeat the miracle of incarnation endless has doublecrossed every mother's womb.

You who bow down at cross and altar,
 Remember me and pity Him
 Who took my flesh and bone for armour
 And doublecrossed my mother's womb. (43-46)

Thomas asks to 'remember' mankind of being mortal and 'pity Him' for Christ. Because of His sacrifice human form take place. The very word 'doublecross' means deceive or betray. God deceived Mary and denied her pleasure by ghostly begetting. Christ is said to have 'doublecrossed'. His mother's womb because of the doctrine of the virgin Birth. The incarnation represents a vicious joke played by a malicious God on Christ, Mary and mankind.

So, the poem takes its source from the Bible. The relatedness of all life, of man, of Christ, the natural life, is an important concept in the poem.

"Incarnate Devil"

This poem is taken from Twenty Five Poems. The poem is about objective pattern of feeling. There is deepening of religious attitude to experience. Biblical thought and imagery remain the real foundation of the poetry.

Incarnate devil in a taking snake,
 The central plains of Asia in his garden,
 In shaping – time the circle stung awake,
 In shapes of sin forked out the bearded apple,
 And God walked there who was a fiddling warden
 And played down pardon from the heavens' hill. (1-6)

The devil incarnate in the snake stung the 'circle' of God's creative compasses awake. This 'circle' is the circle of life and death which comes after the Fall. The snake's garden is the 'shaping-time' of Genesis. God as fiddling is typical of Thomas's witty, handling of Biblical legend.

The poem follows the Biblical account of Eden closely.

The wisemen tell me that the garden gods

Twined good and evil on an eastern tree. (9-10)

Here, the wisemen are authors of the Genesis story. 'Garden gods' is used for the God's creation, the shaping-time of the world which is in particular, the Garden of Eden. The source of the poem as Ackerman states seems to be Genesis ii. 8-9. It states

And the LORD GOD planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the LORD GOD to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of knowledge of good and evil. (Ackerman 63)

In the second stanza, the 'wisemen' that means magi or philosopher tell us what went on in the Garden before our creation. The face of the water was guided by tide of the waters of the womb. The 'hand made moon' means created by God's hand to be a handmaid to Adam and the sun. The moon as Eve, made by Satan is 'half-holy' and 'half-evil'. The 'garden gods' are God and Satan and white as Christ. The conflicts and union of black and white suits co-operative creation. Heaven and hell are mixed.

Our particular Eden had fore knowledge of good and evil like that of the shapeless liquid in the womb. Warm waters and 'mighty mornings' refer to Eden, womb and birth. 'The cloven myth is not only the myth of Satan and Eve, but also the myth of divided creation. We know light and dark heaven and the midnight of the Son i.e. fall of man in our Edens. The word 'shaping-time' unites Eden, womb and poetic creation.

"This Bread I Break"

Thomas is increasingly concerned with religious themes in *Twenty-Five poems*. This poem is also one of the most important poems in this collection. The poem shows more positive use of Christian image. The poem celebrates romantic pantheism.

This bread I break was once the oat,
 This wine upon a foreign tree
 Plunged in its fruit,
 Man in the day or wind at night
 Laid the crops low, broke the grapes joy. (1-5)

Here, the ostensible 'subject bread and wine' of the Eucharist, serve for the holiness of nature. Nature and Eucharist become parallels. The green force of nature and poetry is sacramental and creative than the natural force which is destructive. We destroy what we enjoy and break the holy bread of life to receive it. The word 'break' carries the both meaning.

The unnatural bread and wine of the Eucharist come from natural oat and grapes. 'Plunged' adds sexual connotation to tree and fruit. The 'foreign tree' is primarily the grapevine, the cross, and the fruit bearing tree of Eden. But natural man and nature's wind destroy oat and wine. 'Broke the grape's joy' combines the breaking of bread with the taking of wine, and natural force with the fall of man and the cruxifixion. The joy of creation is the joy of destruction.

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;
 Man broke the sun, pulled the wind down. (5-10)

The word 'knocked' is a favourite word for sex, birth and heart. 'Knocked in' goes with 'broke'. 'Summer blood' implies the blood of Christ or the wine of the Eucharist which leads to 'Man broke the sun'. Man destroys Jesus by cruxifixion on a foreign tree. 'Wind' is the divine

breath and the breath of poets who like Jesus, are destroyed by man. So, 'wind' is the destroyer, the creator, and the victim of destruction.

This flesh you break, this blood you let
 Make desolation in the vein,
 Were oat and grape
 Born of the sensual root and sap;
 My wine you drink, my bread you snap. (11-15)

In the poem Thomas's sense of unity of all creation has become religious in character. The elements of the Eucharist, the forms of natural life, and mankind itself, are identified with Christ. The poem possesses a sense of the sacramental nature of the universe. The common things of life serve to illustrate profound mysteries. An important Eucharist concept is the idea that a part can represent the whole; a part that is consecrated can refer to a consecrated whole. This concept of divinity lies in the accepted physical reality of the bread and the wine. Each particle of life contains the divine.

Thomas stresses that the flesh and blood were "Oat and grape/ Born of the sensual root and sap" (13-14). He speaks in the person of Christ that as man harvested the crops, so did he shed, and therefore partake of, Christ's blood.

The poem is profoundly influenced by the idea of a sacramental universe.

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

Dylan Thomas has written several poems dealing with the problem of death. He associates death with religion. This poem is dedicated to a child, who became victim of bombardment in London during World War II. In this poem the persona laments the absurdity of

a child's death and contradictorily, refuses to lament this death as if his lament were a profanation of its sacredness.

Never until the mankind making
 Bird beast and flower
 Fathering and all humbling darkness
 Tells with silence the last light breaking
 And the still hour
 Is come of the sea tumbling in harness. (1-6)

Here, death is seen as an entering into the kingdom of nature. The images that build up this declaration create specific concepts. The Bible is the main source of the poem's imagery.

The darkness brought by death is presented in positive and negative aspects. In other way it is presented as destructive and constructive aspects. 'Darkness' is referred to as 'fathering', because it is in darkness that all life begins. This darkness which is the generative sources of life makes all men and all forms of natural life similar in their origin. It fathers both mankind and natural life. Thomas has suggested the identity of all forms of life. The Biblical source of the imagery of light and darkness and of the sea is the opening chapter of Genesis 2-6.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was
 upon the face of the deep And God said, Let there be light: and there was
 light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the
 darkness.... And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters.
 (qtd.in Ackerman 117)

This implies that the poet will not mourn this death until the end of the world. This end is seen as a return to the first darkness. The 'sea' suggests the image of potential life. The creation

and destruction of the world are illustrated by the image of sea. Death is described as a return to nature.

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 of sackcloth to mourn (7-12)

Here, death of individual or the generic death is described as a returning to the “Zion of the water bead” (8) to the “synagogue of the ear of corn.” (9) Thomas refers specifically to his own death. The ‘water bead’ and the ‘ear of corn’ symbolizes the primal elements, to which all forms of life, including himself must return. The unity of all existence is seen as sacramental in character. The poet wishes to accept the natural and inevitable process of life.

Similarly, the images of ‘water’ and ‘corn’ are taken as the symbol of regeneration. The myth of death by water that the water bead image is taken as a religious symbol of renewal of life.

The cyclical notion of time presents a progress from the organic world. The world of man, bird, beast and flower present to the inorganic state of death. The child’s death is seen as a movement from the organic to the inorganic state, from individuality to generality, from consciousness to unconsciousness, from the human sphere to the cosmic.

The majesty and burning of the child’s death
 I shall not murder
 The mankind of her going with a grave truth

Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath (13-16)

The child death is taken as mysterious and holy. So, the narrator makes a solemn vow of not mourning the majesty and burning of the child death. The line “I shall not murder” (14) is the Biblical expression that signifies there is a sacred reason not to disturb the death of the child.

Another idea presented in the poem is proximity of death and birth in human existence. The poem abounds in Biblical references and imagery that are ‘beast’, ‘Zion’, ‘grave’, ‘pray’, and ‘salt’. These words echo the Biblical mythology.

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 unmourning water
 Of the riding Thames.

After the first death, there is no other. (19-24)

The child has now rejoined ‘the first dead’. Her body has become the part of the natural elements of existence. The phrase ‘The grains beyond age’ refers to an existence beyond human life and beyond mortality. The elements as ‘long friends’ are described as the child was part of them long before taking the human form.

In the poem, present life is taken as a painful experience and death as a return to Eden, to a state of non-self-consciousness. Death liberates the individual from own consciousness. Death is regarded as the unity of all things, the unity of all creation. So, death is a sacred reality endowing it with an aura of untouchable sacralization. Death as a return to nature is expressed in the poem by using the images of holiness, sanctity, images of religious significance. Therefore, the poem takes the death as sacred, majestic phenomenon.

"Over Sir John's Hill"

The issues of the degree to which human consciousness is foisted on the natural world and the status of Christian references are raised in the poem. This poem is an elegy for the birds. Here, Thomas marks the sparrow's fall like God. The holiness is associated with the bird.

The hawk on fire hangs still,
 In the hoisted cloud, at drop of dusk, he pulls to his claws
 And gallows, up the rays of his eyes the small birds of the bay
 And The shrill child's play
 Wars
 Of the sparrows and such who swansing, dusk in wrangling hedges (2-7)

The word 'gallows' suggests a certain guilt on the part of the birds. They seem as they are heirs of original sin. The birds 'swansing' is taken as the poet's preoccupation with death.

And blithely they squawk
 To fiery tyburn over the wrestle of elm until
 The flash the noosed hawk
 Crashes, and slowly the fishing holy stalking heron
 In the river Towy below bows his tilted headstone. (8-12)

The 'fiery tyburn' is the hill, the place of execution. The verb 'noosed' is the metaphor of guilt and punishment. The 'hawk' as executioner implies prey to mortality. The 'holy heron' fishes the Towy bowing his 'headstone' for those about to be hanged. His 'headstone' is his head. The tombstone of sparrows tells where they fell. The heron stalks fish and walks. The 'noosed hawk' is noosed himself and condemned to death. It has further Biblical echos:

Where the elegiac fisherbird stabs and paddles

In the pebbly dab-filled
 Shallow and sedge, and 'dilly dilly', calls the loft hawk,
 'Come and be killed'
 I open the leaves of the water at a passage
 Of psalms and shadows among the pincer'd sandscabs prancing. (19-24)

The 'elegiac fisherbird' is the heron. The religious significance seems to be derived from the New Testament description of Christ as the father of man. The word 'water' is associated with birth and with the concept of existence as a state of flux. It suggests that 'Life does not end, but changes its form'. (Ackerman 141)

The act of killing is the way to a new form of existence. The invitation in the line "Come and be killed" (23) suggests the inevitability of the action. The poet reconciles to death in "Death clear as a buoy's bell, / All praise of the hawk on fire in hawk-eyed dusk be sung" (26-27). The 'buoy's bell' suggests a funeral bell. The 'blest' refers holy. It implies that birds become holy in their mortality.

Of the led-astay birds whom God, for their breasts, of whistles,
 Have mercy on,
 God in his whirlwind silence save, who marks the sparrows hail,
 For their souls' song. (42-45)

The Biblical echoes and rhythms is obviously supplied in 'whom God, for their breasts of whistles have mercy on' in reference to the sparrows. Thomas fosters the bardic myth in relation to his own personality.

This poem is a bestiary fable with direct reference to the human condition.

"And Death Shall Have No Dominion"

Thomas, as always, adapts Christian scripture and symbols to suit his own purposes. In the poem, the phrase 'death shall have no dominion' refers to the eternal life of a spiritual aspect of man called the soul. Thomas' poem deals with resurrection. It is a highly imaginative statement of the scientific fact that matter cannot be destroyed. This theme is openly stated and restated throughout the poem.

Here Thomas is like a preacher conducting a service for all the dead, in the hope of glorious resurrection. In this poem, Thomas sounds like a preacher with *hwyl*. Thomas conducts his service with grandeur and in a kind of ecstasy. Another point worthy of notice is that the poem starts with "And" indicating the continuity of things -- the circle of life, reincarnation.

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 picked clean and the clean bones gone;
 They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
 Though they go mad they shall be sane,
 Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
 Though lovers be lost love shall not;
 And death shall have no dominion. (1-9)

The first stanza paints a picture of Thomas' vision of Judgment Day. He talks about naked dead men which call to mind the saying that you cannot take anything with you when you are dead. Man is born naked. He comes to this world with nothing on and when he leaves he takes nothing. Earthly possessions mean nothing in death. All people are equal on Judgment

Day. Everyone will be in front of God that day. God is everywhere we look, in the wind on the moon, everywhere.

All will rise on Judgment Day, even those who have been long dead. Even those who have died so long ago that all that remains from their earthly bodies is their bones, picked clean by the insects in their graves. It does not matter if it has been long enough for their bones to have withered away. After talking about the bodies of the dead in the first five lines, Thomas moves on to the souls of the dead. In the case of souls, just as with the bodies, even extreme cases will be welcome on Judgment Day. Those who have gone mad will come to their senses.

There is resurrection even for those whose souls have been impaired. This idea is further justified by the immortality of the soul and of human feelings. Feelings are eternal. Thomas throws in a convincing example here: Even when lovers themselves are long gone, their love remains. The line “Though lover be lost, love shall not” (8), constitutes a covert reference to many great works of literature that we all know, whose subject matter is undying love.

And death shall have no dominion.
 Under the windings of the sea
 They lying long shall not die windily;
 Twisting on racks when sinews give way.
 Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break:
 Faith in their hands shall snap in two,
 And the unicorn evils run them through;
 Split all ends up they shan't crack;
 And death shall have no dominion. (10-18)

One possible interpretation of this stanza can be summarized with a single word: martyrdom. Thomas this time refers to the dead buried under the sea. He is depicting the rising of the dead from under the sea. The main idea of this stanza seems to be that salvation is not by faith but by nature. Even those who have been tortured and lost their faith will rise on Judgment Day.

Faith is lost through the experience of evil (and evil would, in this sense, have to be construed as a belief in death rather than in life). The torture of men, the 'twisting on racks' and the 'strapping of men onto wheels' -- these lines may very well symbolize the ordeals of everyday life and the world we live in (wars, famine, disease). Even those who cannot hold onto their faith after going through such ordeals will be saved on Judgment Day.

In the line "Break in the sun till the sun breaks down"(26), The word play in the 'breaking of dawn' and the sun 'breaking down' may signify many things, such as the dependence of life on earth on the existence of the sun and or the dawn of a new era, of life after death. The breaking of dawn or the rising of the sun, symbolize the re-birth and hope. The 'sun' becomes the ultimate expression of faith, of hope, of some sort of immortality. This image may be used to strengthen the hope of resurrection and re-incarnation echoed throughout the poem.

CHAPTER FIVE

Religion: A Soul of Thomas's Poetry

In this thesis, attempts have been made to show how Dylan Thomas poetry associates with the religion. It has been made clear in foregoing chapters that Thomas's poems are uniquely religious. His poems contain an abundance of images, rhythms and concepts brought from the Bible. The religious character of Thomas's poetry can be perceived in the formal and structural elements and even in the content of his poems. Sometimes they can be taken as a recast of the Christian tradition, a re-interpretation of the Christian concepts and images.

Thomas's poetry presents a secular version of Christianity, a secular attitude towards life and death. Nature is sacralized, taking God's place in the manifestation and communication of world's holiness and mystery. Death is seen from a different perspective, in spite of the use of Christian images and symbols. These religious elements present in Thomas's poetry are part of his cultural background, his linguistic and mythical universe. The sense of mortality as part of the human condition is something present in Thomas's poetry and also in the Christian tradition. Human life is seen as surrounded, darkened by the shadows of death. To be human is to be condemned to die.

Dylan Thomas, however, seems to understand that the death of the individual constitutes the great problem of existence, the great theme of his poetry. The sacralization of death constitutes another important element of Thomas's poetry. Thomas's poems present the forces of nature and the process of death as having a religious significance, a divine character. In his poem, Thomas's idea of sacredness of death, the notion of death as a mystery that is beyond human understanding, is evident. It can be said that very often nature takes the place of God as

the absolute value in Thomas's poetry. Plunging into nature, the poet finds redemption, communion with God and life.

Nature is described with an aura of sanctity, with religious qualifications. Nature can even reflect the glory of God and stay as the silent manifestation of God's divinity.

The idea of nature as being divine, the idea of pantheism, of believing that everything (*pan*) is God (*theos*).

By making the natural world sacred, Thomas may have intended to portray a more direct, vivid, immanent relationship with God. By using this strategy, his poetry receives more intense images and creates a much more impressive, organic, visceral religious consciousness. This passionate vision, of course, contrasts with the abstract, transcendent God of the Protestant theology. Thomas's immanent God (nature) can be seen, heard, touched, smelled, and experienced by the senses, without the interference of reason. The union with nature, provided by death, becomes a religious experience.

In his poems dealing with the death of humankind, Thomas proves to be conscious of the end of history, to be conscious of the annihilation of the human race, to be conscious of the death of the planet. Some links can be traced between this consciousness of an end and the Christian eschatology, the Christian doctrine of the end of the world, the apocalyptic perspective of life and existence. In these poems, there is some kind of consciousness of the end of the race, a consciousness that the history of the world is coming to a dramatic point from which there will be no return, a point related with the atomic age in which humankind can cause the complete destruction of life on earth depending on God's will. For them, the end of the world is a real possibility of everyday life, and they lived under the pressure of this realization.

Thomas associates womb, birth, childhood, and youth with death and mortality. In his poems one would hardly expect to find in such a subject a statement of the poet's attitude to mortality, God, sin and redemption. Thomas has woven a whole pattern of concepts. His poetry can be read in terms of referential effect. The idea of sacrifice and suffering, holiness of creation, lifeless situation, and parallelism between human and natural activities are suggested by Biblical imagery.

All in all, Thomas's poems present the force of nature and the process of death as having a religious significance. In fact, it can be said that the place of nature and God has the absolute value in his poetry. Thomas has used the particular scene to embody his own personal religious and philosophical beliefs.

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