



DYLAN THOMAS: CRITICAL RECEPTION

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ABSTRACT In this article I planned to explore the critical reception that Dylan Thomas got. Thereby we will be able to understand the distinguished position that he held as a poet. In his initial career he was simply viewed as a nature-rhymer. But latter on he salvaged himself with his unique and original approach to nature. He sang for nature but he approached nature from the point of view of the elemental and actual nature. Critics have found that the presence of 'death' in his poetry has primary importance. But overall it does not make his poetry gloomy and pessimistic. Death in his case appears in the optimistic sense of return of the body to the elements. Through the work of the critics we can understand his progress as a poet in his whole career. The symbolic difficulty of his poems is often charged with as difficult and oblique. But some critics argue that this lyrical genius only tried to explore the mystery of this complex web of interrelations among the species. So we find it difficult.

KEYWORDS : Nature, poetry, death, modernism, obscure, return, pastoral, neo-romantic, symbolism

Dylan Thomas (1914-53) in spite of his own fierce complaint is being dubbed as a 'Welsh poet' (wiki. Web) who led to the neo-romantic trend in the twentieth century through reviving Romantic and Transcendentalist ideologies in the face of a War-trodden pessimistic world. He dexterously combines tenets of modernism and romanticism, symbolism with surrealism, hovering Biblical myth and folklore with Freudian psychoanalysis. David Perkins impressed by this 'rebellious genius' (176) finds his poetry as somewhat challenging the dominant mode of poetry making in the 1930s, marked by: his fascination for 'hynotic incantation' (175) and modification of Hopkinsian sprung rhythm; deliberately abstruse and 'obscure' (ibid.) style; abundance of natural images verging on pantheism; obsession with death and Biblical images; metaphysical symbolism etc.¹ Thomas's rowdy lifestyle, his precocity did not seriously affect his popularity, but hampered the flow of his imaginative ability resulting in the insignificance of the amount of poetic volumes; which in turn explains the natural dearth of critical output, undue to the merit of this protégée. John Ackerman claims the fame of carrying out extensive research on Dylan Thomas with his three volumes: *A Dylan Thomas Companion: Life, Poetry and Prose* (1991), *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work* (3rd ed.) (1996), and *Welsh Dylan* (1998). *A Dylan Thomas Companion* is divided into three sections: the 'Life' section captures the setting upon which Thomas grew up – the Swansea, and Wales background provided the first impetus of his poetry, then he moved onto London and finally to Laugharne and America; after that the author scrutinizes his early notebook and manuscript verse in order to distinguish the emergence of Thomas's new poetic voice; in the final section Thomas' development as a prose writer has been traced through examining his prose works ranging from films, radio broadcast, to letters and stories and so on. The book tries to find the sources of some of his works both literary and biographical. The intense focus of this book lies on the poet's presentation of the natural world. The next volume also runs in the same line, examining biographical details, poetical influences, family roots, radical politics, Welsh nonconformity that have gone to the development of the poet. The book links Thomas's poetry unavoidably to the Welsh background, which is the major theme of *welsh Dylan*, the volume that firmly establishes Thomas as 'a Welshman' (Ackerman 4)².

Alan Bold edited the volume *Dylan Thomas: Craft or Sullen Art* (1990) which provides us critical examinations on Thomas' poetry and other works which are of immense help in decoding his poetic craft. Walford Davies produced *Dylan Thomas: New Critical Essays* (ed.) (1972), *Dylan Thomas: Open Guide to Literature Series* (1986) and *Dylan Thomas: Writers of Wales Series* (1990). The 1972 volume assesses the achievement of Dylan Thomas against the Welsh background. The book considers Thomas as one of the most accomplished poet of the twentieth century while excavating the cultural impact that underlies the poetic subtext. The 1990 volume critically appreciates the poetic faculty of the poet and analyzes his poetry in the light of surrealism, national-cultural definitions, against the contemporary poetic trends, especially in comparison with the Movement Poets. The book's main critical stance is overtly textual analysis. Davies is also the co-editor of *Thomas's Collected Poems 1934-53* (1989). C. B. Cox edited *Dylan Thomas: a Collection of*

Critical Essay (1966) which, subtitled – "Twentieth Century Views" offers close survey of Thomas's poetic style and features. The book is one of the earliest to offer a kind of practical criticism on Thomas's poetry. John Goodby and Chris Wigginton jointly edited the *New Case Book series – Dylan Thomas: Contemporary Critical Essays* (2001). The volume combines close study of poems along with theoretical approaches to Thomas's poems. S. Crehan surveys his pervasive concern with 'Time' (content page); Katie Gramich observes the celebration of femininity in Dylan Thomas' poems; Wigginton's own article explores 'Gothic Modernism and Surrealism' in Dylan Thomas' verse; Walford Davies' article is concerned with his narrative technique and language. Barbara Hardy, credited with two volumes on Thomas – *Dylan Thomas' Poetic Language: the Stream that is Flowing Both Ways* (1987) and *Dylan Thomas: an Original Language* (2000) is evidently interested in his lingual experimentation. The latter volume throws light of Thomas's powerful articulation, depiction of the inner self and 'imaginative recreation of forms and language' (UGA Press web). Hardy compares and contrasts him with other modernist artists, revealing his themes, subject matter, regional identity and his response to the landscape and the natural world. To Hardy, Dylan Thomas is a 'language-changer' (qtd. in ibid.) and his poetry is 'artistic(ally) celebration of greenness – literal, metaphorical and political' (ibid.). David Holbrook, another critic on Thomas infamously authored *Llareggub Revisited: Dylan Thomas and the State of Modern Poetry* (1962) and *Dylan Thomas: the Code of Night* (1972); the 1972 volume depicts both the struggle of 'the schizoid individual' (25) and the profound dilemmas of the creative artist. The eponymously titled chapter "The Code of Night" offers 'crude psychoanalytical' (Goodby & Wigginton 2) studies of Thomas' poetry.

Ralph Maud's venture into Dylan Thomas with *Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry* (1963), *Dylan Thomas in Print: a Bibliographical History* (1970) and *Where Have the Old Words Got Me* (2003) – never fails to appreciate the immense popularity of the poet. The last volume provides critical analysis of some of his poems, linking poetry making with biographical details. In the "Introduction" he traces the 'strict chronological order' (xv) of the volumes with the development of poet's career. Paul Ferris in 1977 produced *Dylan Thomas: a Biography* capturing the enchanting and attractive life of this lyrical genius which evokes both 'the extremes of admiration and hostility' (Goodreads web). The incongruent mixture of talent, audacity, alcoholism and reflection on despair make and mar Thomas' vocation as a poet. Andrew Lycett's much latter work *Dylan Thomas: a New Life* (2003) also sketches the impartial biography of the self-styled 'Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive' (PW web). Lycett's effort includes the seamy side of the poet, his personal relations with his wife Caitlin Thomas, his character and reputation; and it is a 'candid revisiting of the familiar one' (ibid.). John Goodby in 2013 wrote *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall* which is one of the latest attempt for modern theoretical approaches to Dylan Thomas: the reappraisal includes critical survey through the parameters of such theories, as – modernism, the body, gender, the carnivalesque, language, hybridity, performance and the pastoral (amazon review web). The volume shows unprecedented enthusiasm for the avant-gardism of Thomas and modernizes the critical filed in reading

Thomas' poetry³.

Due to Dylan Thomas's inconsistent life style, and sometimes extremely 'ill-balanced' (qtd. in PF web) poetical ventures, his works often suffered harsher treatment: Henry Treece quotes some reputable critic who considered Thomas beside Eliot and Auden – 'dog among the fairies' [title of the volume – *Dylan Thomas: 'Dog among the Fairies'* (1948), (PF web)]; or that of being labeled as an 'intellectual fakes of the highest class' (ibid.). But that is hardly consensual; unanimity rests on Thomas being one of the finest lyric masters of the modernists. Ralph Maud claims that 'And death shall have no dominion' is Thomas' first published poem, which encountered immense and immediate popularity. But his first poetical volume *18 Poems* (1934) failed to draw much attention. An original sensibility and evolving of style from the earlier manuscripts verses are discernible. *Morning Post* reviewed the poems as 'individual but not private' (qtd. in ibid.). But Paul Ferris shows that there were certain positive reviews as well. Constantine Fitzgibbon who produced the first, compact biography – *The Life of Dylan Thomas* (1965) is of the opinion that from the very beginning his excessive drinking, philandering, asocial behavior produced the impression of 'the romantic artist at odds with the modern world' (PF web). Critics are generally impressed by Thomas' obsession with word-play, rhythm, unnatural syntax and revolutionary images. William Tindall, Clark Emery and many such critics were struck by the difficulty of his first poetic volume and attempted to provide comprehensive meaning. Elder Olson, however, finds [*The Poetry of Dylan Thomas* (1954)] such merits in Dylan Thomas's poetry, as the unity of time, the interplay of creative-destructive forces and the holistic unity of all living beings. At the time of the publication of *Twenty-Five Poems* (1936), which marks greater clarity and craftsmanship, Thomas was in close proximity with some great literary figures, like Herbert Reid, Geoffrey Grigson, Vernon Watkins [who edited *Dylan Thomas: Letters to Vernon Watkins* (1982)] and others. Dame Edith Sitwell's favorable review for *The Sunday Times* – that the work 'is on a huge scale, both in theme and structurally' (ibid.) – assured the volume instant success. The volume mostly containing previous notebook poems, attempts at a sonnet sequence, which might have not reached that height; G. S. Fraser thinks that they are mostly dominated by 'feeling rather than thought' (ibid.). Modifying Olson's eulogism who being touched by the poet's symbolism, commented highly of the poems ['among the greatest poems of the century' (ibid.)] Tindall argues that the sonnets operate centering round the poet's own personality, aiming to resolve his own spiritual conflict. Commenting on Thomas' religious beliefs, R. B. Kershner called him, 'a pagan, a mystic, and a humanistic agonistic' (ibid.).

Goodby and Wigginton show that although initially reviewed as 'formless' (qtd. in 4) *The Map of Love* (1939) ultimately acquires friendly reception as 'tightly controlled and shaped' (ibid.). John Fuller treats the poems as Thomas' awakening to 'real grief and love' (PF web). *Deaths and Entrances* (1946) arguably Thomas' most accomplished work in the opinion of John Ackerman, establishes him as 'the first great civilian war poet' (xv) and also initiates his fascination for 'lyrical pantheism' (ibid.). T. H. Jones also thought of the volume as his most remarkable achievement; Jacob Krog finds in his presentation of the landscape – 'a new solidity, a new self-sufficiency' (PF web). "Fern Hill", "A Refusal to Mourn", "Poem in October" clearly showcase Thomas' sacramental world view and pantheistic creed. W. T. Moynihan, noticing the profound originality of his metrical skill, termed his rhythm as 'accentual syllabic' (qtd. in ibid.). In *Country Sleep* (1952) only added to Thomas' reputation. R. M. Kidder observed in the volume the poet's confrontation with death; but 'death through a form of worship' (ibid.). Tindall found the poet 'at his mellowest' (ibid.). *Collected Poems* (1952), mostly comprised of earlier notebook poems evoked 'moralistic critical responses' (Goodby & Wigginton 4) and as Goodby & Wigginton argues pictures the poet as 'a poetic peter pan' (5). Ralph Maud edited *Poet in the Making: the Dylan Thomas* (1968) which exemplifies the extraordinary precocity and unique style of the poet.

Among his prose works *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940) shows some kind of dubiousness and flippancy. *Times Literary Supplement* considered it 'smut and practical joke' (PF web). *Under Milk Wood* (1954) shows Dylan Thomas' remarkable handling of the prose form and distinctively marks him as 'essentially Welsh' (Goodby & Wigginton 4). Richard Morton finds in it 'a kind of esoteric significance' (PF web). Raymond Williams, however, dismisses it 'as

some adolescent's imaginings' (ibid.). Thomas' radio broadcast and films scripts also received energetic reception. Yet his is a case of too often resulting in mixed, often unfavorable – not so illuminating critical exposition. Seamus Heaney in one of his Oxford lectures mentioned Dylan Thomas the poet as a 'case history' (wiki web). David Holbrook found him as destructive of his own 'true voice' (ibid.). But in reality, although he differs from the normal stature of canonical writers, there are several scholars and critics who readily acknowledge his championing mastery over rhyme and lyrical forms: Robert Lowell finds him great in his 'dazzling obscure(ity)' (ibid.); Kenneth Rexroth discovered in his poetry 'reeling excitement and intoxica(tion)' (ibid.); Philip Larkin acknowledged – "none can 'stick words into us like pins' . . . like he can" (ibid.); Neil Corcoran finds merits even enough in Thomas' novel form 'for a contemporary Bakhtinian reassessment' (Goodby & Wigginton 3); James A. Davies defended 'taking Thomas seriously' (9); John Ackerman concludes the discussion of Thomas' poetry in the Volume *A Dylan Thomas Companion: Life, Poetry and Prose* with quoting Dame Edith Sitwell who commented: he 'is a poet through whom Nature speaks' (162).⁴

Several other critical works ranging from institutional criticism to recent theoretical approaches on Dylan Thomas show that his works are not undone by reductive 'critical deadlock' (Goodby & Wigginton 4). The followings are some of the few that promote comprehensive critical discourse on the poet: J. M. Brinnin edited *A Case Book on Dylan Thomas* (1960), Clark Emery's *The World of Dylan Thomas* (1971), Constantine Fitzgibbon's *The Life of Dylan Thomas* (1965), *Dylan Thomas* (1965) by Jacob Korg, E. W. Tedlock's *Dylan Thomas: the Legend and the Poet* (1960), James A. Davies' three volumes – *Dylan Thomas' Places: a Biographical and Literary Guide* (1989), *A Reference Companion to Dylan Thomas* (1998), and *A Pocket Guide to Dylan Thomas' Swansea, Gower and Laugharne* (2000), R. B. Kershner, Jr.'s *Dylan Thomas: the Poet and his Critics* (1976), Andrew Sinclair's *Dylan Thomas: Poet of His People* (1975) and *Dylan the Bard* (1999), David N. Thomas' *Dylan Thomas Remembered* (vol. I-II) (2003-4) and *Fatal Neglect: Who Killed Dylan Thomas* (2008) etc. Certain journals, like – *Welsh Journals*, *Dylan Thomas in America*, *An Intimate Journal*, *Southwest Journal* and some well maintained websites, such as – the *Poetry Foundation Website* (www.poetryfoundation.org), the official website on the poet (www.dylanthomas.com), that of the Dylan Thomas Society (www.dylanthomasocietyofgb.co.uk) are constantly producing progressive ideas on different aspects of Thomas' poetry.

1. In Dylan Thomas' case pantheism is one major trope in which he supposedly worships all the elements and agencies of nature. It has biocentric potentialities.
2. Dylan Thomas' nationalism is often viewed as a protest against rural depopulation as a result of war and industrialism. Thomas responded positively to the issue.
3. Undoubtedly Thomas belongs to the modernist symbolist school with a flair of surrealism along with this. Surrealism enabled him to perceive things outside their conventional referential context. It was his medium to envision the renewed man-nature relationship.
4. The range of criticism on Dylan Thomas varies so widely that it is not possible to inculcate any clear cut view. Yet informed with several counts from the *Wikipedia* and *Poetry Foundation Website* on Thomas and form the illuminating book edited by Goodby and Wigginton, I formulated the general critical reception that Thomas' works enjoyed. Yet I fear that sometimes I have become over simplistic in my approach and I also acknowledge that for the lack of space I often omitted several theoretically oriented observations on Thomas' poetry.

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