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## Deconstructive Reading of Dylan Thomas's Poems

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### **Abstract**

The paper studies four different poems of Dylan Thomas- *Our Eunuch Dreams*, *In My Craft or Sullen Art*, *Ballad of the Longed Legged Bait*, *Over Sir John's Hill* from the perspectives of deconstruction. The paper also analyses how Thomas has tactfully exploited literary tools like diction, metaphor and ambiguity in the poems to create meaningful ideas. He portrayed life, death, sin, redemption and the natural processes in his poems by tactfully exploiting these literary devices and ingenious use of words and imagery. He attempts to convey the diverse themes of the unity of all life, the continuing process of life and death and new life that linked the generations through these poems.

**Keywords:** Plurality, ambiguity, contradiction, difference, decentre.

## Introduction

Dylan Thomas, born on October 27, 1914, in Swansea, South Wales, was a neurotic, sickly child who preferred reading on books at home. Paul Ferril (1985) noted that he is a dazzling obscure writer who can be enjoyed without understanding. He read all of D. H. Lawrence's poetry, impressed by vivid descriptions of the natural world. Fascinated by language, he excelled in English and reading but neglected other subjects. Unlike his contemporaries, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden, Thomas was not concerned with exhibiting themes of social and intellectual issues, and his writing, with its intense lyricism and highly charged emotion, rather he had more in common with the Romantic tradition. Thomas describes his technique in a letter: "I make one image—though 'make' is not the right word; I let, perhaps, an image be 'made' emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual and critical forces I possess—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." (8). Alan Bold (1976) observes a kind of authority to the word magic of the early poems; in the famous and popular later poems, the magic is all show. If they have a secret it is the one we all share, partly erotic, partly elegiac. The later poems arise out of personality. Thomas was the archetypal Romantic poet of the popular American imagination—he was flamboyantly theatrical, a

heavy drinker, engaged in roaring disputes in public, and read his work aloud with tremendous depth of feeling.

### **Statement of the problems**

After reading the poems, I have concluded to discuss the following issues in the major poems of Dylan Thomas": How have the metaphors and dictions along with ambiguity been exploited in order to deconstruct the poems? How does the theme often fluctuate because of dual meaning? What narrative technique has been used to offer plural meanings?

### **Objectives of the study**

The main objectives of this research study will be:

- \*To study the major poems of Dylan Thomas from poststructuralist perspective,
- \*To find the unstable and dual meaning in the poems,
- \*To focus on the poem's multiplicity of conflicting, ambiguous and unstable dictions.

### **Hypothesis**

This research study assumes that Dylan Thomas' major poems ( *Our Eunuch Dreams*, *In my Craft or Sullen Art*, *Ballad of the Longed Legged Bait*, *Over Sir John's Hill*) tend to create multiplicity of meaning which are undividable and unstable giving rise to the concept of deconstruction.

## **Methodology**

For the successful completion of this research, I have made textual analysis of books of different writers and for the better and further information, internet sites will be surfed. Other secondary sources and materials, magazines, critical reviews, articles associated with deconstruction are also studied to support my claim.

## **Review of Literature**

Thomas's works and stature as a poet have been much debated by critics and biographers. Critical studies have been clouded with Thomas' personality and mythology, especially his drunken persona and death in New York. When Ellis (2104) gave an Oxford lecture on the poets, he opened by addressing the assembly, "Dylan Thomas is now as much a case history as a chapter in the history of poetry(2)". Firmage (1962) stated, "the strangest feature of Dylan Thomas's notoriety-not that he is bogus, but that attitudes to poetry attached themselves to him which not only threaten the prestige, effectiveness and accessibility to English poetry, but also destroyed his true voice and, at last, him" (78). Many critics have argued that Thomas' work is too narrow and that he suffers from verbal extravagance. Those that have championed his work have found the criticism baffling. Fitzgibbon (1947) also admits that nothing could be more wrongheaded, than the English disputes about Dylan Thomas's greatness. Despite criticism by sections of academia, Thomas' work has been embraced by readers more so than many of his contemporaries, and is one of the few modern

poets whose name is recognized by the general public. Several of his poems have passed into the cultural mainstream, and his work has been used by authors, musicians and film and television writers. Moreover, his writings also received criticism from some of the writers. William Olson (1954) noticed the growth of imagination and the conception of Dylan Thomas in his poems. Somewhere he has also mentioned images prevalent in the poems. But Goodby (2013) analyzed the concept of death and entrances existing in the later poems of Dylan Thomas.

### **Theoretical Background**

The point of the deconstructive analysis is to restructure, or "displace," the opposition, not simply to reverse it, as Barths (1984) stated. For Derrida (1982), the most telling and pervasive opposition is the one that treats writing as secondary to or derivative of speech. According to this opposition, speech is a more authentic form of language, because in speech the ideas and intentions of the speaker are immediately "present" (spoken words, in this idealized picture, directly express what the speaker "has in mind"), whereas in writing they are more remote or "absent" from the speaker or author and thus more liable to misunderstanding. As Derrida argues, however, spoken words function as linguistic signs only to the extent that they can be repeated in different contexts, in the absence of the speaker who originally utters them. Speech qualifies as language, in other words, only to the extent that it has characteristics traditionally assigned to writing, such as "absence," "difference" (from the original context of utterance), and the possibility of

misunderstanding. One indication of this fact, according to Derrida, is that descriptions of speech in Western philosophy often rely on examples and metaphors related to writing. In effect, these texts describe speech as a form of writing, even in cases where writing is explicitly claimed to be secondary to speech. As with the opposition between nature and culture, however, the point of the deconstructive analysis is not to show that the terms of the speech/writing opposition should be inverted—that writing is really prior to speech—nor is it to show that there are no differences between speech and writing. Rather, it is to displace the opposition so as to show that neither term is primary. Derrida's argument against hierarchy is an extension of an insight by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. For Saussure, the concepts we associate with linguistic signs (their "meanings") are only arbitrarily related to reality, in the sense that the ways in which they divide and group the world are not natural or necessary, reflecting objectively existing categories, but variable (in principle) from language to language. Hence, meanings can be adequately understood only with reference to the specific contrasts and differences they display with other, related meanings. For Derrida, similarly, linguistic meaning is determined by the "play" of differences between words—a play that is "limitless," "infinite," and "indefinite"—and not by an original idea or intention existing prior to and outside language. Derrida coined the term *différance*, meaning both a difference and an act of deferring, to characterize the way in which meaning is created through the play of differences between words. Because the meaning of a word is always a function of contrasts with the meanings of other words, and

because the meanings of those words are in turn dependent on contrasts with the meanings of still other words (and so on), it follows that the meaning of a word is not something that is fully present to us; it is endlessly deferred in an infinitely long chain of meanings, each of which contains the "traces" of the meanings on which it depends.

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

The poem entitled '**Our Eunuch Dream**' is a convenient specimen in Dylan Thomas's *Collected Poems*. Thomas's poem condemns this world as obsessed with the inhuman and the sterile: a condemnation, and then a promise of something more vital to the well-being of humanity. For the purpose, it selects two different types of barren activity. They are first, which concerned entirely with the past and the dead; and secondly, that concerned with the belief purely fictitious. The poem has been cast in four sections, each of two stanzas. The first two sections are expository, one for each type of barren action. The third, in its first stanza, asks the crucial question, "Which of these actions or 'sleepings' is real, which represents the actual world?"(17) And in its second stanza shows that both are equally unreal. Then, the fourth section opens with the assertion that both do fittingly represent the world as the poet see it: the world, he implies, is unreal while it concerns itself with the dead. The diction of the poem is arbitrary, all charged with the alarming power of dream visions and symbols. The questions that are likely to rise in a reader's mind are: why "eunuch dreams"? How can something be seedless? "in the light of light", and what can that odd phenomenon be? What does the temper of the heart refer,

and what are those tempers? How can dreams have limbs? Why boys limbs? And for what reason, anyway, do they whack those limbs? In which of two senses, both clearly possible in the context, is one to take the verb "groom" or has it both meanings? Is the window of the "night" cognate with "the dark brides"? And who is it folds these windows in their arms? Or is it perhaps the windows who fold in their arms? We observe that the stanza baffles our understanding of the answers to these questions. If the dreamers are "eunuch" and "seedless" how can they dream about the "brides" and fold them in their arms? "The girls they dream are sheeted ghosts" therefore they cannot walk in the "Light". Truth and love are the tempers not of self-regarding dreams but of the hearts. Stanza two consists of same ambiguity. Here again idiosyncrasy of diction naggingly hints at confusing meanings: the real nature of both phantasms is disguised from the palate, the dreamer is deceived Love and light are the enemies of erotic fantasy. And this midnight deceiving indeed is the link with the bewildering unrelated set of images of the second section, a connection deliberately concealed so that the abrupt transition may have its full force of shock and enigma. What these next two stanzas give us, in fact, is a surrealist evocation. The diction continually stresses unreality, illusion, a mockery of life and denial of love. Here there are less catches, and after the barren ingenuity of the "two one" juxtaposition in the second line, Thomas's verbal shifts effectively blend oddity with aptness. "solid eye"(17) points an unsolidity of the thing the eye is seeing. The "hole in the yard of day" figure, more apocalyptic than specific, makes harshly explicit the central contrast between the nights fostered illusion and the daylight reality.

With the interrogatory third section, we are back in the press of ambiguities, obscuring. There is a seeming shift of intention, in that the daylight world which has hitherto been the symbol of the real is here treated as yet another scene of phantasy, whose pretensions will be collapsed with the rest when truth at length breaks in. "This is the world" (18) has another meaning. Here losing its original irony. It may mean the "quick" and quick social reality, not the dream world of fake, buried in sleeping sack. This transition of poetic intension surprises us. The illusion turns into reality, and reality into illusion. The last movement of the poem, in another sudden shift, proclaims a new order, it is not finally the poet's revolutionary message which carries the poet splendidly through.

The main difficulty in Thomas' poetry is that offered by his diction. We depend upon diction first of all to get at the poem; unless we can grasp its meaning, we can hardly penetrate to character or activity or situation or anything else; and Thomas puts such formidable obstacles in the path of his reader as sometimes to dampen all hope of understanding him. An obvious way to remove such difficulty would be to supply the reader with a translation or paraphrase of each of the difficult poems.

But this has several serious disadvantages. In the first place the reader is likely to take the mere meaning for the poem itself. Again, paraphrase frustrates the poet's purposes by removing all need for intellectual activity on the part of the reader, although precisely that activity is necessary for the effect of the poem. Again, paraphrase leaves the reader quite

unaware of the particular verbal techniques of the poet. Finally, it puts a kind of permanent screen of explication, criticism, and analysis between the reader and the poem, whereas all that, once it has done its job, out to be got out of the way, to let reader contemplate the poem. It is absurd to start out to read a poet and wind up reading a critic instead; but that is the sort of thing that paraphrase encourages. And the best way to help the reader, I think, is to supply him with a list of things that Thomas is likely to do with language; the reader will then know what to look for and how to deal with it when he finds it. Thomas is fond of words with multiple meanings and multiple syntactic functions. He uses these for various kinds of puns and similar tricks, for achieving simultaneous meanings, and for parody.

It is evident in his "My World Is Pyramid" from his *Collected Poems: (1993)* "My World is Pyramid" plays on various meanings of the word fellow" (27), which can be a noun meaning a person, partner, friend, or companion; an adjective meaning associate, accompanying, etc.; and a verb with similar meanings. Again the sonnets play upon words like "whether", "weather", "rung" (like a bell), "rung" (of a ladder), "which", "witch", where there is similarity of sound only. Sometimes he wants simultaneous meanings of a multiple meaning word; in "A grief ago", the phrase "boxed into love" has simultaneous meanings; as Thomas himself declared, and 'boxed' has the coffin and the pug-glove in it. He mixed levels or kinds of language most startlingly, current with archaic, literary with slang and thieves' lingo, to achieve simultaneous meanings. For instance, in "Because the pleasure-bird whistles" the term "bum city" means Sodom, which was a bad city and a city

where sodomy was practiced, so that we have both the slang and the vulgar meanings of "bum"; while in "To-day, this insect," "air-drawn windmill" does not mean, as we should take it in current language, "drawn by the air," but has its archaic sense of "drawn on the air" (i.e. "imagined," "illusory"), like Macbeth's "air-drawn dagger." Thomas will also affect parody through the use of similar words: "minstrel angles" for "ministering angels", "maid and head" for "maidenhead" (54-55). He likes to coin words and devise new uses for words. The coined expressions are nearly all compounds, and some are very strange indeed: "grave-gabbing", "mothers-eyed", "scythe-eyed", "skull foot," "bird-papped," etc. these compounds are based on one principle; sometimes they merely put together two words in their literal meanings, sometimes they involve metaphor, sometimes they are condensed paraphrases. Thomas will use nouns quite commonly as verbs, for example, "Jacob to the stars" means "climb Jacob's ladder to the stars," and there are many similar instances of his wrenching a word out of its conventional function. His metaphors are likely to give a good deal of trouble. In the first place, he dislikes the obvious kinds and goes in for kinds in which the resemblance is extremely inobvious; sometimes it is a resemblance which is fancied only, and likely to be fancied only by a man in a particular mood or pursuing a particular train of thought. Second, Thomas likes to make the metaphor appear self-contradictory. Third, he likes to mix metaphors, to achieve various special effects through the dissonances they beget. The result is that his metaphors, being made as they are out of such materials as the 'metaphysical poets' used in their conceits, become enigmas

or riddles, since, unlike the metaphysical poets, Thomas does not make explicit the grounds for his fantastic comparisons and analogies.

In "**Our Eunuch Dreams**", Thomas has used apparently self-contradictory metaphor in which the contradiction comes from incomplete statement. For instance, we have "one dimensioned ghosts." "Ghosts" here is itself a metaphor for images on a movie screen; but how are these "one-dimensioned"? (17) Thomas returns to the metaphor in the succeeding section of the poem, in the lines "the photograph is married to the eye, / Grafts on its bride one-sided skins of truth," and we realize that what he meant by "one-dimensioned" is "one-sided"; there is no further side to a photograph or a movie image. The trick here is that he counted on our reading "one-dimensioned" literally, whereas it is a metaphor. He uses this particular trick here to emphasize his point that, while the photograph and the image are half-true, dreams are totally false. He uses metaphors which deceive us as to what is being analogized to what. This again involves partial statement which has to be filled out with something that went before or comes after. For example, in "when, like a running grave" we have "time tracks you down," (19) one is quite likely to think of time here merely as a hunter tracking, but the last stanza clarifies this; time is also being analogized to a

runner on a cinder track who on completion of his course shapes an oval, an "0", a zero standing for the nothingness of death.

Thomas ,in the poem , "**In my Craft or Sullen Art**" from his *Collected Poems*, tells that all the things for which he does not write: not for ambition, not for money, not to impress other poets or artists in the same game. He does not write for the "towering dead" (106) (all those immortal poets that went before him-poets people write books and theses and make films about- and who can be such a heavy, often paralyzing shadow for a poet). Thomas says that instead he writes "for the lovers", for the "common wages/ of their most secret heart".(106) He wants to speak to ordinary people, to every human being who has ever loved. These are the most important experiences, the most important griefs, the most important, age-old ache of humanity. The lovers in this poem are heroic, cradling all the "griefs of the ages" in their arms. Holding each other , holding on to love, even though the person they are holding represents all their griefs, and the griefs of the whole world. And the poet does not need praise of payment from the lovers for whom he writes- they don't even read his poems. He just wants to speak to those secret hearts that we all have, that want only to communicate with other hearts- to know and be known, to love and be loved completely. We are all lovers; we all understand the necessity and the agony of loving someone. Thomas describes poetry as a "craft", which is not a word that is often used to describe poetry these days, though of course, it is a craft, just as much as pottery or sculpting or music is a craft. Many people think of poetry as a highly emotional art full of gushing declarations of love or melodramatic. But even the most 'emotional' poets, the Romantics, who described poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", added that it must "take its

origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (that's Wordsworth in *The Lyrical Ballads*). So, although poetry often deals with the most intense human experiences and emotions, it is also controlled, it is crafted and Thomas "labour" – to create a form that will express those experiences and emotions. In the same way, a sculptor does not simply hack away angrily at a block of stone, he rather uses the techniques he has learned to create a recognizable form that will communicate his anger to other people. Hence the art of this poet without audience is 'sullen' in every sense and his neat structure more ambiguous than his brave airs make you think.

One of his most famous, and supposedly most simple poems, "**In my Craft or Sullen Art**", contains the use of metaphor. "Sullen art" means "so stubborn, unresponsive, refractory, that if it were human one would call it 'sullen'" (106). "Spindrift pages" means "if Keats was one who wrote in water, my more ephemeral work ought to be called 'spindrift'." "Ivory stages" means "stages whereon people act falsely, like actors"; it involves an illusion to the Virgilian gates of ivory and of horn through which the false and the true dreams, respectively, come. This sort of metaphor always contains some supposition or allusion from which the metaphorical term results as a logical consequence; frequently the supposition is a metaphor of Thomas' own. The "angel" for "Gabriel" business mentioned earlier, for instance, comes from a previous metaphor, while "ring the stars" derives from subsequent analogy of stars to bells.

His fondness of metaphor runs in the poem, "**Over Sir John's Hill**", Thomas is also fond of a highly composite metaphor in

which the parts are unintelligible until we grasp the whole. In "Over Sir John's Hill," (142-144) for instance, the hill is called "just" and the heron is called "holy". These terms derive from Thomas' overall comparison of the events taking place to a trial and execution; the hill is just because it is a judge, and it is a judge because, like a judge pronouncing the death sentence, it puts on a black cap- in this instance a black cap of jackdaws. The hawk is seen as the hangman executing small birds, and since he is a hangman, his stoop is seen as a rope (and a fuse is a sort of rope, so his "rope" is called a "fuse"). The heron is the chaplain or priest and so is called "saint" and "holy". Once one gets the whole, the parts are clear. "It is the sinner's dust- tongued bell" is likely to mean little or nothing unless the reader realizes that the details add up to a Black Mass being celebrated, with Satan executing this office. He affects metaphor also by his compounds. These do not usually offer much difficulty. "Lamb white days," for instance, means "days innocent as a lamb is white"; "a springful of larks" means "as many larks as you would find in a whole spring"; "apple towns" means the trees in apple orchards; and so on. Sometimes one part of the compound indicates the circumstances under which the other took place; thus "sky blue trades" means "things I busied myself with, as with a trade, under the blue sky," and similarly "the farm at its white trades" means "all the inhabitants of the farm doing their work in the white snow" (143).

In the poem , "**Ballad of The Long Legged Bait**", he has used various kinds of implied or suggested metaphor. The storm was analogized to a supernatural warship, although the warship itself was never mentioned. This sort of metaphor is

produced by mentioning attributes of a thing until a kind of rough definition results. Another sort comes from taking a stock phrase and altering part of it to produce an implied analogy, as for example, "a nose for news" is altered into "a jaw for news," "the stations of the cross" into "the stations of the breath," "once upon a time" into "once below a time"(131). Thomas explanation of the first phrase was quoted at the beginning of this book. The second implies that breath, that is, life, is like the Passion of Christ; the third implies that if something can exist in time, it can also exist out of time; if what exists in time exists once upon a time, what does not yet exist in time can be said to be once below a time.

In the "Ballad," as the fisher sails out from the "looking land," which bids him farewell, he throws over the bait "that stalked out of the sack." The bait is "A girl alive," recalling Donne's "The Baite," wherein the loved one is described as a lure. In fact, Donne's poem may well exploit religious images and attitudes as some of his other love poems do, as those of other Renaissance poets do. The lady swimming among the fishes will prove irresistible to them and, in effect, make a great haul: the poem not only is a variation upon Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," but its invitation evokes Christ's command to the Disciple and His own sacramental functions. However the strongest clue to the meaning of Thomas' "bait" is in the lines,

*Oh all the wanting flesh his enemy*

*Thrown to the sea in the shell of a girl*

The fisher and the bait represent the dual nature of Christ: the one, his divine spirit, and the other, his human body (the bait

is "long-legged"). Only after leaving heaven is his human form apparent – then it stalks out of the sack (the womb?). Because he would meet man on his own ground, God uses as his intermediary the "flesh his enemy," which "Is old as water and plain as an eel" (the enmity dates back to the serpent and the first death). That the bait represents Christ's body is suggested too by "long legged bread."

While going through the poems, we fail to stand with a particular idea or meaning. When we hold with one meaning at the same time they tend to produce another meaning. So we feel that we are often lost with concrete meaning and this process of duality of ideas remains till the end of the poems

## Conclusion

Thomas's poems show a radical transposition of its theme from central to margin. There are hierarchal sets of dualism, the calculated exploitation of ambiguities of diction, the phrases and even grammatical function within its incoherent symbolic structures. We have in Thomas a double practice of writing, at once closed and open, determinate and indeterminate, symbolic and allegorical. Contents of the poetry are perhaps the most obvious sign of this double practice, inviting us on the one hand to fix his poetry in one frame work of interpretation while mocking us on the other for our very desire to do so. In reading Dylan Thomas's cited poems, **Our Eunuch Dream, In My Craft or Sullen Art, Ballad of the Long Legged Bait, Over Sir John's Hill**, we are struck by two antithetical process at work: one, a process of extraordinarily rapid shifts from one idea to another: and the

other, a process of fusing in one cryptogram a number of relevant intentions. The poems, far from reproducing a central idea, actually interrogate the means by which the idea is constructed. Or even more so, we can find in them the very manifestation of a Derridean art of writing. His writings totally consist of ambiguity metaphor and idiosyncrasy of dictions evoking the very sense of surrealistic evocation. The rapid transition in his poems surprises us. Because of the frequent use of ambiguity, metaphor with diction, the illusion turns into reality, and reality turns into illusion in his poems, we don't find the solution, but play of signifiers, which is the example of the deconstructive writing.

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