

The Importance of Images of Flight in Dylan Thomas' Prose and Poetry

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Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) is perhaps the most well-known Welsh poet of the 20th century. Born during the First World War in the Welsh industrial city of Swansea, he spent much of his life outside of Wales (mainly in England) but never lost contact with his homeland. Despite his popularity Thomas was neither happy nor wealthy and his alcohol abuse undermined his unstable health. Dying at 39 during a literary tour in the USA, his remains were returned to his native land and he is still celebrated as a brilliant, but unstable and ultimately “doomed¹” poet who chose his own way toward self-destruction.

Born at the very beginning of the greatest war humanity had ever seen at the time, Thomas' early childhood was marred by wartime privations and the overall depression that hung over Britain. The high hopes of the Victorian age were gone or unfulfilled. The war claimed gigantic sacrifices in both resources and spirit and did much to shape the dark and uncertain years which were once again to culminate in an even bigger and far more destructive war. It is therefore in such gloomy surroundings that one must look if one aims to understand the conditions and age where Thomas' talents developed. The ironic and desolate images abound in his works but there are almost always glimmers of hope here and there, sometimes a fine memory, sometimes just longings for a brighter future. It is through oxymoron and contrast (Thomas's favourite literary tools alongside irony and sarcasm) that he often highlights these glimmers of hope and beauty. A particular type of these are the frequent depictions of flight, soaring and flying animals and objects in Thomas' works. Flying, of course, is a very common occupation for thousands of birds, insects and other animals. But it has fascinated human imagination from times immemorial: just recall the Greek myth of Dedalus and Icarus, Leonardo's sketches of flying machines, the Montgolfier balloon and ultimately the beginning of modern flight by the Wright brothers.

The idea of flying has always been endowed with an almost supernatural aura of freedom, power and fulfilment. It also has the image of providing a way to escape from any pain or trouble, from any drab and dreary reality, much like dreaming itself. It is therefore natural that Thomas tends to depict flying with connection to dreams and hopes. There are of course depictions of flight in his works showing it in its natural light and usually utilised to enrich a description of a situation or a scene or a character, be they human or otherwise. For Thomas, flight and soaring high above whatever lies below seems to have a powerful attraction and he frequently invokes its supposed freedom and power.

As virtually all humans are drawn to the idea of free flight through soaring skies, its depictions by a master of prose and verse such as Thomas naturally contribute to both his aura and popularity, especially

¹ This image is strengthened by John Brinnin's biography of Thomas published in 1956.

as a visionary dreamer. In this short treatise the imagery of flight in several of Thomas' poems and short stories compiled in the Shinozaki Shorin edition under the title "Reminisces of Childhood" shall be examined and presented. Edited mainly with the needs of English and English literature students in mind, the book is an attempt to offer a concise insight to both Thomas' upbringing and early years and his works as an accomplished writer and poet. While by no means exhaustive, that edition does indeed provide an adequate introduction to the person and literary accomplishments of Dylan Thomas and as such presented a delightful opportunity for interpretation.

In the short story *Reminisces of Childhood*, Thomas depicts his hometown of Swansea during and soon after the Great War. Through vivid oxymoron combinations like "ugly, lovely town" he shows his conflicting love for his birthplace with the sadness and greyness of this declining town in depression-choked Wales. The author quickly lists his favourite places and some of his early childhood memories before lamenting that these are without any chronological order and likens them to shoals of fish, some of which burst out from the sea of memory into the air of the present - the "immortal flying fish". This poetic description of fish flying out is an unusual but quite memorable comparison and their flight helps them exist and be remembered.

A little further into the narrative, Thomas recalls his early school days with the usual scuffles and small disobediences found at a boys' school. The children indulge in many different shenanigans but seem to particularly enjoy lying to each other about how distinguished they or their families are and sharing various imaginary secrets. This children's game prompts Thomas to recollect his dream about having an amazing secret of his own - that he could fly. In a beautiful description he writes how he dreamt of flying over the whole town until "there is no more Time" but then sadly concludes that that "was only a dream". In this case the dream of flying is the still-subconscious hope and yearning of the young boy to escape his often oppressing surroundings and be free, flying high and even eluding Time itself and all the sorrows it would bring. Thomas has a special relation with Time as a concept and further explores it in his poetry. Furthermore the connection between flight and immortality hinted at with the depiction of "immortal flying fish" is reinforced here with the concept that one can fly where there is no Time and thus be immortal.

The next short story is *A visit to Grandpa's*. Originally published as part of *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Dog*², this short story showcases Thomas's deep connection with rural Wales and his ancestry. Despite speaking no Welsh and having no particular inclination to include its rich folklore in his sources of inspiration, the author nevertheless acknowledges the important role of the land and people of Wales in his life and works. Comedy elements abound in the story, derived mainly from the child protagonist (the young Thomas himself) and his reactions and observations of his ageing grandfather's behaviour. But there is also a strong melancholic, even sad and tragically solemn undertone dealing with imminent death and how people try to prepare for it. In a sense all death is imminent but for ageing people it gradually becomes a point of

² Published in 1940 as a collection of 10 short stories inspired by Thomas' life.

obsession, especially, it would seem, for Dylan's grandfather. The morning he disappears while wearing his finest clothes is described by the author as windy and foggy, with his slingshots flying "high as hailstones in a world on its head". Certainly there is something amiss in such a morning and after all the previous talk about burying and death it seems ominous. Also young Dylan is indulging in a rather destructive sport: shooting at birds. Sling-shooting has always been popular with boys in particular despite its bloody nature. But, as the author almost apologetically states, no birds fell that morning: they flew high in the sky, obscured by fog and protected from the boy's shots. Thus life triumphs for once. Later, when the village men go looking for the grandfather and find him waiting on the bridge, life and death are brought up again. While obviously not dead, the old Dai Thomas insists that he must be buried in the village of Llangadoc thus hinting at some possible mental disorder. But the final sentence adds a different notion - he stares at the "flowing river and the sky, like a prophet who has no doubt". Flowing water has always borne an association with the flow of time and, standing on a bridge at the end of the river where it empties into the sea, Dai Thomas is allegorically at the end of his life. The sky too awaits his soul much like the ground of Llangadoc would await his mortal shell. Religious Welshmen believed in a curious mix of Christian and pagan traditions so the grandfather's reluctance to be buried close to the sea could be explained with the Welsh belief that the sea is the entrance to Annwn - Hell in Welsh mythology. He would much rather rest inland and go to Heaven like any good Christian. Thus the images of sky, water and flying are once more associated with life, death and immortality.

The topic of death as a form of liberation from a life that seems to have lost its meaning is touched upon in the next short story *The Fight*. It centres on the acquaintance of Thomas with Daniel Jenkyn, which would lead to a lasting friendship. Dylan and Dan, still in middle school, start out as rivals in a scuffle but eventually Dylan is invited over for dinner at the Jenkyns' and meets Reverend Bevan and his wife, who appears to have a sort of mental disorder. According to Dan, she had tried to kill herself by jumping from a window but her husband had not even noticed so she told Dan's mother about the incident. From this short description (which delights both boys to the point of offering to open windows for Mrs. Bevan) two things become clear: the lady is clearly lonely and craves attention and affection which her cold, distant husband does not give her; and she sees jumping to her death as a way of escape. As opposed to flying, jumping and falling have a clearly negative connotation that alludes to the finiteness of life. While the Reverend and his wife are probably real people and the whole story about the suicide attempt might also be real, it merits some attention because of the way chosen by the unfortunate lady. If life is indeed 'soaring', as Thomas' happier imagery of flying schoolchildren and birds escaping from the sling seem to hint at, then a fall to the ground is the end of it, the ceasing of motion, death. In the case of poor Mrs. Bevan (and, to a degree, of Dai Thomas the grandfather) this end might be a way to liberate an unhappy soul from its unhappy earthly prison.

A much brighter, happier soaring of birds and souls occurs in the first half of *Who Do You Wish Was With Us?*. It follows Dylan and his friend Ray on a hiking trip around the Uplands near Swansea. Ray is older, more mature and more bitter than Dylan, but the two share a solid, honest friendship. The walk to the

promontory of the Worm's Head is a proper idyll. Birds fly high and the two young men (or "a young man and a boy" in the words of Thomas) amuse themselves by naming them. Then they reach the beach at Rhossili and look over the scenery from atop a cliff before climbing the Worm's Head. Thomas is mesmerised by the echo of their voices reverberating between the rock and the sea, amplified and filling the sky until he feels "as large as a building". The beauty of nature makes him feel one with sound, sky and sea. The two "townees" enjoy their walk to the very tip of the promontory with flocks of seabirds above their heads. But then, in the melancholy of the seashore sunset, Ray remembers his dead father and brother and his sick mother. A lot of tragedy has befallen that young man and he carries his grief everywhere. Even the nature seems to change, influenced by this grief: the seagulls rise "in a storm" and Ray slips and falls in a "shower of stones". The images of the birds flying in a confused storm and Ray's fall reinforce the sadness, the fatalism and desolation after the sunny and pleasant hike. The sunset calms them down but when Dylan asks the question that serves as the story's title, Ray again remembers his dead brother and wishes he was with them on the rock by the sea. This powerful image of brotherly love and longing is only strengthened by Thomas's masterful description of the evening "coming like a cloud" and of memories for living and dead friends "racing against the darkness". Dylan and Ray's race is a climb back up the Worm's Head before the high tide leaves them stranded, but the metaphorical race against the darkness is an image to which Dylan Thomas the poet will return with even greater success in the celebrated poem 'Do not go gentle into that good night'. In this short story the images of a vast sky and its flying denizens are used to reinforce all the emotions the protagonists experience: from the exhilaration of the trip to the pain and anguish of remembering lost loved ones. The union of the soul with the nature seems to fascinate Thomas and he frequently invokes it in both his prose and poetry.

The poet himself addresses his style and inspiration in *Poetic Manifesto*. The Manifesto is not a story in itself, but rather an explanation written in form of a reply to possible questions in which Thomas at length addresses the circumstances that lead him to become a poet and a writer. The words that captivated him and inspired him "flew out of the air" and he gives them a holiness - "fresh with Eden's dew". Words themselves (or language and the ability to use it) are perhaps the best example of human intelligence and their use can bring all sorts of emotion. That is the magic Thomas celebrates as an artist. He denies being both a realist and a surrealist, arguing that a poet's main job is to select and refine images from his sub-consciousness and present them in the best possible way. This idea puts him closer to Romanticism - although he himself would have denied this classification as well since the dark, albeit sometimes amusing irony, he so loves is not a typical Romantic literary tool. But much like other romantic poets he uses images of soaring and flying not in their trivial, mechanical way, but to illustrate the movements of the soul and dreams. A case in point is the famous poem by a poet cited by Thomas as a source of inspiration: John Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' in which Keats uses extensive natural imagery interwoven with his feelings and thoughts in a blend of reality and imagination. The importance that Thomas too gives to imagination and intuition when observing nature, as well as his religious feeling and concept of Creation, bring to light glimpses of Blake's works and visions.

Although it has to be remembered that Thomas's religious ideas are not only Christian, as he himself seems to believe, as in all developments of life there is a parallelism, some visions of death and immortal divinity (like the possible allusion to Annwn mentioned before) can be as valid as the Christian one. Thomas has been considered a poet of the late romanticism due to belief in the great importance of imagination and intuition in the process of understanding God and his Creation.

Finding and analysing the images of soaring heights in Dylan Thomas' poetry presents some different challenges than doing the same about his prose. The main reason behind that is that poetry is much more metaphorical, much more fluid in expression and construction and ultimately much more open for interpretation. Complex and layered poetry like that of Dylan Thomas, with its frequent free verse and alliterations offers ample opportunity for literary analysis but also hides the risk of misinterpreting the ideas of the author. Thus in the following analyses only fairly obvious instances have been discussed.

In 'I see the boys of summer' Dylan Thomas depicts the ever-present conflict of generations as an older man looking at and criticizing the young boys for their recklessness and feistiness. But he is also sad with the prospect that all boys of summer must one day become middle aged men and in turn criticize the next generation. Images of sky, birds and flying are present again - both in the first part where sun and moon shine upon the ruin of the boys (an allusion, perhaps, to the unstoppable passage of Time); and in the second chapter where the boys defend their outlook and rebelliously aim to "hold up the noisy sea and drop her birds", thus upsetting creation and perhaps changing the whole order of the Universe - what youth did not at least once think that they can do anything?! In this poem Thomas (still very young himself - he was only about 20 when it was published) offers both generations' points of view and uses the images of celestial objects and flight to illustrate both the yearnings of the soul and the power of creation and Time.

The power of Time is further explored in the 4th stanza of 'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower'. In this highly symbolic poem Dylan Thomas laments the impossibility of meaningful communication between man and nature. Despite mankind being a definite and in a way dominant part of nature, it also seems removed, detached and shunned by it although that is clearly a paradox. Nothing is beyond the power of Time or the rules of nature, except perhaps imagination which both liberates and fills with anxiety for imagination is what brings about fear of death and what lies (possibly) beyond. Death is in this poem closely associated with time passing and it is personified as a mouth leeching from the fountain of life, slowly destroying it as it emerges. However, there is a positive side to Time: in an unusual twist given the poem's pessimistic setting, Thomas endows Time with the power to create Heaven. It has ticked (the allusion to a clock ticking away is a powerful reminder of the seconds of life inevitably disappearing) a place of safety, a place untouchable by the endless change of life and creation. The heaven round the stars might well be the Christian heaven or it might just be the symbol of immortality because the only real measure in creation would be Time itself, even when measuring something that is timeless. But it is significant that the

heaven is up there with the stars, all but inaccessible to us. Its position naturally represents our longing for a safe haven of hope, away from the vagaries of life.

Coming back down to Earth, Thomas further explores the beauty of Wales in 'Especially when the October wind'. The central concept is simple enough: the poet, walking in his native countryside, describes in a romantic, elegant way all that lies before him to his lover who (assumedly) walks with him. In order to magnify the connection he feels with nature and its living and non-living creations, he paints a picture with words: chilled by the October wind, shone upon by a sun that exposes the crabs the poet himself feels he is one of them. These crabs, the noisy birds, and the coughing raven belong to the menacing reality which is completed in images foreboding the long cold winter's approach. The coming fury of the cold again reminds us of the power of creation to sustain (the shining sun) and to destroy (the winter) life. And again, through invoking the vastness of the sky and the weather as well as birds and winds, the poet celebrates Creation in all its sometimes overwhelming glory.

A more otherworldly experience awaits the reader in 'I have longed to move away'. The "moving away" is actually an allusion to death and while Thomas never committed or attempted to commit suicide, this poem clearly shows longing for death. Again, soaring imagery is present to better express the emotions in the poem - ghosts float in the air and their calls are as loud as thunder. But death can ultimately wait because the poet feels there is life left in him and that life might explode "crackling in the air", much like the fountain of life in 'The force that drives...' Life, ultimately, will go on and that is the purpose of humans (and all living things): to go on until there is no life left in them. It is a powerful reassurance in the face of depression, a call to fight on.

Returning to October as a setting is the 'Poem in October' in which Thomas again explores the wintry weather and the desolation it brings. It's the author's birthday time³ and he reflects on that and how the late autumn makes him feel. Even though winter comes early to Wales, there are still fresh memories of summer and the weather changes abruptly in unison with the poet's mood. He is excited and feels himself one with nature again: in the second stanza, the poet's name is figured in a rainy sky. The birds from "winged trees" fly his name "above the farms." This upward moving imagery marks the stanza as tour of imagination over and through the familiar landscape. The trees are "winged" because the poet sees his own flight upwards through them. He meets the "rose in rainy autumn" on its own imaginary plane, the alliteration of r's suggesting his eager participation in a "shower of all my days" - an allusion to the often melancholy rainy climate which the poet nevertheless loves and relates to. But the poem features more than one type of weather, suggesting both the mutability of nature and the constant change in the human soul - he is situated at the top of a hill, he finds himself in fair weather that is full of birdsong and "summery" light. It is a "fond" climate sharply contrasting to the previous "rain wringing/Wind... In the wood faraway under me." The stanza takes even more force from the alliterations typical of each weather - summer with its i's and l's and the winter with dark, booming

³ Thomas was born on 27th October.

o's. The poet sees not only another kind of weather but a second place in time and space as well. From his vantage point on the hill, he has a view of the harbour, church and castle. The predominant imagery is of dim lit wetness; the predominant sound is the assonance of "pale," "snail" and "rain." The rain is once again contrasted to the "spring and summer {now} blooming." The poem ends with one more late summer image in the sunlight over the town, where the poet stands in his "thirtieth year to heaven⁴", saddened and hopeful all at once.

The next piece of poetry is perhaps one of Thomas' most famous poems: 'Do not go gentle into that good night'. The title might suggest some romantic liaison but this notion cannot be further from the truth. It is in fact a powerful urging not to give up to death, to fight to the last. Believed to have been written during an illness suffered by Thomas' father, it is perhaps among the most uplifting and fiercely hope-inspiring message that a sick person may expect. The images of wild men catching the flying sun, of grave men near death whose eyes still "blaze like meteors" show the utter resolve to continue fighting. The idea of blazing eyes is often associated with anger but also with extreme bravery on the battlefield, for grave sicknesses are also a battlefield where man is not always the winner. In the final stanza, Thomas invokes an image of his father on the sad height, which brings biblical allusions to Golgotha and the final moments of pain and suffering of Christ. But, much like Christ himself, Dylan's father must not simply give up, he must "rage" and never let go of the light of life until there is not a shred of strength left in him. This is the essence of the struggle to continue living, the instinct that leads us all forward.

Another battlefield appears, however, in the poem 'Among those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred'. This rather long title is fairly similar to a newspaper article reporting the aftermath of a German air raid over an unnamed English city (but most probably London) during the Second World War. It begins with the morning symbolically "waking" over the death and destruction of the previous night. An elderly man is among the victims, a sad end to a life that has seen so much. Even nature seems saddened at the loss - "he stopped a sun". This sun can be the sun itself, pausing to share in the grief, or it could be an allusion to the blast of the explosion, but evident is the pause brought about by the old man's death. Then a "heavenly ambulance" arrives to take him, an angelic image associated with ascent to heaven. But the most powerful image can be found in the last two lines of the poem: the morning (i.e. Time and nature both) is "flying on the wings of his age", acknowledging both his wisdom and his subsequent admittance to heaven. Thomas masterfully summarizes that in the image of 100 storks (one for each year of the old man's life) perching on the sun's right hand, awaiting his arrival. Worthy of note is the "right hand" - it is an allusion to Christianity and the Bible mentions that the righteous will be put to sit on the right hand of God in the traditional place of honour. Thus in death the old man receives recognition and is awarded a place in the afterlife in heaven and by God.

The last poem selected for this treatise is considered Thomas' masterpiece: 'Fern Hill'. It is in the true

⁴ The phrasing "to heaven" can be seen as both "toward" in the sense of counting years and "ascending to as in flight". Both are consistent with the spirit of the poem.

sense a reminiscing about his happy childhood days in the beautiful countryside of Wales. Thomas' particular mastery lies in the use of metaphor - in superbly evocative combinations like 'windfall light', 'holy streams', 'fire green as grass', 'fields of praise' and 'lamb white days' he depicts an idyll of pure happiness and celebration of life itself. And of course images of soaring and flying abound, shining sun and starry nights, but also dreams of owls "bearing the farm away" and flying with the horses in the moonlit darkness. Flying and soaring in this case bear a particular connection with the happiness and freedom associated with childhood. The author gets reborn again and again under the sun in the blue sky and he acknowledges Time's kindness to him in his early age: allowing him to live in happiness, at least for a while. His admiration and awe of natural beauty and life itself are almost religious in their intensity, and there are indeed "holy streams" and "lamb (a symbol of Jesus and innocence) white days". The ending bears a more melancholic outlook, with the ever rising moon nearing the morning of the "childless land" - childhood is over, Time has slowly moved eternally forward and all but the memories is gone. Even so Thomas is still happy to relive these memories through the poem: he glorifies life, the wonders and beauty and mystery of each living day; in the author's words (in the introduction to the 1952 edition of *Collected Poems*) he wrote 'for the love of Man and in praise of God'. And this despite his knowledge of the inevitability of death and the ceaseless ticking of Time. This, above all else, is the leading motif in Dylan Thomas' poetry - for the love of man and praise of God, both in his unique ways. Despite the sadness, the irony and the ultimate desolation of Time and creation, life is to be celebrated and appreciated, for this is why life exists in the first place.

Dylan Thomas is celebrated as a master of words and his ability shines through his unusual, sometimes puzzling phrasing and rich alliterations. But what is even more evident and characteristic of him is the use of rich and powerful metaphorical imagery, a blend of reality and imagination leading the readers to the fantastic world of the human soul. Through images of flying, real and imaginary, the amazing genius and inspiration behind Dylan Thomas' poetry and prose can be even more fully understood and appreciated.

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