

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)

An Introduction

Born in Swansea, Wales, Dylan Thomas is famous for his acutely lyrical and emotional poetry, as well as his turbulent personal life. The originality of his work makes categorization difficult. In his life he avoided becoming involved with literary groups or movements, and unlike other prominent writers of the 1930s—such as W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender, for example—he had little use for socialistic ideas in his art. Thomas can be seen as an extension into the 20th century of the general movement called Romanticism, particularly in its emphasis on imagination, emotion, intuition, spontaneity, and organic form. Considered to be one of the greatest Welsh poets of all time, Thomas is largely known for his imaginative use of language and vivid imagery in his poems.

Dylan Thomas was obsessed with words—with their sound and rhythm and especially with their possibilities for multiple meanings. This richness of meaning, an often illogical and revolutionary syntax, and catalogues of cosmic imagery render Thomas's early poetry original and difficult. In a letter to Richard Church, Thomas commented on what he considered some of his own excesses: "Immature violence, rhythmic monotony, frequent muddle-headedness, and a very much overweighted imagery that leads often to incoherence." Similarly, in a letter to Glyn Jones, he wrote: "My own obscurity is quite an unfashionable one, based, as it is, on a preconceived symbolism derived (I'm afraid all this sounds woolly and pretentious) from the cosmic significance of the human anatomy."

By December of 1932, he left his job at the Post and decided to concentrate on his poetry full-time. It was during this time, in his late teens, that Thomas wrote more than half of his collected poems. In 1934, when Thomas was twenty, he moved to London, won the Poet's Corner book prize, and published his first book, *18 Poems* (The Fortune press), to great acclaim. The book drew from a collection of poetry notebooks that Thomas had written years earlier, as would many of his most popular books.

As far as Thomas's poetic sensibility is concerned, it is really the milieu of works and not the social or political happenings of his time so much, that influenced the art and craft of Thomas's substantially. Many voices of the past widened the doors of his poetic perception. He borrowed sound-sense-values, ideas and techniques from the English and Welsh poetry of the past. Though he did not know Welsh, he significantly absorbed dominant strains of Welsh poetry, such as its incantatory notes, rhetorical flair and conscious craftsmanship.

The poetry of Thomas was greatly influenced by another early seventeenth century source, the Metaphysical poets. Thomas is indebted to John Donne in matters both thematic and technical. There are various echoes of Donne's sermons and lyrics in his work. He was peculiarly attracted by wombs, tombs and worms found so profusely in Donne's conceits.

Although a poet's approaches to earthly existence change from time to time, most of his poetry is built upon the major strains and patterns of meaning crystallized unconsciously from his experiences and meditations. *Collected Poems*, likewise, moves along such a pattern of Thomas's ideas of earthly existence. His "crudities, doubts and confusions" ultimately establish a design of values that constitutes

meaningful themes for his poetry. It may be stated at the very outset that much of Thomas's poetry has sprung from the profound vision and experience of the timeless universal elements which operate perpetually on the animate and inanimate objects in this universe. The dominant themes of his poetry are the dominant activities of the cosmic process, Creation, Growth, Destruction and Regeneration. Segments of the eternal cosmic cycle, they frame the pattern of the Thomas universe.

Thomas puts man at the center of this cosmic cycle. In a note at the beginning of *Collected Poems*, he has significantly declared his intention: "These poems, with all their crudities, doubts, and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God." Out of love of man, he writes about every phase- of man's life. However, he does not exclude the world outside. He writes about conception, birth, childhood, love, death and regeneration of man in terms of and in relation to all the animate and inanimate objects in the physical world. But he looks at man as an object of Nature,' and not as a slave of civilization with its manifold dogmas of religion, society, politics etc. He is a poet of man and not of men. The social problems of the groups of men did not invite his attention as they encompassed the vision of many contemporary Anglo Welsh poets like R. S. Thomas, Idris Davis, Huw Menai or the poets of *New Signatures*. On the' contrary, he embraced the inner through the outer and eschewed everything concrete or definite. Being severely critical of the social poetry of his times, he wrote: "most of them are outer poems. Three quarters of the world's literature deals with the outer world." Thomas strips man apart from his fellows and makes him the metaphor of everything.

Thomas's preoccupation with man was mainly to explore the mystery of the cosmic processes of Creation, Growth, Destruction and Regeneration. His poetry, according to him, is a "struggle from darkness

to some measure of light.” Human beings, birds, trees, seas, hills, stars and clouds populate the bulk of his poetry. But they are there only to signify the operations of the four processes mentioned and explained above. The outer world in his poetry is intended to be reconciled with the inner world of man, sand *vice versa*. In a letter, Thomas declared: "Perhaps the greatest works of art are those that reconcile perfectly, inner and outer." These words fit his own poetry, perhaps, more than any other statement. He expressly attempted to incorporate the astral into the earthly bodies. Knowing the difficulty encountered in the execution of such an ambitious scheme, he wrote in another letter: "For the time at least, I realise that it is impossible for me to raise myself to the altitude of the stars and that I am forced, therefore, to bring down the stars to my own level and to incorporate them in my own physical universe.