

Time and Death in Dylan Thomas's The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower

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Abstract

Dylan Thomas's reputation of being an alcoholic deemed him as a "doomed poet" but that didn't stop his mystifying writings on death. He expressed his liking for worms and corruption that influenced his womb-tomb or life-death writings. His poem *The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower* is important because here he talks about his acknowledgement of the powers of "force" that is responsible for both life and death, birth of a flowers and human youth or making human bodies turn to clay and then to lime for the hanging man. Later he reveals the "force" to be "time" that is responsible for all changes around us. Thus we must realize that life and death are correlated and not separate from each other. Thomas's obsession for death has led him to create poems that impart dark knowledge on death that people most often avoid in fear and anxiety.

Keywords: death, life, nature, time, Dylan Thomas

Dylan Thomas was a Welsh poet born on 27th October, 1914. He lost his father after a painful illness in 1952. Shortly afterward he himself passed away in 1953 barely being able to grieve his own father's death. Thomas's reputation of being an alcoholic deemed him a reputation of a "doomed poet" in John Brinnin's biography on him in *Dylan Thomas in America* published in 1955. Dylan Thomas has written a great deal about death in his lifetime, particularly mentionable is the renowned poem "*Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night*". As is evident in the poem he urges not to give in to death yet defines the night that is to cause death as a "Good Night". He urges the dying man to rage against fading light or darkness yet paradoxically comments that wise men know that "dark is right". It is interesting to note that Dylan Thomas's poetic appeal comes from the duality of his perception which he soulfully dissolves to invoke universal appeal. This appeal partly results from his absolute acceptance of human reality that ends with death throwing light on the true nature of death.

The poem *The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower* is Dylan Thomas's attempt to talk about the similarity of the fate of human beings and the non-human world. This poem is Thomas's realization of a massive power which he calls force that is responsible for the destiny of man and nature both starting with birth and ending with death. Nature is a potent force and this force is what drives human activities and affects human existence. It is necessary for us to realize that nature's forces

hold both powers of creation and destruction. The power that drives the flower which literally means the power which gives birth to a flower comes through the green fuse that is the stem of the flower. The energy that thrives in the green fuse leading to the flower is explosive and nurturing. This same potent force sparks in human beings the embryonic development to an adult. It is interesting to note that Dylan Thomas uses two opposite words “green” and “age” simultaneously which draws attention to the simultaneity of human growth through the “green” youth to “age. These forces are explosive such as a bud explodes into a full grown flower or a few roots of youth grow into network of roots in a full grown tree. Similarly a human life cycle blooms into prime and slowly ages to wither away into nothingness or biblically the dust.

The repetitive occurrence of the phrase “And I am dumb to tell” conveys the poet’s dumbness which is his inability to convey the massive insight he encounters and realizes. This insight is the insight of knowing the forbidden, most often ignored truth of human existence which is similar to the existence cycle is anything in nature. The question then is that how often we see a flowers dying or a tree toppling down to its death after a storm. The answer is many a times. However it is human tendency to not elaborately indulge into thinking about death. Julia Kristeva has coined the term “*abjection*” (1) for this phenomenon where human beings show disgust at sight of a corpse. It is body’s ego defense mechanism to abstain from sights of anything gross such as a dead body, pus or blood. These sights are reminders of death that is awaiting all human beings and so we unconsciously fear death. We put such thoughts indulging in our withering away into nothingness at bay till we die. Ironically whatever the human mind detests Dylan Thomas puts it in writing.

Death is a realm of whose beyond we do not have an idea about. So when the poet writes he is dumb on realization of the unique metaphysical reality of the homogenous life forces present both in nature and man we understand the intangibility of the expression pertaining to the domain of death. The repetitive mentioning of being “dumb” focuses on the fact that words are inadequate to explain the phenomenal drive which is present in both man and nature, which gives birth to us and the environment around us and which takes away our lives and returns us to the dust. The poet is dumb on realizing that the force which kills a rose, rose being the symbol of beauty is the same force which kills man. Dividing the four seasons of a year into human life cycle is common analogy. Spring symbolizes birth, summer is the thriving of life, autumn marks the decline of life and winter symbolizes death. Spring marks birth in nature. It is the time when new plants and flowers are born. It thrives through summer and the growth phase declines from autumn when the leaves turn yellow and orange. In winter the tree is left barren or dead. Human life cycle is the same as is seen in nature. So in the fourth and fifth line the poet tells the “crooked rose” is “bent” by the “same wintry fever”. The rose just like human beings which blooms in spring, thrives through summer dies in winter and the metaphysical force which controls the life and death of beings on earth is the same one.

Gravity influences both human body and tree anatomy. A vein makes blood flow into the heart defying gravity and thereafter channelizes it to different parts of the body. Without veins all blood in our body would accumulate in the lower region of human body only. In a tree the roots absorb water and minerals through osmosis from the ground and distribute it to the different parts of a tree. Similarly, after onset of autumn both literally and metaphorically, leaves of a tree and human hair changes colour. Leaves turn yellow when the chlorophyll breaks down. In absence of chlorophyll the leaves appear

yellow and afterwards die. When human body ages the hair loses melanin due to pigment breakdown causing hair to turn white. Both processes symbolize the metamorphosis of youthful body towards death. The biological process of dying both in plants and humans is similar and this is what the poet in this poem identifies to be “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower” causes to drive his “green age”.

In the second stanza the poet draws attention to the analogy of water that rolls through rocks and blood through human body. This phenomenon occurs because of the mysterious forces which the poet talks about throughout the poem. This same force gives life by making streams and letting blood flow through human body. This same force is also capable of taking away life such as when water dries out at the mouth of a stream it doesn't reach the pool thereby seizing the stream to exist in totality, similarly when blood turns into wax or at least as hard as wax, human existence comes to an end. This force is unknown and mysterious and is as if in shape of a coin having two faces; life and death. Thomas is drawing an analogy between human body and water system of earth pervaded by the omnipresent “force” which is the indispensable irony of existence in both nature and human world.

The energy which has omnipresence through life all around is an abstract power that guides all destinies. In the third stanza he talks about the energy that causes whirlpool or quicksand denoting the deadly energies of this “force”. This is the same energy that drove water down the path into a stream featuring the life giving properties to the “force” but in this stanza the poet shows the force's life taking powers. The destructive energies are epitomized in this stanza featuring the uncontrollability of death. “Hauls my shroud sail” means this same hand or force is responsible for both sailing of a ship symbolizing moving forward and the death of the poet symbolizing coming to an end which again brings the life giving-taking energies simultaneously. These dark forces are incognizable energies which is all pervading and ubiquitous. Because the origin of these forces aren't known or what is the matter that forms them reminds us of Robert Frost's awe in his poem *Design* where he is surprised by the synchronicity of the moths arrival near the spider close enough to bring upon the moth's death. Frost ends the poem by questioning the nature of design that governs all activities on earth. The ending of *Design* is left with multiple questions on the nature of such design. As readers we question god's ways of the ill fate of the moth and the lucky spider or the flower being white. Such extraordinary coincidences Frost says is the abstract energies about which he knows nothing of but is at work day and night making life cycles roll. One example of such mutual dependence is the Yucca plant and Yucca moth. Both have co-evolved in time and they share a relationship of obligate mutualism. A Yucca moth lives for about four days and is Yucca plant's only pollinator. If the moths were to vanish or do anything else other than pollinating the plant, Yucca plants would cease to exist. Basically the Yucca moth's time on earth is as a Yucca plant pollinator.

In lines fourteen and fifteen the poet starts with his old phrase of being dumb. Again the poet is numb in conveying the awe in learning that the lime which is used to cover the body of a hanging dead man is the same lime that comes from the clay that is formed after the poet's death. Clay here is the biblical meaning of returning to the dust. Literally when human bodies decompose they become one with the earth and this earth or clay turns into lime after a long time through the process of metamorphosis. So both metaphorically and literally the same force turns a living man into clay and clay into lime.

In the fourth stanza the poet finally attributes a name to the force he has been referring to in the last three stanzas. He calls it “time” that sucks like a leech at the fountain head. Time shall heal by the blood that falls onto the “sores” and this dark knowledge of time’s nature makes him dumb again. He is in lack of words to tell the wind how time has made up the universe where the stars exist and burn out. To the poet time is immortal because these stars have been created by supernova and have collapsed to become black holes but time has remained constant and indestructible. The poem ends with the beautiful couplet where the poet explains the all pervasiveness of time which outruns life and death. The same worm that sucks on the lover’s tomb sucks at the poet’s dead body. Here the poet probably uses “sheet” as an imagery which compels us to imagine our dead body lying down in the earth dug as our bed to sleep for eternity. As we sleep to be made into clay, the worms feed upon us. Death is then the ultimate reality but time has powers to vest both life and death to all beings.

Space and time are two integral components to understand our existence in this universe. Ontology claims that space and time exist separate from the human mind. Mind exists only when we live through our earthly body but Thomas’s obsession with death and his critical view of the “force” that he calls “time” reflects his abundance of information of the mysterious unravelling of time. The indestructibility of time testifies the human inability to have a control over time or whatever time does to life and bring death and because time has existed since eternity our existence of material plane is momentary and after death we go back to the plane of the spiritual. Death is not the end but only the beginning of a spectacular life beyond our earthly body.

Thomas’s obsession with “death” goes a long way across most of his poems where he elaborately engages in discussions of death and life after death such as in *And Death Shall Have No Dominion*. When we die we give up all our earthly possessions including the bones that were once part of our body. We may be a little mad in our lifetime on earth but that becomes insignificant after we die because we will be restored with sanity. So the only circumstance after death is to rise above earthly planes into the cosmos of the dead where we are spiritually lifted and enlightened. Here “rising again” is a biblical allusion that strikes chord with the similarity to Christ’s rise after his death. Even if lovers are not to be found anymore the love remains. Thus death has no control over our fates after we die thereby concluding *And Death Shall Have No Dominion*.

In the poem *A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London* published in his collection named *Deaths and Entrances (1946)* as the title aptly conveys the poet’s refusal to mourn the death of the girl in London because mourning the young child’s death by singing elegy of innocence and youth will be blasphemous as it will only taint the reality of the victim. The first and second stanzas of the poem describe the vicinity of the dark from where we come and to where we return after death. Because Thomas was writing the poem during World War II we shall assume he is describing deaths that were caused by bombings in London.

Dylan Thomas known for his writings on death started writing notebooks from the age of fifteen. The Second Notebook of the notebook series is a perfect example of his “womb-tomb” philosophy where he wrote a poem called *Written for a Personal Epitaph* elaborately describing the process of human life that eventually ends in the grave with death embarking upon him and worms feeding on his dead body. He describes death as a wasting away of a mother’s labour of love and sweat that only ends

with rotting bodies and dead limbs. He writes '*I write of worms and corruption, because I like worms and corruption*'. (66) This clearly shows why Thomas was obsessed about death. The Third Notebook consists of his vivid description of graves, corruption, death and maggots. He continues with these grotesque imageries later in his collection of *18Poems* which engages in the dark themes of “womb-tomb” philosophy.

“Death is said to be ugly only because we entertain an ugly conception of the body ... so has a dead body; and not only an abstract pattern but a physical one. A dead body promises the earth as a live body promises its mate; and the earth is our mate” (68)

The above extract is from one of the letters written by Thomas on a Christmas Day 1933. Dylan Thomas shares a distinct view of death and dead bodies which is totally different from common perception of dead bodies. Dead bodies to him are not rotten, decomposing worm food and that is because he views death as a “*nature’s mysterious interpenetration*” (67). Because he could understand life and death symbiosis, he could write about true nature of death. That is why his poems feature the “womb-tomb” philosophy of life and death, death being his main concern. Death is explained in and out in his poems like *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night, And Death Shall Have No Dominion, A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London* and *The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower* thereby expressing the fearlessness of having a normal idea of death which is our only reality.

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