



Poetic imagery in the poetry of Dylan Thomas

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Abstract

Dylan Thomas was a brilliant poet, playwright short story writer, Essayist, screen writer, Journalist and Novelist. His works are known for Musical quality of the language, comic or visionary scenes and sensual images. He is widely regarded as one of the 20th century's most influential lyrical poets and amongst the finest as such of all time. His acclaim is due to the force and vitality of his poetic imagery and celebration of natural beauty in his poetry that is uniquely brilliant and inspirational. His vivid and often fantastic imagery was a rejection of the trends in the 20th century poetics while his contemporaries gradually altered their writing to serious topical verse. Thomas devoted himself to his passionately felt emotions. Thomas, in many ways, was more in alignment with the Romantics than he was with the poets of his era. He was considered the Shelley of the 20th century as his poems were the perfect embodiments of 'new-romanticism' with their violent natural imagery, sexual and Christian symbolism and emotional subject matter expressed in a singing rhythmical verse.

The intensity of any literary work largely depends on powerful imagination. It also depends on the effective execution of that very imagination in the pages of a literary work. Therefore, to visualize his/her imagination the poet/writer often employs various literary devices. The most effective and compelling of those is the use of imagery (a figure of speech). Imagery is used in literary works to refer to the ways the writers compose mental images in words. It signifies all the sensory perceptions used in a literary work, whether by literal description, allusion, simile or metaphor. Imagery is not limited to visual imagery; it also includes auditory (sound), tactile (touch) thermal (heat and cold), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste) and kinesthetic sensation (movement). Imagery engages the reader's imagination through wonderful descriptions or illustrations that vividly portray the reality of a particular moment. A literary work with effective imagery gives the reader a clear mental picture of what is happening and enhance what the writer is trying to convey to the reader.

Keywords: poetic imagery or verbal imagery, selected poems of Dylan Thomas

Introduction

Dylan Thomas attached great importance to the use of imagery, and an understanding of his imagery is essential for an understanding of his poetry. Thomas's vivid imagery involved world play, fractured syntax and personal symbolism. Thomas' poetic imagery shows the use of a mixture of several techniques, the most prominent being the surrealist, imagistic and metaphysical. But the Bible, his study of Shakespeare, English poets also laid under contribution. Thomas as a resourceful "language-changer" like Shakespeare, Dickens, Hopkins and Joyce shaped the English language into a richly original mélange of rhythm, imagery and literary allusion.

Dylan Thomas was influenced in his writing by the Romantic Movement from the beginning of the nineteenth century, and this can be seen in a number of his best works. Dylan Thomas uses symbols and images of nature to express how he feels towards death and childhood. He says that images are used to create or feeling of love towards life. Despite Dylan Thomas "often obscure images, he expresses a clear message of religious devotion in many of his poems he creates images that reflect God's connection with the earth and body. In "*And death shall have no dominion,*" Thomas portrays the redemption of the soul in death, and the soul's liberation into

harmony with nature and God. Thomas associates God with Thunder, rainbows, and night only to remind us that he is even more present in a simple stone as he is in other great entities. Color imagery is also there in some of his poems as he describes his happiness as a child he explains his young days as being as happy as the grass is green". The style of Dylan Thomas is an opaque poetic style, which Thomas used to perfection. It is used to describe the unusual and day-to-day activities. Dylan Thomas possessed tremendous talent and was blessed with immense gifts that made him a professional success at a relatively young age.

His rich rhetoric imagery gave his poetry a magical touch. Dylan Thomas is famous for his use of verbal imagery in his poetry. We can define this verbal imagery as:

"Verbal imagery is the descriptive use of words to create a picture when speaking with another person or group voice control is also a key player in the overall affect".

"To create a more peaceful backyard we will plant beautiful swaying grasses mixed with soft, scented catmint along the bubbling stream that you enjoy from the lounge chair on your tumbled paver patio, which is nestled into the area of your yard just off the family room doors'.

Diana Grunden

Here follows a brief discussion on Dylan Thomas' use of poetic Imagery in his major poems.

Dylan Thomas was influenced by Romantics especially in the treatment of nature in his poetry. First and foremost he used natural imagery in his poetry. Dylan is a poet of sea and wood or we can say that he is a nature poet. He depicts the beauty of nature wonderfully and celebrates it with great joy. Most of his poems contain nature imagery. Indeed he was a nature poet in the sense that much of his truest poetry inspired from natural scenes. We can take the example of "*Poem in October*" which was published in volume '*Death and Entrances*', 1946. This poem contains vivid pictures of nature. It was written on this thirtieth birthday when he comes to the town. He feels as if the whole nature is greeting him. He feels that the nature is celebrating his birthday. He feels overjoyed in the lap of nature, though he realizes very soon that it is a step forward the heaven or death.

*It was my thirtieth year to heaven woke to my hearing from
harbour and neighbor wood.*

*And the mussel pooled and he heron priested shore
The morning beckon*

*With water praying and call of seagull and rook
And the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall
myself to set foot*

That second

In the still sleeping town and set forth.

My birthday began with the water-

*Birds and the Birds of the winged tree flying my name
(Line 1-12)*

He takes wood as his neighbor, the herons (birds) as priests and the waves of sea are rising high in his honor. He seems as if the birds of water and sky both are flying high his name. The birds are calling and the gardens are blooming.

In short we find that the poem contains wonderful vivid nature pictures with great joy and pleasure.

After nature imagery we can deal with death imagery. Death is a frequent theme in Dylan Thomas' poetry, especially in the corpus of his mature work. Thomas employs different interesting and unorthodox images to present various aspects of death. In the poem "Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night" for example, he emphasizes resistance towards death as he repeats this appeal in the last line in every stanza. Imagery is used by Thomas to create the theme of his poem and what it means. Although readers are unaware of the details behind the oncoming death of Thomas' father, the motives of the author for writing this poem are very obvious. In this poem Thomas is asking his father through pleading words to fight against the darkness that is taking over and leading him into the afterlife.

The poem "Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night" was completed in 1951. The poem begins by Dylan asking his father not to grow 'Soft and Gentle' towards his approaching death. He is telling his father to fight death and to not let it take him easily. Thomas' main theme is to fight. He uses detail and context in the poem to portray this:

*Do not go gentle into that Good Night.
Old age should burn and rave at close of days;*

Rage, rage against the dying of the light (Line 1-3)

Death is a "good night" a peaceful darkness in which one should "rage" against the "dying of the light" The poem is very strong and powerful.

Initially, Thomas uses images of fury and fighting in the lines "Do not Go Gentle. . . .", Good night and "dying of the light" to emphasized the resistance towards death with these images, Thomas conveys death as the end and where darkness prevails. He takes his stand within concrete, particular existence. He places birth and death at the poles of his vision. Excessive images of anger and rage towards death exemplify the passion that Thomas feels for life.

Secondly, Thomas brings into action images of "burn" and "rave at close of day" to show and emphasize the resistance towards death. Contrasting images of light and darkness in the poem create warmth of living and the coldness of death, so as to discourage people from choosing the dreary, bitter coldness of death.

In addition, Thomas uses images of four types of men, Wise men, Good man, Wild men and Grave men. Firstly he gives the example of wise men burning and raving because their '*Words had forked no lightning*'. They know 'dark' is truth and death is our inevitable end, therefore we must be, if we are wise, resigned to it.

Next come to the 'good men' who know their actions must be considered 'frail' in the general scheme of things, at the end rage because they could have done better, their deeds might have danced after them:

*Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail might have danced in a green bay. (Line 7-9)*

Then the 'Wild Men' who here stands for the poets, who captured some of the vitality of the natural world and

*Sang the sun flight, and learn, too late,
They grieved it on its way. (Line 10-11)*

And finally 'Grave Men' who have not used their blinding light.

*Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

He used all these images to tell his dying father that all men either smart or ignorant need to fight against death. A man peacefully may prepare to die only when he has made his true contribution to society. Here Thomas shares an attitude towards death, which is very much similar to Robert Frost's "Stopping by woods on a snowy Evening".

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep.
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep. (Line13-16)*

"Do not Go Gentle . . ." is one of the great short poems. It is written in the form of a Villanelle of French origin. The poem

is highly rich in the use of imagery.

Next is sexual imagery which is very much common in Dylan's poetry. He used sexual imagery almost everywhere. The influence of the seventeenth century metaphysical poets is often cited in connection with Thomas unconventional religious imagery. Thomas speaks with directness and passion on the theme of sex quite similar to Donne. Thomas's work shows the same fusing of sexual and religious imagery as it is seen in Donne's poetry. In both poets there is an intense consciousness of death. Donne preached a sermon in his grave-clothes and Thomas's poems show a similar fixation with the physical fact of death.

In a number of poems Dylan used Freudian imagery for example in the poem 'Lament' he used 'Old Ram Rod' which is the symbol of phallus or male sexual organ. He used this imagery to present his grief. He sighs because it is women who have killed him. He laments for the loss of his youth and energy due to sexual activities.

Next example of sexual imagery we can see in the poem "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines" The poem is describing the first sexual experience of sexuality. When he says "Light Breaks where No Sun shines" it means he is explaining their experience of sexuality. He says:

"Where no sea runs"(Line 2)

This describes the time before they had sex, when they were clean and pure. When the two virgins began having sex, Thomas uses the line:

*The water of the heart
Push in their tides (Line 2-3)*

After having sex they become like "Broken ghosts with glow worms in their heads". The broken ghosts represent the purity that they killed which causes them to "doomed to death". The glow-worms represent to sex itself.

*The things of light
File through the flesh where no flesh decks the bones.
(Line 5-6)*

This means that the problems and obstacles of life are going to start affecting the two people who are, in a sense, already dead.

The imagery of destruction and creation are very much common in Thomas' poetry. Like Thomas Hardy, he indicates a driving force of the universe, which both generates and destroys. Many of the poems can be studied in this contextual consideration. In "The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower", for instance, he indicates that an invisible cosmic force is responsible for both creation and destruction. The process of life goes on because of the operation of this force. Again this force is working in the animal, vegetable and human world. This is the force that destroys the roots of trees and also acts as the destroyer of the poet's youth. He shows similarity between man & nature. Time destroys both man and nature. Man and nature in many respects are similar to each other but also different in some ways like he alone has consciousness, reason and intellect. He alone feels the urge to

'tell', no object of nature ever feels such an urge.

This force can be taken as life force at work both in man and nature or it may be sexual urge, intense and uncontrollable which is creative but which becomes destructive when suppressed. This force is working in nature as well as in man's life also.

'Fuse' suggests explosive force, energy or power. It is this force which works through the vegetable world (Green Fuse) and ignites it into life and activity. The result is that nature bursts out with creative activity and flowers bloom. This force works in the man's life also. Due to this force the man is moved internally by the creative urge, sexual urge which is creative but destructive also.

This force can be taken as 'time' which has the power to destroy everything.

*The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever (Line1-5)*

So this force destroyed nature and poet's youth. This force is watering the ground and withering away the mountain spring. In the same way, the very worm, which is eating up the body of dead lovers, will also eat up the poet when he will die.

*And I am dumb to tell my lover's tomb
How at any sheet goes the same crooked worm. (Line 21-22)*

Thus we can see the poet celebrates the life force which is closely connected to death force. 'Eros' or 'love of life' and 'Thanatos' or 'death wish' are closely associated in the lyric.

During the 20th century Thomas was being hailed as the most spectacular of the surrealist poets, or poets who used fantastic imagery of the subconscious in their verse. And it cannot be so in the age of Freud, Jung and Bergson. Dylan has uncanny insights into the processes of the mind. Much more profound than that of any other poet. He penetrates deeper into the human soul than even Freud and his followers.

In his best works he captures psychological moods which have been rarely captured, especially those of childhood and adolescence. He himself matured early and his early poetry is the poetry of an adolescent.

In "The Hunchback in the Park" Thomas talks about a solitary hunchback who eats bread from a newspaper, drinks water from the chained cup of the fountain; and sleeps at night in a dog-kennel. This detail about him shows that he is a homeless outcast, not a normal member of society.

This poem contains clear imagery of people as well as natural objects. The hunchback is seen:

*Eating bread from a newspaper
Drinking water from the chained cup
That the children filled with gravel
In the fountain basin. . . (Line 7-10)*

He is doubly an outcast, because of his deformity and vagrancy and therefore an object of mockery to the truant boys playing in the park. He and the taunting boys appear

together in the lines that show the youngsters as:

*Laughing when he shook its paper
Hunchback in Mockery.* (Line 20-21)

And, in a phrase adapted to children's perceptions, the boys are shown as dodging:

*The park keeper
With his stick that picked up leaves.* (Line 23-24)

Dylan brings memories from his childhood in which we can see the poet with children in the park to hurl the stones at "the solitary miser" an artist. In this sense like those children, he (poet) too was a tormentor in the past. But from the standpoint of the worlds of adults (present time) and as an artist himself, the poet sympathizes the solitary miser. It is the dividedness of his attitude that pulls down the wall between two different times and two different worlds. At this point the poet himself seems to be a tormentor of himself. The child Dylan Thomas hurls the stone at the adult Dylan Thomas or we can say that he renders the typical Wordsworthian double consciousness while dealing with two different times and different worlds.

Dylan Thomas creates a distinction between the world of reality and the world of imagination. This view is exploded through the experiences of the solitary miser who visits the park every day and who is physically deformed. In the world of reality this person is neglected, teased and tormented and he is quite cut off from social realities. Dylan Thomas uses of the phrase "Solitary miser" to refer the basic reality of these persons existence that is, he is not only living in solitariness but also identify less. Despite the bitter experience in the world of reality, this deformed person enjoys utter freedom in his world of imagination.

He is engaged in creativity because he lives in the world of imagination through which he is able to transcend the bitter experiences of the world of reality that includes his physical deformity, children's torment & his carelessness.

In this sense Dylan Thomas Romanticism covers near to Keatsian romanticism because of his belief in *art as a power that transcends the world of reality*. The poem is actually about love for both children and adults. This solitary miser lives in the world of reality and the world of imagination, where the world of imagination is dominant. The world of reality is full of suffering, where there is torment, sorrow and the bitter experiences quite contrary of the world of imagination that is full of happiness. Thus through this lyric he portrays his own feelings through the character of solitary miser. He presents the grief of an artist through this poem and this can be the best example of subconscious imagery.

Dylan Thomas's interests were psychological but they were also religious, indeed, God and Christ are rarely absent from his poems since he takes imagery largely from the Bible. We find religious imagery quite frequently in his poetry. For example, in the poem *After the Funeral*, we see religious imagery when the poet regards the woods as a kind of chapel whereas religious ceremony would be held in honor of his deceased aunt. He visualizes four birds that will fly over her, making the sign of the cross in order to bless her spirit again:

*Bow down the walls of the Ferned and Foxy woods
That her love sings and swings through a brown chapel,
Bless her bent spirit with four, crossing birds* (Line 24-26)

This is a personal elegy in which the poet mourns at the death of his beloved aunt Ann Jones. As a boy he passed a happy summer vacations on her farm called 'Fern Hill'.

In this poem he used nature imagery also at various place like:

*Morning smack of the spade
Ferned and Foxy woods
Shed of dry leaves.....*

He used natural objects to show his grief over the death of his aunt. The poem is highly rich in the use of natural imagery as well as he used religious imagery also.

The next example, in the poem. "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, of a Child in London" we have religious imagery in the poem. He used natural imagery also.

The poet says that the birth and death is a cosmic process, and after death the human becomes one with the non-human, the microcosm merges with the macrocosm, life returns to its very source and becomes one with it. In a sweeping and comprehensive view of man's life on earth since creation the poet shows the eternity both of life and death.

Adam and Eve died; they were the first to die. Then Christ suffered and was crucified. The child is thus of the company of Adam, Eve and Christ. All created things- man, bird, beast or flower- are fathered by God and hence all are scared and holy, both of man and nature, comes out of darkness and returns to that very 'primeval darkness' after death;

*Never until the mankind making
Bird beast and flower
Fathering and all humbling darkness
Tells with silence the last light breaking
And the still hour
Is come of the sea tumbling in harness* (Line 1-6)

Thus human merges with non-human, becomes one with sand and water and becomes the part of macrocosm so one should not lament.

Next we find religious imagery like:

*Zion of the water bead
And the synagogue of the ear of corn* (Line 8-9)

The word Zion means 'Jewish'; it is also the name of small hill in Jerusalem, 'The sacred city of the Jews'. On it is a Jewish temple from which incense and prayer go up to God in Heaven. Thus it bridges the distance between man and God and brings two closer. The word 'bead' suggests holiness or holiness of water. 'Synagogue' is the Jewish temple to worship. Hence these words provide a sacramental quality to enhance it religious appeal. There are other words also used in the poem which depicts religious imagery like 'Sackcloth', again, it is holy and it is worn by ascetics and by repentant sinners. So there are various examples of religious imagery in this poem.

Another poem using strange imagery to present religious theories is "Ceremony after a Fire Raid". Written about the death of a child in World War II and therefore a product of Thomas', later period, the poem has a tone of mystical wildness that justifies these images:

*Into the organ pipes and steeples
Of the luminous cathedrals,
Into the weathercock's molten mouths
Rippling in twelve winded circles,
Into the dead clock burning the hour
Over the Urn of Sabbaths
Over the whirling ditch of day break
Over the sun's novel and the slum of fire
And the golden pavements laid in requiems,
Into the bread in a Wheatfield of flames,
Into the mine burning like brandy. (IIIrd Part, Line 1-11)*

Though not all of the images are clear, all are alive with motion or fire. In a quieter tone, Thomas might have contemplated small and familiar objects for the same elegiac purpose. But quietness of tone, as seen earlier, was not one of his characteristics. Even when familiar imagery became common in his poetry, Thomas usually wrapped the images in the verbal overstatement that was uniting force of his life's work.

After analyzing all these poems we can clearly see the use of extensive verbal imagery in his poetry. He used a wide range of imagery to depict his feelings and emotions.

Dylan's imagery has been criticized for its obscurity and incoherence. His images are obscure and difficult to understand. There is ambiguity in his style but his images are familiar subject to study. His imagery is fascinating and attracting. He used many techniques throughout his poetry. He used natural imagery, death imagery, sexual imagery, imagery of destruction & creation (growth or decay, imagery of subconscious, Freudian imagery and religious imagery. So he attached great importance to the use of imagery. Except imagery he used symbolism also. His poetry is highly symbolic and full of wonderful vivid and refreshing images. In this reference he rejects the norms and traditions of 20th century and followed Romantics.

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