

Images and Symbols in Dylan Thomas' Poetry

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Abstract: Dylan Thomas is deeply influenced by French Symbolists and has connotatively used symbols in his poetry to blend the complexity of religious and sexual images which creates ambiguity and metaphysical nature of words. Symbols are not only connotative but also evocative and emotive. They evoke before the mind's eye a host of associations connected with them and are also rich in emotional significance. It is emotive conveying the "pure sensations" or the poet's apprehension of transcendental mystery. This research paper attempts to analyse the types of imagery used by Dylan Thomas in his poetry which in one way contributes the connotative meaning of the poetry but in other way leads to ambiguity and complexity leading to layers of meanings.

Keywords: Symbols, Images, Nature images, Religious images, Sexual images, Death images, Personal Symbols, Religious symbols, Biblical symbols, Complexity of Dylan Thomas' symbols,

INTRODUCTION

Imagery is evocation and through words of sensory experience. Images may either be literal or figurative. An image, whether figurative or literal, may take on an added significance if it is used recurrently in the course of some particular work. Such images are key images, for they provide the key to the understanding of the work. When an image instead of evoking a concrete objective reality also suggests an additional level of meaning beyond that reality, it is called a symbol. Symbolism is an attitude of mind in its approach to the material of thought this idea, has existed since the beginning of writing. Symbolism is the presentation of ideas, objects and life in general through means of imagery, metaphor and beauty and musicality of language. And such, symbolism is opposed to realism, in that realism presents things as they are, and symbolism presents things through indirect impressions. Most of the beauty of poetry is achieved through some form of symbolism. In theme, all allegory is symbolic.

In the 20th century, symbolism had influenced many English poems as also helped to create a new verse of which is called free verse. Poets such as W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Sitwells, Auden, Spender and MacNeice, Thomas created new kind of poetry with the help of symbolism. The importance of symbolism is very great in the poetry of Thomas. It is through conflicting imagery that he has been able to present a fantastic universe through his poetry. A critic has rightly observed: "A symbol is a word or an image that signifies something, other than what it represents and that, even when denoting a physical, limited thing, carries enlarging connotation, so that it has the reality, vivid yet ambiguous, the emotional power and the suggestiveness of a compelling dream or archetypal myth. A symbol in poetry differs radically from the symbol in mathematics or one of the kindred sciences. In these it is a definite sign, but, because of its multiple meanings and the feelings associated with them, points to something that cannot be precisely defined. It may be regarded as a metaphor with a rich but indefinite tenor." (Babette Deutch). "A symbol is often a means of making concrete and perceptible meaning that otherwise would remain inexpressible. It is a loaded word or image from which meanings ray out; the meanings are determined by the content in which the symbol appears. A symbol may be an object (a rose), a situation (a journey), a character (Coleridge's Ancient Mariner) or a setting of a work (sea)". (Louis Simpson)

Dylan Thomas has used various sources of imagery. His images are religious, sexual and natural. A noted critic has rightly observed: "Dylan attached great importance of the use of imagery and an understanding of his imagery is essential for an understanding of his poetry. As he was a poet both of the sea and the woods, the common scenes and sights of the countryside – the various objects and

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phenomena of nature are the most important sources of imagery in his poetry. But the Bible, his study of Shakespeare and other English poets, both of the present and the past, are also laid under contribution. Images of pain, disease, decay and death, as well as sexual imagery, is also frequent. His interests were psychological, he wanted to communicate complex states of mind, and this he does by the use of concrete images. The abstract is thus conveyed through the concrete and "inner scope" is imaged through landscapes and seascapes. Often his images are symbolic, and such symbolic images increase the expressive range of language."

IMAGES OF NATURE

Thomas has used wonderful images of nature. According to him, man is a part of nature. In the poem *The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower*, he has very beautifully explained that the force that works in nature also works for the growth of man, which is clear from the following lines of the poem:

"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
The same wintry fever bends my youth."

The above lines give us an idea that man is a part of nature. This force is creative as well as destructive. The same idea has been explained in the philosophy of *Life Force* by Bernard Shaw. This force is both explosive and destructive which is meant by the words "fuse" and "blasts" used in this poem. The force is not the only operative in green nature, but it also works in the green age of boyhood. Thus, Dylan Thomas believes the identity of man and nature. The same idea is expressed in the following lines:

"The hand that whirls the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
Hauls my shroud sail."

RELIGIOUS IMAGES

Dylan Thomas has used in his poetry religious images. There are many religious poems such as *Vision and Prayer* and *In the Lamb-White Days*. Dylan has borrowed the images of Genesis, gospel, the image of Christ and crucifixion, sacrifice, last supper, resurrection, redemption and image of birth according to the belief of the Christianity.

"Deliver me, my masters, head and heart
Heart of Cadaver's candle waxes thin,
When blood, spade-handed, and the logic time
Drive children up like bruises to the thumb,
From maid and head,
For, Sunday faced, with ushers in my glove,
Chaste and the chaster, a man with the cockshut eye,
I, that time's jacket or the coat of ice
May fail to fasten with a virgin O
In the straight grave....."

"I dreamed my genesis in the sweat of death, fallen
Twice in the feeding sea, grown
Stale of Adam's brine until vision
Of new man strength, I seek the sun." (I Dreamed My Genesis)

"I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars
The masses of the infant-bearing sea
Erupt, fountain and enter to utter forever
Glory, glory, glory....."

"Altarwise by owl-light in the half-way house
The gentleman laygraveward with his furies
Abaddon in the hangnail cracked form Adam
And, from his fork, a dog among the fairies,

The atlas-eater with a jaw for news,
 Bit out the mandrake with to-morrow's scream
 Then, penny-eyed, that gentleman of wounds
 Old cock from nowhere and the heaven's egg,
 With bones unbuttoned to the half-way winds,
 Hatched from the windy salvage on one leg,
 Scraped at my cradle in a walking word
 That night of time under the Christward shelter:
 I am the long world's gentleman, he said,
 And share my bed with Capricorn and Cancer."

In some religious poems, Thomas has used the words gospel, saint and priest. In other images, he has brought together the heavens, church, grave, font, dust and saviour. Dylan's Christ's is full of everyman's passion. Christ is identified with Adam. Satan does not tempt, and Adam does not fall. Redemption is a generation. Death is the day of judgement. This is described in the following lines:

"These once blind eyes have breathed a wind of visions...
 And, mild is a pardon from a cloud of pride,
 The terrible world my brother bares his skin."

In another poem, he says

"There was a saviour
 Rarer than radium
 Commoner than water, crueller than truth
 Prisoners of wishes locked their eyes
 In the jails and studies of his keyless smiles."

His religious images are not purely Christian. They fuse man and God, woman and God; this world and the other world. For him, there is no difference between Samadhi (Indian form of the highest state of meditation when a man enters the grave to control death) and sex. Both lead to the same realisation. Hence, there is a fusion of religious and sex images. In Ceremony after a Fire Raid,

"Who were priest and servants,
 Words, singers, and tongue
 In the cinder of the little skull
 Who was the Serpent's
 Nightfall and the fruit like a sun
 Man and woman undid,
 Beginning crumbed back to darkness."

Thus, there are many biblical images in the poems of Thomas, but he has changed the Christian concepts.

SEXUAL IMAGES

The poems of Dylan Thomas are full of sexual images for many reasons. The first compelling reason seems to be own deep interest in womanising and alcoholism. From his very youth, he had become addicted to wine and women. Then there was the deep impact of Freud and Jung on the thought and philosophy of Thomas. Thomas after the completion of his education at the grammar school of Swansea at the age of sixteen became enamoured of drinking and attending pubs of Swansea. These experiences of pubs became part and parcel of his psyche. Therefore, he began to create sexual images in his mind which he has used profusely in his poems. One such poem is Light that Breaks... where God's creation of the universe has been illustrated using sexual imagery. The poems explain the formation of the embryo in the woman of a woman. Later images used in the poem, 'water of the heart' broken ghosts and glow worms are sexual images. They stand for male sperms which give light to the embryo. Then in the second stanza, the poet uses the image 'candle' which means penis. Then he goes on explaining the human anatomy of procreation. In many other poems, he has made use of sexual imagery.

Lament is an awesome poem of sexual imagery. The speaker is ram-rod (human penis). The old man has a retrospective view. He has described four stages of manhood, the windy boyhood, adolescence and youth and manhood and old age. A critic has made a significant observation of the sexual nature of the poem:

"It is all about an 'old ram-rod' who at the moment of death surveys his life through the various stages of growth and maturity. 'Ram-rod' is a symbol for the phallus, the male sex organ. A comic twist is given to the whole narration in as much as the poet himself becomes the sex organ, and

this poet turned phallus, this ram-rod, sighs as he looks back at his life from the vantage point of old age. He sighs because it is women who have killed him. There was a time when he was an innocent boy, but even then he was naughty."

A study of Thomas' poems reveals the fact that they derive their life in the imagery. Thomas' poem, *In the Beginning*, is an illustration to prove this. The 'three-pointed star' is at once the Trinity and the male sexual organ. The poem runs on two levels at once: it can be read as an account of the creation and account of the conception of the human child. There is at once the identification of the human being with the whole cosmos, and also the identification of the sexual impulse with the creative forces of the universe. Thus, the central imagery tries to polarise the opposite's viz., the identification of the human being with the whole cosmos, and also the identification of the sexual impulse with the creative force of the universe.

IMAGERY OF DEATH AND DECAY

The poems are full of images of death and decay. From the very beginning of his poetic career, he was conscious of the natural process of dying. Some of the early poems show death as a threat, "running grave". He was aware of his death. Thus, in some of his birthday poems, he says, *Before I Knocked*, there is a presentation of Jesus Christ from his prenatal existence to his crucifixion. Thomas describes his early work as his womb and tomb period.

A critic has rightly observed: "There is undoubtedly something unhealthy about the imagery of "worms", "womb", "tomb", "flesh", "blood", "bone", "seed", "hair" etc., which dominates the early poems. Thomas is said to have been preoccupied with the idea that he had tuberculosis and was to die of it." In the last phase of his poetic career, his treatment of death becomes sombre and serious. For example in his most famous and sing-song poem, *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night* his advice to his father about death is that he should not pass into good death softly. A critic rightly observes: "The poem begins by Dylan asking his father not to grow 'soft and gentle' towards his approaching death. He asks for bloody tears of existential rage from his father. As a militant atheist, his father had nurtured a violent dislike for God all his life and cursed 'unjust providence' with anger which had become his essential nature. Now when he is in his seventy-fifth year, Dylan wants him to 'rage' and protest against the 'dying light' of his life. This brings Yeats to mind in whose poems we find old age resisted with stoic gaiety. The first example Thomas gives is of 'wise men' burning and raving because their 'words had forked in lightning'. They know 'dark' is truth and death is our inevitable end. Therefore, we must be, if we are wise, resigned to it. But they are aggravated by their failure to have put a spark into their philosophising that might have changed the world in a flash of lightning.

INFLUENCE OF SYMBOLISM ON DYLAN THOMAS' POETRY

Thomas has used the symbol for creating a new type of poetic world. A critic has pointed out in the following extract:

"Dylan Thomas presses symbols into service to build his fantastic universe. His principal use of symbols is to convert abstract (the remote and the fanciful) into concrete (immediate and factual). His symbols are meant to coerce the imagination of the readers into belief. Through the repeated employment of symbols thus, Thomas builds a fantastic universe of his own in his *18 Poems* and *Twenty-five Poems*. This universe of Thomas is, indeed, weird and terrible. In this universe, babies have the fore-knowledge of the agonies of life and death. They speak from the womb or sitting amidst its veils and shadows; paint night is the day upon its sides. In this universe, men brood on maggots which reality. Since there is a close similarity of interest between Dylan and Freud, the poet's symbols have often been interpreted regarding Freud. Sometimes, such symbols have often been interpreted regarding Freud. Sometimes, such an interpretation is justified as when, "Apart from the obvious sexual meaning, the branching trees in "wherever you walk, trees crowd into a shade." "Are in their shade-casting function, symbols of death." Once as they were passing in a train through a tunnel, Dylan exclaimed that it reminded him of Mummy. Here the tunnel is a Freudian symbol for the womb."

KINDS OF SYMBOLISM

Dylan has made extensive use of symbolism because he seeks to convey difficult psychological states to his readers. He aims to bring light the inner darkness and complex states to his readers. He uses two kinds of symbols which is clear from the following statement of a famous critic:

"Symbolism is an oblique mode of saying things and hence it is that figurative art is difficult, complex and even obscure. Symbols may be of two kinds: i) Traditional symbols and ii) Personal

symbols. Traditional symbols are stock symbols which have been in general use. For example, "rose" is a traditional symbol of beauty that has been used by poets from the earliest times. These symbols increase the evocative pleasure of poetry without introducing elements of complexity or obscurity. Personal symbols, on the other hand, are devised by the poet for his purposes, to express the vague, fleeting impressions passing through his mind, or to convey his sense of the mystery of life. They express the poet's experiences, often mystical. As the readers are not familiar with such symbols, they create difficulties for them, though at the same time, they enhance the richness of the language. Some poets use word and images as symbols, others like T.S. Eliot use quotations from other writers, myths and legends, and particular characters, historical or otherwise as symbols."

PERSONAL SYMBOLS

Dylan has used his symbols. His symbols are not conventional or Freudian. A noted critic has correctly observed that his symbols are different from Freud:

"But more often than not Dylan's symbols have different values from those of Freudian symbols. Writes Elder Olson in this connection, "whereas, for Freud 'fruit' symbolises the female breast and does not symbolise offspring, it is generally a child-symbol for Thomas...Whereas for Freud, 'caves', 'churches' and 'chapels' refer to the female genitalia, Thomas uses 'caves' to signify the innermost recesses of self and 'churches' and 'chapels' particularly sunken ones to signify lost pristine faiths. Thomas associates 'ladders' and 'climbing', not with sexual intercourse, but man's spiritual ascent."

Thomas has influenced by modern psychology affirmed its ends so far as they coincided with his own, and made use of some of its findings. But he remains at most a lay writer, and it remains for the reader to extract meaning from each symbol in its context, not to impose upon it the meaning traditionally ascribed. Freudian or Jungian meanings should be attributed to Thomas' symbols with great caution otherwise, instead of clarity, there would be confusion and obscurity. Dylan's symbols are his own; they have been devised to express his apprehension of psychological moods.

RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

Dylan has used many religious symbols. An eminent critic has rightly observed:

"Dylan's interests were psychological, but they were also religious. Indeed, God and Christ are rarely absent from his poems; and the later poems, abounding in bells, books and candles, are as ritualistic as anything by Hopkins or Eliot. Like Bunyan, Thomas was always asking what he could do to be saved. "Father was a sceptic, but grandfather was a preacher. As a boy, Thomas attended Sunday school and chapel- Presbyterian; he told me - where he got "drunk on salvation's bottle'. His familiarity with the Bible, which remained a principal source of his imagery and with Pilgrim's Progress dates from this time." Christian symbols and imagery recur in his poems. God and Christ, for example, are symbols for nature-objects and forces, and for their creative powers. Christ is frequently used as a symbol for suffering poet. Christ suffered and was martyred, and Dylan too suffered and was a martyr to his psychological complexes. Dylan finds nature holy, and this holiness is expressed through symbols drawn from the ritual of the chapel and church. His churches have weathercocks, not crosses, on the steeples. Water, tower, snakes and ladders etc., are Biblical symbols though they are enriched and expanded by his reading of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Jacobs, ladder and Eve's snake are Biblical symbols, but they are also Freudian. Dylan's symbols were also coloured by his brush with surrealism which seeks to express the irrational through the use of concrete images and symbols. Thus, his symbols are many-faceted and complex, contributing much to the obscurity of the poems and the difficulty of the readers. Thus, a symbolic-image like "four breasted stems at the poles of the summer sea-ends, eyes in the sea-shell" is difficult to explain as it is a complex of many influences."

BIBLICAL SYMBOLS USED BY DYLAN THOMAS

There is a strange blending of the religious and sexual symbols in the poetry of Dylan. A critic has made an apt observation on this point:

"There can be no denying the fact that Biblical myth and imagery provides him with some Key-symbols which are constantly repeated and which carry nearly the same value and meaning in different poems."

Most of them are conventional and have been logically at Writes Clark Emery in this connection, "Thomas' Adam is Scripture's natural man, once innocent as a child, then tempted like an adolescent, now in his adulthood guilty and conscious of being subject of Time and Death. His Jesus is also Scripture's, redeeming through sacrificial love that guilt and conquering death. But it is Adam and Jesus as they appear in each man, not as they appear in a book that coerces Thomas' attention. He sees the history of man in scientific terms; as slow development from primitive, sea-born, simplicity to its present land-locked complexity. And he considers this history (as he sees the Adam-Jesus history) recapitulated in each. He can, therefore, use the sea or water as a symbol for the spawning-ground of life either of man or a man and the sun as a symbol for the life-maintaining.

SYMBOLISM AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE INNER EXPERIENCES OF DYLAN THOMAS

In many poems Dylan has made large use of symbols to express the inner movements of a heart and mind which is clear from the observation of a famous critic:

"In some poems, Dylan makes extensive use of symbols to express inner dynamics. For example in the Lament the old ram-rod, the crumpled horn, and the soul which is "shoved" into the coal black sky are the internalised father's penis, while the "breast high coal" and the "coal black sky" containing the "wick dipping moon" are the internalising mother's breast. In another of his good lyrics, Fern Hill the two kinds of weather, one on the hill and the other down below symbolise two mental states one of the adult Dylan and the other of the boy who moved about the apple-country like a lord or prince. The swallows are symbols of life and movement of the soul ascending heavenward. "Riding" and "flying" symbolise a desire to grow up, and "singing" symbolises a defiant joyfulness, even in spite of the passing of time. The farm of his aunt is symbolic of an Edenic world, an earthly paradise, which is ours in the golden period of boyhood, but which is lost as we grow into adulthood. "Parable and legends" symbolise the glorious fantasy world of the boy, as it is surveyed nostalgically by the adult, "womb and tomb" growth-inducing force which the spawn of the sea or womb comes to experience."

COMPLEXITY OF SYMBOLISM: INFLUENCE OF SCIENCE

Dylan is a modern poet. He has read and understood all the modern novelties of science. He can blend the information of the scientist with the wisdom of scripture. An eminent critic has rightly observed:

"So this spawn becomes the Adam who was tempted to aspire and lost his simplicity and the Jesus who, practising aspiration of another order, regains it. "Light" in Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines symbolises the light of life, the light of knowledge as also the light which preceded creation. In this lyric as in many others, the process of procreation is rendered regarding the creation of cosmos out of chaos. His symbolism drives home the cosmic significance of the human anatomy. The microcosm and the forces that govern it constantly find their counter-part in the macrocosm and nature's elemental forces. "Symbolic parallels between the world of man and the world of nature are constantly drawn, and they contribute to the richness and density of Dylan's poetry." In The Force that Through the Green Fuse, "green" is a symbol for creative activity, symbolising both the creative power at work in nature and the intense sexual urge at work in the poet. This powerful energy is both creative and destructive; it blasts trees and stirs quicksands. This very creative energy when repressed in the adolescent destroys his green age, i.e., youth- the period of creative activity and makes him old and crooked before his time. In Dylan's lyrics, the imagery of light, sea, fruit, the seasons etc., is constantly used symbolically to assert the kinship of man and nature. In this way, he communicates cosmic processes by the use of concrete imagery drawn from the world of nature with which he was intimately familiar as a village boy; both of the sea and the woods."

CONCLUSION

Dylan's imagery has been criticised as being grossly over-sized and clumsily handled. Often it is exaggerated and violent and results in obscurity and incoherence rather than in greater clarity. His comparisons are often inept and trite, and they reveal a morbid preoccupation with sex and death and disease. There is, no doubt, some truth in such, such assertions. But all the same, the poet's imagery is a fascinating subject of study, much too vast for a work like the present one. Dylan has used significant symbols to express psychological states of his subject. Dylan is a symbolist, and his symbols are complex and many-sided. Most of them are not universal symbols, but own symbols, devised by Dylan for his use and their value keeps on shifting from poem to poem. Further, complications are introduced by the fact that they are derived from a multiplicity of sources from the Bible, from Freud, from Surrealism, from a village boy's observation of the life around him. Hence, the subject is to be approached with considerable

care, for the pitfalls are always at hand. Full justice to the subject cannot be done within the limited scope of the present work."

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