

## Love and Sex as a Transforming Experience Portrayed in Dylan Thomas' Select Poetry

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### ABSTRACT

Dylan thomas deals love in par with death and creation. His poetry deals with love and sex to be the part of the life's journey towards death and rebirth. One can often find love in his poetry to be sensual driving to extreme insanity. He views love and sex to be a part of procreation and life's journey towards grave. He finds the universe sexual as the process of unity in the universe of human life with life process of nature. To deny sex is to go against the universal scheme of creative process. Sexual commitment is urged by the senses but feared to be expressed. Sex is for rebirth and renewal of children who are the bond of human love. A profound need of love is felt in human life but it is unattended due to fear. This fear in thomas is due to his puritanical upbringing as well as the conventional ideas of the society against which he had so often fretted and protested in his poems and letters.

The early poems constitute physical and compulsive love with impersonal tone. There is a flow of conscious desire in thomas to transcend sheer animality in his 1930 notebook. He had described sexual love attended by the fear of death which is the ultimate reality. He describes love as elevating soul, ecstasy of social union, positive power of love that adds meaning and creates pleasant feeling in life. Thomas dealt love not only in connection with sex but also his affection for his aunt in after the funeral, filial love in if my head hurt a hair's foot, his love for his dying father in do not go gentle into that good night, impersonal affair in marriage love poems and christ's sacrificial and redemptive power of love in many of his poems. The end of love is not an asylum or plague or it is not mere rub but it is the way of spiritualising soul in and death shall have no dominion through the line, "though lovers be lost, love shall not".

Keywords: Nostalgic love - love and adolescent urges - love for nature and welsh countryside - love – transforming experience - greedy and exploiting love - physical love and spiritual miracle.

### INTRODUCTION

Thomas' love poetry depicts love for nature in childhood, adolescent experience with physical love and sexuality, love as a transforming experience and love as an experience of hope in difficult situations of life. G.S. Fraser notes on the last collection, *In Country Sleep* as "a retreat to the themes of childhood innocence and country peace [...]; a vision of a lost paradise regained". The love poetry emerges from the courtly love from France. "The novelty of courtly love lies in three basic elements: first, in the ennobling force of human love; second, in the elevation of the beloved to a place of superiority above the lover; third, in the conception of love as ever unsatisfied, ever increasing desire."

The three poems from *18 Poems, Especially When the October Wind, If I Were Tickled by the Rub of Love* and *Where Once the Waters of Your Face* deal with different natural elements: wind, water and the physicality of love. *Especially When...* and *Where Once the Waters...* deal with natural elements and love of the Welsh countryside.

Thomas' poems represent love as a medium that enables a person to experience crucial conflict or struggle and leads to transformation of the people involved in it. Some poems depict love for the countryside or love as a physical desire of the flesh but some mature love poems are collected under *Death and Entrances*. They are *Love in the Asylum, Paper and Sticks, On the Marriage of a Virgin* and *In My Craft or Sullen Art*. In these poems, adolescent physical desires are replaced by love as a transforming emotional experience. E. Glyn Lewis notes that "Thomas has in this collection developed a mature and imaginative sympathy for persons in spite of what may appear to be their defects and weakness". *Love in Asylum* depicts the imagination of a mad girl and

the richness of her imagination that becomes an eye-opener for the speaker. *Paper and Sticks* presents the unfulfilled desire and its illusion with love shattered by money. *On a Marriage of a Virgin* depicts the transformation of a girl after her first sexual experience. *In My Craft or Sullen Art* presents love to be meaningful act of creation and inspiration for creation. Rushworth M. Kidder remarks on Thomas' matured poetic experience as "Entrances are the beginning of Thomas' mature poetic style and consciously ordering the past youthful and sexual experience...." According to A. Davies, *Death and Entrances* conveys "an impression of light, of illumination. This movement towards light is also accompanied by a simplifying of style and an attendant gain in lucidity". The poems are relatively shorter than the complicated obscure early poems of Dylan Thomas. These matured poems are clear and concise.

*If I were Tickled by the Rub of Love* presents the ironic voice of puns and vivid imagery of physical love, the adolescent sexual lure threatened by the imagery of the first sin by Adam and Eve and Biblical punishment. John Ackerman comments that "His Puritan conscience did not live in harmony with his animal, human self." This poem projects the release of conflicts between urge for physical love and sex and puritan mind of considering sex as a sin. Ackerman further elaborates that "Sex is desirable but it comes with the associations of fear and guilt and death. He is aware that what attracts him also repels him and cannot come to terms with himself."

The love theme in the poem is connected to sexual lure which attracts as well as repulses the speaker. The conflict is raised by the desire of sex which leads to frustration as constantly reminded by the fear and guilt. Sexual frustration is caused when the desire remains unfulfilled and at the same time, it is accompanied by fear and guilt of what happens when it is fulfilled. A. Davies points out, "Thomas' early poems are full of sexual imagery such as this one deal with "the relation between man's capacity for love and sexual act"". Thomas right from the beginning of his poetic career, his poems are centred on the "task of unravelling of this mysterious complication of human existence." He acknowledges the mystery behind human existence and "the poet passes through the more superficial aspects of sexuality to the fundamental truth concerning man as a being capable of love." (Davies). As Ackerman points out, "In this poem, there is a profound moral conflict."

The poet tells us he is in love, but this is not the customary poetical convention of "love-madness". He is daft with the drug that's smoking in a girl: the drug of sexual desire makes him daft."(Ackerman). The idea of drug trance is connected to the image of the devil: "This world is half the devil's and my own / Daft with the drug that's smoking in a girl / And curling round the bud that forks her eye." The adolescent urges and desire for sex is compared to the devil's intensifying its sinful nature to enact the sinful act of sex. The devil's intensifying the sinful nature is drawn in parallel with the stimulation of senses. The visual and olfactory senses are stimulated through the projection of "the smoke is curling round the girl's eye". He is addicted by the drug which is the girl. She lures him like a drug with her enchanting eyes. Ackerman suggests in connection to the comparison of the drug and girl and devil, "The drug has been planted in the girl by the devil; she is not responsible for her sexual nature." The physical nature of this poem is also stressed by "the speaker sees the girl anatomically, not in pretty, romantic terms"(Ackerman) as the girl is described as "A rooking girl who stole me for her side." The girl is considered to be tempting and inviting him to commit the sin of sex. By the word, "rook", Thomas connects the image of raven to sin and "stole" reveals the innocence of the speaker and he remains passive as he is addicted to the charm of the girl. The biblical imagery of sin threatens the speaker: "I would not fear the apple nor the flood". The speaker's dilemma, the moral conflict and tension of the poem is brought out by contrast between the religious symbols of "apple" and "flood" and the vivid physical images of "cells", "the blood" and "the flesh". The sexual tinkling of the stage of life in womb is dealt through "tickled by the hatching hair / winging bone that sprouted in the heels / itch of man upon the baby's thigh". The embryonic development of characteristic of natural world of plants and animals is conveyed through "hatching" and "sprouting". The physical tendencies for the desires of sex are awakened in the stage of embryo itself in womb which depicts the psycho-analytical theory of Sigmund Freud. Even the purest form of innocence in unborn child is tickled in the womb. The early stage desire is developed into the sexual appetites of adolescence in the next stage of the child in the poem. At the stage of adolescence, sexuality is associated with the sin for the first time as "the devil in the loin". The idea of masturbation is indicated as "I would not fear the muscling-in of love/ If I were tickled by the urchin hungers/ Rehearsing heat upon a raw-edged nerve". Even though, the speaker considers sex to be a sinful act, his natural biological being has to undergo its natural process.

If I were tickled by the rub of love,

A rooking girl who stole me for her side,

Broke through her straws, breaking my bandaged string,

If the red tickle as the cattle calve

Still set to scratch a laughter from my lung,

I would not fear the apple nor the flood  
Nor the bad blood of spring.

The symbol of Noah's ark is seen through the image of flood which is considered to be destructive but the ark supplies hope for new world order. The flood and apple refer to the sin in Eden and punishment is expulsion from paradise. According to Genesis, flood was not a punishment from God but the forbidden fruit is the punishment for the sin committed by Adam and Eve. Flood gives the speaker hope but apple threatens him against sex. Biologically, the "bad blood of spring" is symbol of menstruation in women.

A rooking girl who stole me for her side,

Broke through her straws, breaking my bandaged string.

"Roeking girl" is the notion of girl as a thief who steals one his ribs, "And the rib, which the Lord had taken from man, made he a woman" and can be compared to Eve who tempts Adam with the fruit of forbidden tree. The "bandaged string" refers to the breaking of the string of his connection with his mother.

Shall it be male of female? say the cells,

And drop the plum like fire from the flesh,

If I were tickled by the hatching hair,

The winging bone that sprouted in the heels,

The itch of man upon the baby's thigh,

I would not fear the gallows not the axe

Not the crossed sticks of war.

The cells determine the gender of the child conceived in the womb, which "drop" like a "plum". Tindall points out the plum as the forbidden fruit like Genesis' apple. The apple is considered to the attractive element according to Newton's law as well as the apple is the element of attraction for Adam and Eve. The speaker fears death neither by "the gallows nor the axe" that he would not fear to be killed nor he would fear "the crossed sticks of war" which implies crucifixion as in "the poles are kissing as they cross" from *I See the Boys of Summer*.

Thomas depicts the sinful physicality of nature representing phallus so boldly and creating ironic effect. Assonance and alliteration in the last stanza resolves the dilemma of the poem by a pun. The duality of the poem, the attractiveness of the kiss and the repulsive "thistle" in it is represented by the assonance in "Your mouth, my love, the thistle in the kiss?". The poem ends with the opposition of physical love and death:

And what's the rub? Death's feather on the nerve?

My Jack of Christ born thorny on the tree?

The words of death are dryer than his stiff,

My wordy wounds are printed with your hair.

I would be tickled by the rub that is:

Man be my metaphor.

Raymond Stephens notes in his critical essay that "Against this mortal 'rub', the poet attempts a personal transcendence, which is the power of his creative 'metaphor' to transform one level of reality into another". Man as well as love and death are metaphor and the inevitable reality of death is connected to sin but capacity of man which leads him to sexual act is the process of creativity. Scarfe notes that "life-death problem in Dylan Thomas is as unresolved as the sex-sin problem". Nature plays a vital role in the biological development of man. Even though, the speaker opposes sex to be a sinful act, natural force makes him undergo the creative process and makes man look at the productive benefits of sex.

*If I were Tickled by the Rub of Love* asserts the need for sex but puritan spirit of sin repels it. An individual rationalises the biological and emotional need for sex but faces the puritan conscience which depicts sex as a sin. The necessity of sex and procreation is inherent in nature but a restraint in conventional religious ideas creates the emotional conflict. If the poet accepts rationalised mind as sex to be a process of procreation, there would be no conflict to fear for "apple" which is perceived as sin and punishment in conventional concept and "bad blood of spring" (regeneration and original sin by Adam and Eve).

I would not fear the gallows nor the axe

Nor the crossed sticks of war

Sex is attractive but associated with fall, sin and death which repel the individuals. The poet analyses the man's birth breaking "through her straws", breaking the prison of the girl's body, the speaker would be born. "Rehearsing heat upon a raw-edged nerve" is suggestive of masturbation. Sexual desire is described as "devil in the loin"(symbolises sin), death as "the outspoken grave". The disgusting old age and its impotency for sex is expressed through "Crow's foot" and "lock / of sick old manhood on the fallen jaws". Depravity and dissolution of sex is expressed through "Time and the crabs and the sweethearting crib / Would leave me cold as butter for the flies". If the speaker were tickled by the desire for sex, he would bravely "drown" in the "sea of scums". He is attracted by the seductive charms (like "drug") of the sex and surrendered to "smoking in a girl". Sex is viewed as bait for the persona as:

Daft with the drug that's smoking in a girl

And curling round the bud that forks her eye

Tindall views "the bud" as a male bud where the girl's eyes are forked or fixed. Sex attracts but repulses due to the dread of time, impotence and death that accompanies the old age. The persona is conscious of lechery as an aversion and old age which is in store in future and dreadful feeling out of death repulse the sexual desire in him through the lines:

An old man's shank one-marrowed with my bone

And all the herrings smelling in the sea.

I sit and watch the worm beneath my nail

Wearing the quick away.

The realization of total loss of identity through death and mortality as the supreme reality creates a fear in the persona's mind.

In *When, like a Running Grave*, sex and death are paralleled through the images of creation and destruction. The images that represent creation are also represented as the images of destruction. Love and sex are the instruments of creation but the poem presents as they represent death. The ultimate outcome of the act of love i.e., sex is death. Death overtakes creation, love and sex. The struggle to accept sex as a part of love and life is evident in the poem and the dread by the destructive images. The creative agent of love becomes the agent of death. The act of love is an act of destruction:

Heart of cadaver's candle waxes thin,

When blood, spade-handed and the logic time

Drive children up like bruises to the thumb

The male organs are described as deadly "cadaver's candle", "bud of Adam" and "cadaver's shoot". The girl is described as "your calm and cuddled is a scythe of hairs", an agent of death and "love in her gear" is in parallel with "a turtle in a hoarse" signifying death. "A pair of scissors" signifies death as time cut shorts life. The poet is a victim of conflict between head and heart and time. The physical urge which is natural creates fear and frustration. He fears that he will never enjoy the sexual experience

I, that time's jacket or the coat of ice

May fail to fasten with a virgin o

In the straight grave

Death is the end of love and image of inevitable process of time is mentioned as "logic time". The straight grave refers to the vagina. The journey is expressed in "Stride through cadaver's country in my force". The world is represented as "cadaver's country" and the poet realises that the body which he uses to fulfil his sensuousness is subject to death one day. The negation of life is death and expressed in "pickbrain masters" sends code not to have faith in the blood or in "maiden's slime". The image of sex as creative and destructive agent is expressed in "Descending hammer / Descends .....on the entered honour". Image "Cadaver in the hanger" is taken from aeroplanes. Sex and death are implied in "Joy is the knock of dust". Begetting a body for the grave i.e., born to be died is the joy expressed. So it is joy for creation as well as destruction. The conflict of head and heart is evident and love becomes a matter of head when conventional and rationalised moral ideas of death i.e., love and sex indulges in creation which paves way for destruction and when this realisation is brought out, love is no

more an expression of normal passion. Death is “the house of wind” that blows in “whistler’s cough”. Death is the very act of love: “Everything ends, the towering end” / “actions end”. W.S. Merwin states that “the poet advocates love of death and he wanted to be a “a shooter like the cock / blowing the old dead back” asserts his faith in life and not in favour of love or death.

*Our Eunuch dream* projects love which is considered to be illusionary in contrast with reality. The conflict to believe in reality or fantasy is expressed through the contrast. “Light and love” represent reality in contrast with the “seedless” or “barrenness” of erotic sensuous love of the sleeping boys “winding footed in their shawl sheet” who dreams of erotic emotions which are in no way can be related to reality. This kind of love-making with erotic feelings of girls is infertile as they are “sundered from the worm/ the bones of men” and boys fold in their arms “the widows of the night”. The real love is different from the celluloid flavoured love which is like “one-dimensional ghosts” as “midnight nothings, which vanishes when the sensual feeling is lost. The shadowy love which “we watch the show of shadows kiss or kill” gives a lie to reality as “give love the lie” and “love on a reel”.

.....or our two sleepings, which

Shall fall awake when cures and their itch

Raise up this red-eyed earth?

“Red-eyed earth”, “cures” and ‘itch” represent actual sexual reality in contrast with the celluloid love as “the sunny gentleman, the welshing rich”. The faith for regeneration in the world in the future lies in the hands of “red-eyed” revolutionaries. “This is the world” of erotic dreams with cinematic love has “one-sided skins of truth”, where “trash” are “honoured as the quick”. The positive note the poem ends is through the phrase, “Have faith” in real love. The poet says, “we should blow the dreams like the cock”, “blowing the old dead back” and as “our shots shall smack/ the image from the plates”. The glory of real love and celebrated life are expressed through the energy of love and adventure that true lovers spreads and affirms faith in future regeneration through the lines:

And we shall be fit fellows for a life,

And who remain shall flower as they love

Praise to our faring hearts.

In *All all and all the dry worlds lever* affirms the life force as a drive for nature and man to reproduce. The world is dry and often has to be renewed and regenerated through process of reproduction. Life attains fullness through reproduction:

All all and all the dry worlds couple,

Ghost with her ghost, contagious man,

With the womb of his shapeless people,

.....All that shapes from the caul and suckle,

Stroke of mechanical flesh on mine,

Square in these worlds the mortal circle

Regeneration is physical through “worlds couple” and “ghost with her ghost”. Sexual renewal is expressed through “the glanded marrow”, “the corpse’s lover”, “the foaming narrow” and the dry worlds lever”. The political and social agents of love and renewal are expressed through:

City of spring, the governed flower

Turns in the earth that turns the ashen

Towns around on a wheel of fire

The phrases, “the working world”, “the heart is in the ribbing metal” and “the trigger and scythe” hint at the social perspective of regeneration. There is a compulsion in the force of nature which constantly flowers the dry worlds through the generative urges of male and female. The mortal being is compelled to couple and the flowering of life takes place and there is a force that compels regeneration in man as well as nature. “Each golden grain spat life into its fellow” shows such a kind of regeneration.

*Love in Asylum* is suggestive of attitude of conflict to sex. Puritan spirit creates the tension and conflict in the poem. Life is described as mad house where irrational love enters. Sex plays a major role in his struggle for

identity and fulfilment in the complex psyche. Maturity in interpersonal relationship is constituted through man's ability to have satisfying sexual relationships with the opposite sex. To nature, sex is a part of procreation which is the function of all organisms but to an individual, the act of sex is a great psychic experience. The acceptance of sexuality as the part of life's process is the surety of maturity. The nightmares dreads against sex but still the persona is attracted to sex. The adolescents assert the individuality and independence through the act of sex. Love is perceived to be cosmic, dynamic force of all things.

*Paper and Sticks* represent love as homosexual, selfish material and physical exploitation. Love is valued by the physical and material satisfaction followed by lust and greed. The purse and heart are treated in the same level when the speaker says, "Once I had a rich boy for myself / I loved his body and his navy blue wealth / And I lived in his purse and heart". The materialised purse and wealth are treated in par with heart and love. Love depends on the richness of the boy. The heart which is considered to be the symbol of genuine love according to western ideology is considered to be a mere container of holding wealth and riches. The colour of the lover's eyes are materialised by comparing to the typical green colour banknotes. The alliteration in the poem enhances the simple form of this poem. The imagery in the poem is connected to symbolism i.e., the fire imagery denotes the symbolic sensual fire in a human being as well as image of colour. "When in our bed I was tossing and turning / All I could see were his brown eyes burning / By the green of a one pound note." The colour of "the green of a one pound note" is considered to be more valuable for the lover than the alliterative "burning brown eyes". The speaker shows attraction towards "green colour note" (bank note which is material) more than the illuminating "burning brown eyes". The speaker could only offer money for his or her lover than the welfare, love and care: "I'll share my money and we'll run for joy" and sharing the money can only bring joy and not sharing love.

The irony of the love represented here is that the love lies in the measure of money not in the measure of care. Love seems to exploit the handsome and rich lover at first with positive selfish tone but suddenly it moves to a negative and destructive tone at the end of the poem through "Sharp and shrill my silly tongue scratches / Words on the air as the fire catches / You never did and he never did." The choice of diction especially the pronouns reveal the desperate and void tone of disappointment of the speaker. The poem ends with the unfulfilling love experience of the speaker who experiences the void in their love affair. The speaker is able to realise that the material benefits and values can never bring in harmonious relationship between lovers. The poem is a dramatic monologue in a way that the speaker with realisation at the end recalls the materialistic aspects of love.

In *On the Marriage of a Virgin* yokes the religious and sexual imagery to represent the physical love and spiritual miracle of Virgin's conception. In religious context, the poem is about the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus and her conception of child without any sexual confrontation. It also brings out the splendour and glory of a bride like Edmund Spenser's *Epithalamion* which sings the beauty of a bride on her way to the wedding. The first stanza refers to the virgin as Virgin Mary and the second one refers to virgin wife sleeping beside her husband. The poem contrasts the multitudes of love through the opposition of Virgin mother and the pagan virgin wife and ends with the reality of marriage as a contrast to the miracle of creation.

William York Tindall notes on the variety of subject treatment and the "multitude of loves" in the poem as:

"This poem is clever – witty in the seventeenth-century sense of discovering ingenious analogies or of putting apparent incompatibles together. In this elaborate conceit of conceits, the elements at loving war with one another are the Christian and the pagan, the divine and the human, spirit and flesh, the fabulous and the real, the abstraction and individuality, woman alone and woman accompanied, the serious and the frivolous and more... Not wit alone but clever allusion distinguishes this poem on "a multitude of loves". Iris, Mercury, Aphrodite, the golden shower of Danae and Leda's swan surrounds the Virgin Mary and the less miraculous married virgin at the end."

The creative and miraculous force of Virgin Mary is portrayed in the first stanzas as waking in the morning and realising the miraculous experience as "Waking alone in the multitude of loves when morning's light / Surprised in the opening of her nightlong eyes / His golden yesterday upon the iris." The golden light refers to the miraculous light which fertilises the Virgin and "waking alone" assures the virginity of Mary. This imagery of golden referring to the religious imagery of light as "golden yesterday" in contrast to the sensual perception of "golden ghost" referring to the virgin woman in the second stanza. The golden light can refer to the sun in its religious and spiritual terms. "Loaves and fishes" refer to Jesus Christ. The word "alone" is emphasized throughout the poem as "waking alone" in relation to Virgin Mary and "once she married alone" referring to the virgin wife and is paradoxical in statement that one cannot marry alone. As Tindall puts it "it stresses the paradox of 'miraculous virginity' reveals the trouble of divine love". The divine love of God and to be blessed with God as an infant Jesus, it involves a lot a trouble as a virgin mother as the divine light enables her to conceive alone and is placed in contrast with "real marital love" conditioned by physical nearness and mutual understanding.

The virgin wife wakes up to her senses and desires which reverse her loneliness through the “golden ghost” referring to the physical unity of the man and woman. The golden ghost represents the man who opened her eyes, usurps and stuns her senses through the new confrontation of sexual desires through the “vibrations of sun”. Tindall notes on “golden ghost ringed” as “Ringed means married and a wedding ring is gold. His gold alchemically weds her mercury...like a porter, he delivers his ‘golden luggage’ through her eyes, below the ‘lids of her windows’”. The first sun forced out refers to the first sexual confrontation. The spiritual experience of golden light is compared to golden ghost in physical love. Tindall on “unrivalled blood” notes that “Instead of abstract and composite virginity, we have to do with an actual comparisons, this blood is incomparable. But possessive and triumphant – jealous of all rivals, human or divine.”

Thomas combines the sexual and religious images and symbols to denote the physical sexuality leading to spiritual awakening. The dual representation of divine love and marital love leads the struggle of the virgins (virgin mother and virgin wife) and leads to spiritual experience of divine and marital love respectively. Virgin mother enjoys the exalted state as divine God’s mother even though she was liable to be questioned for her virginity by common man. Virgin wife enjoys the physical pleasures of marital love after her struggle of being alone. The marital love is placed in par with the divine love which qualifies sex to be spiritual experience. As the title justifies, the poet wants to stress on the marital love but for elevating the marital love, he draws parallelism with divine love.

### CONCLUSION

Thomas treats love to be a part of life’s journey. Love starts from womb and continues to tomb as his poetry deals with womb-tomb process. He assures the permanence of love even after physical decay in poems like *And Death Shall Have No Dominion*. Sex is often considered to be physical and compulsive biological process for creation but often remains unattended by fear and conflict in mind between puritan spirit and inevitability of natural process. Adolescent urges are often considered to be immature and desire for flesh and physicality. The transition from childhood stage to adolescent stage with secret sensual desires is projected as transformation from innocence to experience adulthood. This transition is described in relation to nature which an adolescent man has lost it as his childhood. Sex is considered to be a kind of spiritual experience and holy sacrament according to Thomas who takes a strand against religious belief of sex to be sinful act or birth sin. He stresses on the spiritual awakening through which man realises that the life’s journey from the womb towards death. The child in the womb in the poem *Vision and Prayer* has an awakening of its identity, an adolescent boy in *I See the Boys of Summer* becomes aware of his physical urges, the speaker in the poem, *Love in Asylum* realises his unusual love for the mad woman and the woman is considered to be an agent of awakening of his self, love becomes permanent and dominates death in *And Death Shall Have No Dominion* and *After the Funeral* which depicts the love for his aunt. In most of the poems, Thomas concludes love and sex as a part of natural process for creation and destruction.

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