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DYLAN THOMAS' RELIGIOUS QUEST

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
the Graduate Council of  
Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in Education

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by  
Sophie Huie Cashdollar  
July 1968

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Sophie Huie Cashdollar entitled "Dylan Thomas' Religious Quest." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Lewis C. Tatham  
Major Professor

Accepted for the Council:

Wayne C. Stamps  
Dean of the Graduate School

## DYLAN THOMAS' RELIGIOUS QUEST

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## DYLAN THOMAS' RELIGIOUS QUEST

Religion, wearing a coat of many colors and as many disguising masks, is the omnipresent element in Dylan Thomas' work. Dylan Thomas, the man and the poet, was absorbed by religion to the point that nearly everything he wrote contained religious overtones. He was obsessed with the struggle for a religion, a strength, a peace, a unity with a greater something or someone.

Established religion was not the answer for Dylan Thomas. Possibly his striving for a faith yet unattained leads Thomas to so much reference to the negative aspects of established religion as he knew it. One particularly good example of this negativism is in his poem "Lament." He ridicules the hypocrisy of preachers, the "deadly virtues," and the "sunday wife." The sinner has led an admittedly wicked and lustful life, but he does not repent, implying that almost anything would be preferable to a Sunday School religion of hypocrisy and sham. He would rather have his own black soul to call his own.<sup>1</sup> Another good example of this same attitude is the poem "When, Like a Running Grave." The speaker asks to be

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<sup>1</sup>Dylan Thomas, Collected Poems (New York, 1957). Subsequent references to Thomas' poetry are from this edition.

delivered from the "sunday faced." He has no desire to give up the pleasures of the world.

At times the striving for a religion leads to cynicism and disbelief in the traditional concept of deity. In "Shall Gods Be Said To Thump The Clouds" Thomas asks,

When it is rain where are the gods?  
Shall it be said they sprinkle water  
From garden cans, or free the floods?

He concludes with the even more cynical challenge,

Let the stones speak  
With tongues that talk all tongues.

Throughout the poem are questions phrased to ridicule the gods, whoever the gods may be. In "Why East Wind Chills" Thomas says that there is no answer to the mysteries of the universe.

Why east wind chills and south wind cools  
Shall not be known till windwell dries  
And west's no longer drowned  
In winds that bring the fruit and rind  
Of many a hundred falls.

There is no answer for the child who questions, nor is there an answer for anyone.

Why silk is soft and the stone wounds  
The child shall question all his days.

Although Thomas ridicules traditional religion in some of his poems, his more characteristic attitude is an ambivalent one. In "Poem on His Birthday" he prays

Faithlessly unto Him  
Who is the light of old.

He prays faithlessly, but the poem is full of Christian references and has an optimistic philosophy about the coming of death. In his poetry Thomas considers the possibilities, the ambiguities of life and God, and he still seeks his salvation.

Dissatisfied as he was with conventional religion, Thomas sought in his poetry to create a new religion--one that makes extensive use of Christian imagery and concepts, but, at the same time, diverges significantly from the Welsh Nonconformism in which he was raised. The most striking of these divergences is the highly sensual quality of his poetry. Sensuality became for Thomas a means of salvation. The sexual act is for him a sort of religious act. In "If I Were Tickled By The Rub of Love," in one of many phallic symbols he uses repeatedly throughout his poetry, he calls the male sex organ "My Jack of Christ," thus making it a religious instrument. Sex is a religion in that it involves a participation in the life force of the world. He sees it as unifying all time and being characteristic of all men. In "I Dreamed My Genesis" the child is born into the world from "limbs that had the measure of the worm." In the poem "In The White Giant's Thigh" he speaks of "the night's eternal curving act" which is still going on without the women who have passed on. Sexual references of a very sensual nature abound

everywhere. In "Before I Knocked" Thomas tells how he was aware of things before his birth and uses some of his more overt sexual symbolism. Before he was born he was "sister to the fathering worm"; he felt

. . . the rainy hammer  
Swung by my father from his dome.

Thomas strives to make sex the ideal. Sex is equated with love; they are one and the same. In "Ballad Of The Long-Legged Bait," the story of a woman who is used as bait and is ravished by the creatures of the sea, Thomas calls the sexual union "love."

She nipped and dived in the nick of love  
Spun on a spout like a long-legged ball

Sex is also indirectly idealized in Thomas' poem "In the White Giant's Thigh" where the subject is motherhood and the setting is a graveyard. The deceased died barren.

Though the names on their weed grown stones are rained  
away,  
And alone in the night's eternal, curving act  
They yearn with tongues of curlews for the unconceived  
And immemorial sons of the cudgelling, hacked  
Hill.

Not only do they mourn their barrenness, Thomas mourns for them also. "Now curlew cry me down to kiss the mouths of their dust."

Sexual freedom is celebrated as being natural and desirable, as in "Lament."

And the sizzling beds of the town cried, Quick!

Whenever I dove in a breast high shoal  
 Wherever I romped in the clover quilts

Even when he is older and impotent the man in the poem, the "hillocky bull," does not regret the rowdy, bawdy life he has led. He only regrets changing his attitude as he grew older, finding "a woman's soul for a wife," a "sunday wife" who "bore angels" and plagued his death with all her "deadly virtues." A religion of sensuality is preferable to one of hypocrisy.

But again, there is no clear-cut answer for Thomas. He is sometimes positive in his view of sex, sometimes negative. He is sometimes attracted, sometimes repelled, sometimes optimistic, sometimes cynical.

Thomas is at his most negative as he views sex with disdain in his poem "I See The Boys of Summer." The elder speaker criticizes the boys' interest in sex because it is so extreme.

I see the boys of summer in their ruin  
 Lay the gold tithings barren,  
 Setting no store by harvest, freeze the soils.

Time cannot stand still for the selfish pleasures of the boys. In a moralizing tone Thomas says,

I see that from these boys shall men of nothing  
 Stature by seedy shifting.

In this poem of dialogue between the care-free boys and the older, more temperate man, the elder voice is given the emphasis.

Also in his poem "Into Her Lying Down Head" Thomas sees sex negatively, equating it almost entirely with lust. He describes the woman engaged in the sexual act as thinking of other lovers, real, historical, and fictional. He sees the physical union as a betrayal of both partners.

One voice in chains declaims  
The female, deadly, and male  
Libidinous betrayal

There can be little comfort in sex as it is presented here. It not only fails him as a religion, but it becomes the very antithesis of religion.

"Ambivalent" is the most appropriate word to describe Thomas' attitude toward sex, and as a result such comfort and affirmation as he may receive from it is, at best, ambivalent also. Throughout his poetry, he rather consistently expresses both attraction and repulsion. Sometimes Thomas views sex with both desire and fear in the same poem. Such is true in "If I Were Tickled By The Rub Of Love" as he says, "This world is half the devil's and my own." He would give all he has and would fear nothing for "love," or "sex" as it is actually described in the poem, but at the same time he does fear, he fears sex itself because of its connection with death. He could enter into sex with complete joy and fearlessness if it were not for death. Sex, as a religion for Dylan Thomas, has definite limitations.

The sensuality of Thomas includes more than sex. He seeks solace in reveling in sensuality. His sensuality is, in a sense, a religion as he describes nature around him, as in "Poem on His Birthday."

. . . finches fly  
In the claw tracks of hawks  
On a seizing sky . . .

His sensualness in describing nature is related to his sensualness in describing sex in that he sometimes sees both sex and nature as a part of a larger pattern, as a unifying force in the universe, as continuity. Sex creates life, which brings death, which causes decay, which brings new life, in the form of nature.

Thomas seeks his salvation in nature itself, as did a whole generation of Romantic poets before him. Thomas' admiration and love for nature is incorporated in many of his poems and often reaches pantheistic heights. He sometimes describes the natural glories of the earth with an almost "religious" zeal and fervour as if they were, indeed, a religion to him. In "A Refusal to Mourn" Thomas' "God" is a pantheistic one; he speaks of the

Zion of the water bead  
And the synagogue of the ear of corn.

Thomas connects nature to the after-life by picturing the dead child entering into union with nature, thereby invalidating any reason for mourning.

Thomas' most vivid descriptions of nature are usually incorporated with the experience of an individual, as in "Poem in October," "The Hunchback in the Park," "Over Sir John's Hill," "Poem on His Birthday" and "Fern Hill." His unusual descriptions and handling of the English language in general create an immediate experience of joyful exultation.

In many of his poems nature is presented in connection with religion; in fact, nature is religion. "Poem in October" is such a poem.

It was my thirtieth year to heaven  
 Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbor wood  
 And the mussel pooled and the heron  
 Priested shore  
 The morning beckon  
 With water praying and call of sea gull and rook

All is glorious on the poet's thirtieth birthday as he wakes to the sounds of nature. The poet sees himself as being on his way to heaven or in sight of it. The world belongs to the poet alone as he leaves the town for an early morning walk in the country.

My birthday begins with the water  
 Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying  
   my name  
 Above the farms . . .

On this walk he sees and hears the present with a sense of wonder. All is vivid and living on this glorious occasion. As Moynihan says,



capacity for vision, and capacity for belief. The surrounding countryside represents all the qualities he hopes the child will retain. Nature is a source of strength and spirituality. The father speaks of "the rain telling its beads," "the lord's table of the bowing grass," "the prayer wheeling moon," and "priest black wisted spinney."

But nature is not always so ecstatic for Dylan Thomas; it is not always a source of comfort and inspiration. The joy of existence in glorious nature that is so highly praised in "Fern Hill," "Poem in October," and "In Country Sleep" changes somewhat in "Poem on His Birthday." This poem presents a different view of nature from that found in the other two poems. The natural world of "Poem on His Birthday" is not a companionable realm but one of predators and destruction with its blood gutted seals and bone-littered beaches. Instead of the poet's being comforted and inspired by nature he is made more aware of death by its presence. This birthday is a step toward the death the poet sees in the nature about him; even the representative priests, the herons, wear shrouds. A general decline of nature is also suggested by the ship-wrecking sea and the falling stars. But then the turning point comes, with the existentialist's leap of faith.

Yet, though I cry with tumbledown tongue  
Count my blessings aloud.

He counts the "triumphant faith" of the world of nature, of which the "mustardseed sun" is the symbol. The poet praises the beauty of the earth and the islands as he sails out to die rather than praising Heaven which he feels is closed to him.

Thomas' nature reveries are nearly always presented in connection with a negative aspect of life, in "Poem in October" with a regret for loss of childhood and fading perception. Even though the positive aspect is emphasized, the comfort and peace nature brings him is not complete. In the midst of all this nature-wonder, while marveling his birthday away, "the weather turned around," memories come flooding back of another blessed time and season, childhood, where the boy

. . . whispered the truth of his joy  
To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.

In "Fern Hill" also there is this same regret for loss of childhood. Thomas fears that the time when he came closest to finding a true religion in nature is long since passed, and he longs to recapture that time.

Thomas' religious quest often assumes the form of the mystic experience. The mystic experience, as illustrated by Thomas' poetry, was for him the most successful medium for obtaining religious satisfaction. From his mysticism Thomas had visions about many great truths which

are related to intuitive religion, such as time, immortality, unity, the life process, and personal identity. Much of Thomas' poetry may be called mystic in that it is in accord with William James' definition. James confers on the mystic experience the characteristic of the noetic quality, calling it a state of knowledge or insight into depths of truth unhampered by the intellect. The second characteristic of the mystic experience is ineffability: no satisfactory summation of its contents can be expressed in words, and its quality must be directly experienced. The third quality is transiency: mystical states cannot be sustained for long, and when faded they cannot be reproduced perfectly in memory. The fourth quality is passivity: the mystic feels that his own will is in abeyance and he is held by a superior power.<sup>3</sup>

Dylan Thomas' mysticism seems most often inspired by nature, or at least the outside, as in "Poem in October." On the poet's birthday as he wakes to the sounds of nature and takes an early morning walk, his childhood is with him momentarily. Indeed, Thomas becomes the child again, "his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved in mine." The state of childhood and its relation to nature is described

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<sup>3</sup>William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New Hyde Park, New York, 1963), p. 381.

in religious terms.

. . . he walked with his mother  
Through the parables  
Of sun light  
And the legends of the green chapels

Part of Thomas' vision, mystic and intuitively religious in nature, consists of insight into the unity of matter, insight that all things participate in all others, that constant shifting of matter from one form of life to another is a natural change.<sup>4</sup> Thomas sometimes shows this unity of the human spirit and all created matter as existing before birth, as in "Before I Knocked." The cyclic unity of birth and death is stated also.<sup>5</sup> The child says that even before he was born,

My heart knew love, my belly hunger;  
I smelt the maggot in my stool.

In "And Death Shall Have No Dominion" Thomas sees the body as persisting through the changes of death: "Heads of the characters hammer through daisies." Life goes on, but it changes from one form to another. Life in the individual endures by changing its mode of existence; it changes from the body of a person to nourishment for a flower.<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup>Jacob Korg, Dylan Thomas (New York, 1965), p. 29.

<sup>5</sup>Korg, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup>Derek Stanford, Dylan Thomas, A Literary Study (New York, 1954), p. 76.

poem is a beautiful and moving tribute to the life-force. It shows Thomas' view that life and death are merely stages within the universal process.

Thomas' vision of the universal process is inherent in much of his poetry. In "A Refusal to Mourn" Thomas uses the child as a symbol of the inescapable fate of humanity and places her death within the framework of the universal process. The marks of Thomas' universe are the "harness" controlling the sea, the "grains" of earth which receive the child, the "dark veins" of her mother or all who have gone before, and the "riding Thames." Since the child is journeying back to the community of the dead, to natural origins, there is no reason for mourning.<sup>7</sup> Essentially the same thoughts prevail in "Ceremony After a Fire Raid." The fate of the child is seen as a sacramental occasion envisioning spiritual deliverance arising from this child's death, specifically, and the destruction of war, more generally. In "Among Those Killed In The Dawn Raid Was A Man Aged A Hundred" Thomas makes the point that the man's long life was an imprisonment and his death a release. But due to his long life, his long servitude, he is made a part of the natural order of things in the universal process, "The morning is flying on the wings of his age." The

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<sup>7</sup>Korg, p. 112.

storks appear to celebrate his union back into nature, "And a hundred storks perch on the sun's right hand."<sup>8</sup> Again, there is no reason to mourn. Thomas finds comfort and consolation in seeing the total picture, of seeing people and nature, their relationships and interrelationships, as part of a universal process.

Much of Thomas' early poetry is based on mystic insight into nature, human life, and the relationships between them. Life is seen as a process in which the paradoxical conditions of impregnation and death exist at the same time. In "The Force That Through The Green Fuse Drives the Flower," his first published poem, Thomas conveys two balanced ideas, the kinship between nature and the speaker who are subject to the same forces and the duality of these forces which are at once both creative and destructive. Thomas identifies the body of the man with the body of the world. The same force controls the growth and beauty of human life and the decay and terror of human life. Ironically, the creative energy and the murderous energy are one and the same.

The force that drives the water through the rocks  
 Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams  
 Turns mine to wax.  
 And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins  
 How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

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<sup>8</sup>Korg, p. 116.

Thomas sees a sort of harmony in the universe as he speaks of the duality of natural forces. On the other hand, he complains that he is influenced largely by their destructive side.

Another result of Thomas' mystic insight is his vision of the unity of time. In his most poetic and significant mystic insight there is unity of time, but even when there is no unity, time is an obsession from which Thomas is never free. In "Fern Hill," essentially a happy, optimistic poem, the language used is so fascinating that it is easy to overlook the casual, deceptive presence of Time in the background. In the first two stanzas Time is permissive:

Time let me play and be  
Golden in the mercy of his means.

But by the last two stanzas Time assumes an ominous character, "Time allows . . . so few . . . morning songs," "Time held me green and dying." Time was constantly at work, even in the boy's childhood when he did not know it, and it is still at work. It is the enemy. But Thomas seeks a kind of unity. Regardless of the direction it takes, Thomas' religious drive assumes its greatest urgency in his desire to escape the confines of time. Indeed, his basic religious drive often appears to be equated with this struggle. "Fern Hill" is concerned with a kind of

immortality, a possible escape from time.

As much as Dylan Thomas longed to escape from the confines of time, the actual condition of his poetic universe becomes more often a unity of time, an eternal present where the world is in all stages of its development at once. The unity of time renders all things participants in one another's existence. Opposites merge so that "Light breaks where no sun shines." Thomas' many paradoxes are often the result of the universe being freed from time, such as, "I am the man your father was," and "Over the past table I repeat this present grace."

One particularly good example of the mystic experience as related to time is in "Poem in October" when the time of childhood is with the poet momentarily; Thomas becomes the child again, "his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved in mine." Time stands still for the poet as all time is fused into the present. The perceptive awareness of nature that the child is capable of is transmuted into his adult life momentarily.

And the mystery  
Sang alive  
Still, in the water and singingbirds

In at least three of his poems--"Fern Hill," "Poem in October" and "Poem on His Birthday"--Thomas seeks escape from time for both himself and his reader as he makes the experience so immediate and spontaneous that both the poet

and reader actually seem to participate in the celebration. Dylan Thomas creates this immediacy of experience by his unusual descriptions and his unusual handling of the English language. In "Fern Hill" Thomas creates this immediacy by his ability to perceive as an adult what a child would say and perceive, the imaginative childhood words and phrases, the youth's vision that transforms, the overall coherence in the imagery and figures of speech, the extensive alliteration, and the breathless quality of the poem. Also in "Poem in October" the experience "happens" for us as we read the poem; there is a reality in the boy walking in the Welsh pastoral scene.

Even though much of his poetry longs to escape completely from time, occasionally Thomas suggests a limited concept of immortality, a "heaven" rather than Heaven itself. In "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" he says,

And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind  
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars

He suggests that the human notion of time includes a limited concept of immortality, with a limited concept of death.<sup>9</sup> In the poems of nature celebration, as in "Fern Hill" and "Poem in October," there is also the suggestion of a kind of immortality in the celebration itself, a

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<sup>9</sup>Korg, p. 67.

feeling of celebration so intense that concern for time is insignificant and unimportant.

The unity of time amounts to an absence of time. To the perfect vision of the mystic, time is an eternal present which is also related to the concept of unity of matter and universal process.<sup>10</sup> One of the characteristics of the mystic experience is the sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life, a consciousness of already possessing it. The keynote of the perfect mystic experience is invariably a reconciliation; all things in the world, such as time, matter, and process, all opposites, melt into unity. This is what Thomas sought and sometimes achieved, although more often it was partially and imperfectly achieved.

Much of Dylan Thomas' religious striving shows itself in his use of the English language. Since one of the characteristics of the mystic experience is its ineffability or inherent incommunicableness, this may often account for his unusual language usage. Since language grows out of the need for communicating the familiar experiences of daily life, not the unique, the spirit has no language of its own. Language seems bound by a conservative principle that it can tell only what the hearer already knows. The obscurities of

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<sup>10</sup>Korg, p. 32.

the poems occupied with his vision are partly due to the limitations shared by literature of mysticism. As Jacob Korg says,

In his poetic idiom we sense the imaginative vision shaping the rhetoric, and the rhetoric adapting itself to the exceptional requirements of the vision. His style is controlled, ultimately, neither by his mysticism, nor by his joy in language; it is, at its best, a balanced collaboration between them.<sup>11</sup>

Dylan Thomas must have felt that he had to escape from the confines of the English language to communicate his mystic insight. In "Fern Hill" it is Thomas' vision of time as the ever present entity that lends itself to analysis of his language. In the poem Thomas shows his ability to perceive as an adult what a child would say and perceive. The language is simplicity itself with a reliance on imaginative childhood words and phrases, such as "honoured among wagons," "all the sun long," "owls bearing the farm away." The boy's eyes see things quite differently from the adult. Time, indirectly age, permits the boy to see with a vision that transforms, hence, "lilting house." In his eyes things can be both "green and golden," possibly like the green plants in the sunlight. He hears with a transformed ear "the tunes from the chimney." He sees the hay fields "high as the house," "fire green as

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<sup>11</sup>Korg, p. 27.

grass," and "the whinnying green stable."

In this same poem there is an overall coherence in the poet's imagery and figures of speech. The references to "a wanderer white," "the cock on his shoulder," "Adam and maiden," "new-made clouds," and "lamb white days" all relate to one another by their connotations of freshness and innocence. They contribute to the central theme of the poem, the joyous innocence and happiness of childhood, and contrast with "the shadow of my hand," emphasizing the loss of this joy.

Because of the extensive use of alliteration, the reader intensely "feels" the words in the poem rather than racing across them; the exuberance of the child's experience is thus intensified: "And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman," "clear and cold," "green as grass," "wanderer white," "tuneful twining," "farm forever fled." There is also much use of assonance within the lines, helping to create a melodic effect.

The breathless, childlike quality of the poem is partially due to Thomas' use of the aspirate "h," "huntsman and herdsman," "high as the house," "happy as the heart was long," "house high hay." This childlike quality is also partially due to Thomas' use of the liquids, certain non-frictional and vowel-like consonants, chiefly "l" and "r." These melodic consonants help build a

resonant musical line.

"Fern Hill" is written in syllabic verse, that is, verse that merely counts the number of syllables in its lines, and neither counts the stresses nor distributes them determinately. This lack of the conventional meter creates a more appropriate medium for describing the non-systematic, uninhibited, carefree days of childhood. The stanzas, examined separately, seem almost free from any restraint, either of language or form. But, paradoxically, in syllabic verse, symmetry is actually the principle. Each line in a stanza has the same number of syllables as the corresponding line of succeeding stanzas. The same paradox is true also of Time in the poem. Even in childhood where life appears to be carefree and spontaneous, time is at work. Life is controlled, just as the form of the poem is controlled. Thomas emerges a master craftsman.

Throughout his brief life and career Dylan Thomas searched as a man and a poet for a source of strength, of consolation, and affirmation that he never achieved in entirety. The closest he came to affirmation was in the mystic experience. To the extent that he was able to communicate in language, inherently inadequate to the occasion, he was a great poet. Jacob Korg said that Thomas strove to create "a system of metaphor capable of expressing

a visionary reality."<sup>12</sup> Many people feel that he succeeded in doing so.

It is ironical in that Thomas seemed never to achieve religious satisfaction for any length of time in his poetry. The highest and noblest experiences and insight are of necessity brief, gaining strength from comparison, and this did not seem to satisfy him. Religion is not meant to be "possessed." The very thing that makes religion a source of strength, comfort, consolation, and affirmation is its lack of logic, of tangibility, of permanence. We fret because its healing and inspiring quality is not always immediately within our reach, but, paradoxically, the same qualities constitute the very essence of religion for us.

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<sup>12</sup>Korg, p. 28.

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