

Reading Memory in the Select Poems of Dylan Thomas

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Abstract:

The 19th-century Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas is a prolific poet of his time. He is well known for delineating his emotional self. His poems ascertain the trajectory of life and living, hope and aspiration, time and place, nostalgia and memory and death and dying. The most significant aspect of his poetry appears to be the re-association and reorientation of his past. This particular paper concentrates on the select poems namely “A Poem in October” (1944) and “Do not Go Gentle into that Good Night” (1951) where there is a spontaneous growth of time past and time present. His childhood innocence and youthful vigour occupy a special place in his poetry. The element of time sets to unite his thoughts with his actions. His poems represent the correlation between the self and the individual. The paper attempts to reread memory as one of the dominant aspects of his poetry. The poet urges to show the binary between self and individual, society and habitat and family and culture. He associates himself with his regulatory nature in accepting memory as the earmark of his poems. His poetic persona resonates between memory and recollection. This paper sets out to explore the idea of memory as a contemplating agent that strives as the primary advocate of all human perception. The paper also concentrates on locating memory in its corporeal state.

Keywords: individual, memory, recollection, time, self

Introduction:

The 20th century English poet of Welsh origin significantly talks about life and death, memory and recollection, desire and longings and past and present. The element of time works predominantly in his poetry. The poem has been structured into seven stanzas of equal length. The ten lines in each stanza elucidate his unconditional association with the different components of nature. Memory seems to be one of the dominating aspects of his poetry. His recurrent use of time and space confers a precise understanding of the phenomenon of memory. The paper attempts

to substantiate the importance of memory and its representation in the probing of the poet's conscious and transfigured self. It reiterates how memory subscribes to the prospect of his perseverance and endurance. With the spontaneity of his memory, he intends to recollect his recent past, relish his present and anticipate the future. Further, as a prolific minstrel, he lives in the present and appears to be optimistic about his future. The paper underscores memory as an envisioning component that works as a prime agent of all human perception. The substantial use of memory enlightens us on the poet's understanding of the past and present and also analyses its importance in factors relating to remembrance and recognition.

Every composition is a text and every text is an artistic creation. It is a combination of the poet's senses and feelings on the one hand and mental impressions and psychological thinking on the other. It is the author who recollects and shares his mind and sensibility with the readers along concerning particular episodes and events. Dylan Thomas' poetry accustoms to bring together the concept of resituating memory. Memory studies is an emerging that facilitates the growth of one's mind in capturing the principal aspects of human life and morality.

Memory studies as a theory starts evolving during the 1990s. It is an interdisciplinary field. The discourse of memory studies envisages prospects from social, cultural, economic, historical and individual trajectories. This paper lenses Thomas' poems from the angle of memory studies. It attempts to read memory as an antecedent to the poet's thoughts, ideas and emotions. The sensuousness of memory creates oblivion within the poet. According to Craig, memory is "the human capacity to remember words and things, information and actions, and then to recall these for contemplation or adjustment, is understood universally to be our memory" (278). In this context, Thomas seems to relive his thoughts about his past attachments and present innovations. His manner of recollection always beholds the culture and traditional practices of Wales.

Astrid Erll in the Introduction of *Memory in Culture* writes: "Memories are not objective images or past perceptions, even less of a past reality. They are subjective, highly selective reconstructions, dependent on the situation in which they are recalled" (Introduction, 8). Memory always gives value to past interests and present state. As she says: "Much of poetry, certain forms of drama... can actually be described as the literary representations of individual memory" (77).

Again, in *Narrative and Cultural Memory*, Erll writes: "...the narratological distinction between an 'experiencing I' and 'narrating I' already rests on a (largely implicit) concept of memory, namely on the idea that there is a difference between pre-narrative on the one hand, and, on the other, Narrative memory which creates meaning retrospectively" (Erll 77). She here insists on the first person narration which acts as a forward for any kind of literary representation of discrete memory.

In Chapter VII, titled "Afterword: Whither Memory Studies", Erll tries to define the genre of memory studies as: "memory studies is interested in the entire spectrum of possible interrelations between past, present and future as they take shape in socio cultural contexts" (Erll173). He also says that memory is a "process and movement, rather than as a phenomenon that is fixed in time and space ..." (Erll173). Further, memory appears as a framework that 'enables change' (174). She writes: "Memory Studies is therefore not an excuse in nostalgia, but can be a method to discover and reflect the mechanisms and potentiality of cultural change and renewal. It is memory that helps to shape our present and future as well. It particularly maintains a temporal sequence relating to individual justification, collective perspective and social involvement. Whatever form memory adopts, it always links to culturality" (Erll).

Moreover, Birgit Neumann writes that texts "are concerned with the mnemonic presence of the past in the present, they re-examine the relationship between the past and the present, and they illuminate the manifold functions that memories fulfil for the constitution of identity" (Neumann 333-334). Thomas' poetry refers to the manifold manifestation of his memory lane. He desires to ponder his observations of the natural entities, his simplicity in recollecting his emotions in tranquillity and his experience in fusing the varied intuitions of his life. His "Poem in October" refers to the fragrance that the month of October brings to him. It provides him a platform to concentrate on his past, be joyous in his present and be creative in his future. It symbolizes pleasure and fidelity. He receives an extensive mosaic from the nearby ecology. The poet also sets out to explore the town and the woods, the earth and heaven, the farm and shore, the country and the hill and so on. The poem begins with his "thirtieth year to heaven" (Thomas 1) when he hears the musical roar from the priestly shore. The water, the boats, and the wall witness his birthday and set to celebrate his life amid nature's bounty. His birthday begins with the water. The birds and the horses express their joy for this enlightened day. When he writes: "And walked abroad in a shower of all my days" (Thomas 16) he reflects the tranquil state of his joyous years. The words like 'border'(18), 'gates' (19) and 'closed' (20) specify his present state of oblivion. The clouds and the bushes, the rain and the wind, the blackbirds and the sun cover his mind with relentless thoughts and emotions. The October sun and 'the rainy autumn' (15) stabilize his mind with hope and enlightenment. He here refers to the town Laugharne, which was sleeping still. In an interview, Thomas exclaims: "strangest town in Wales" with the philosophy of "it will be the same in a hundred years time" (Interview).

In the Introduction, Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone write: "Memory in common use is tied to the individual..."(8). Further, they say: "memory as concept, rather than as given phenomenon- has been increasingly significant over the last couple of decades" (4). The different entities of nature trigger Thomas's memory

of the place. His nostalgic self drowns in memory of his mother. The subtle rain, 'the sea deluged Church', and 'the brown castle' (Thomas 34) commemorate his childhood epoch. The spring and the summer garden arouse his psychological self to a rhythmic state. The brown colour of the castle symbolizes natural landscape and oblivion. The first four stanzas talk about the cheerful and optimistic country that regulates the mind of the poet. On his birthday he wakes up at the call of the forestland and sets out towards the 'still sleeping town' (Thomas 10). It refers to the invariable beauty and wonder of Laugharne that deserves one's appreciation and acknowledgement. The word 'year' refers to the time frame and the word 'heaven' suggests his gradual experience as a man of elegance and a poet of expression. The morning marks the ray of hope and satisfaction with which he moves to see the town of Laugharne. The October sun specifies the poet's longing to live longer with an abiding joy. The different time slots bring in a perfect amalgamation of celebration and remembrance. The 'winged' (12) trees signify spirituality and transcendence and the 'white' (13) horses symbolizes purity and tranquillity of the horizon. The tides of the rainy autumn correspond to the force with which he caters to the past years of his life.

Szpunar, Watson and Dermott write that memory gets itself involved in: "recollecting the past" (642) and 'envisioning the future' (642) or at other times in the traits of characters. They also regard memory to be a "mental phenomenon" (642). The apple and pears in "Poem in October" appear to be the parameters of his childhood days. The 'red currants' (Thomas 45) satisfy his quest to discover his infancy anew. Klein also says in 'On the Emergence of Memory': "If history is objective in the coldest,hardest sense of the word, memory is subjective in the warmest, most inviting senses of that word" (Klein 130).In the words of Thomas memory helps him to reshape and remold his past. In the second part, Thomas notes the free-moving birds that invite him to the farms to become a part of the countryside.

The concluding two stanzas depict him as a man of similar texture during his infancy. His childhood, in fact begins with these woods, rivers and the sea. The place announces its generosity that proliferates his life and living. The phrase 'twice fold' symbolizes his visit to the countryside in the company of his mother. He defines himself then and now, where nature's appraisal is a constant phenomenon. Alongside this, the aspect of memory rationalizes his spirit as a poet. The place seems to be his 'heart's truth' (68). He sings the song of praise, wisdom and elegance for the space, especially on his birthdays.

Memory is an absolute experience. It connotes love and attachment. It acts as a source that comes from inside. However, remembrance is an independent factor. It has an abrupt form. Memory for Thomas is a process and remembrance is its component part. For Boyer, memory "serves to organize current behaviour" (3) which assists in acknowledging one's self-defined identity. In the essay "Creating a New Discipline of Memory Studies" Roediger and Wertsch define the subject of memory as

“a singular noun, as though memory is one thing or one type, when in actuality, the term is almost always most useful when accompanied by a modifier” (10).

William Wordsworth in his *The Prelude* writes: “Each man is a memory to himself”. Moreover, in Chapter 8 titled “A Journey through Memory”, Annette Kuhn writes that memory helps in 'making identities' (179). She also caters to the arena of personal memory that includes “remembered events” (179) of one's own life that bring together an ordeal, a revelation, perplexity and a voyage into the unfamiliar world. She also speaks about the products of personal memory that bind together the personal and the socio-cultural.

Assman writes that the focus of memory “is less on the recall of knowledge than on the reproducibility of feelings” (Assman 91). Thomas talks about a place that can be revisited. His poetry yields experience and identity. His poem “Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night” comments on the rage that death creates among the human folk. The poem begins with “Do not go gentle into that good night” which refers to the semiotic meaning of death. The poem is divided into six sections, each of which deals with a different tone of memory. His manifestation of varied human potential corresponds to the rhetorics of memory. He skilfully categorizes humans into four different kinds, viz. wise men, good men, wild men and grave men. He situates these types in plural form. The usage of two rhyming words ‘night’ is related to death and ‘light’ is related to life which also caters to his conceptualization of memory. In such an instance he remembers his father who was on his deathbed. The denotative meaning of old age seems to be all-powerful and poignant. The rightness of the wise, the brightness of the good, the grievance of the wild and the blindness of the grave mark the accompaniment of his thoughts and its representation. The poem highlights the pragmatic power of memory. The underlying concept of memory shifts from a statement to an utter expression. The mediation between the two brings in the evocative power of memory.

Aristotle writes: “memory relates to the past” (607). Further, he goes on to say that “Memory is, therefore, neither perception nor conception, but a state or affection of one of these, conditioned by lapse of time”. Thomas's memory here is more of affection than a mere consideration. The lines: “Rage, rage against the dying of the light” (Thomas 3) are repeated four times exploring his considerate approach toward death. Death for him is a mere reality. This has a universal configuration in itself.

Memory appears to be a natural phenomenon that overrules the concept of artificiality and credulity. The poet seems to be supplemented by his memories to frame his present and anticipate the future. Every poem is a memory intrinsically. It is always a purposive exhibition of values and morals. It can sometimes be regulatory in nature and form. Thomas's poetic imagination looms large within the discourse of memory. His poems decipher the dichotomy between continuity and suspension, conscious and sub-conscious, stillness and flexibility and so on. He registers himself in

inflicting his mind and his state of being. With the aspect of recollection, he eternalises his past.

His poems radiate his two selves viz. the public and the private sphere. The first poem explores the strong bond that he shares with his mother. It also gets sanctity when he refers to his birthday. The moment he ushers layers of truth about his infancy and childhood he epitomizes his mother and the way she nurtured him. His reference to Nature and his mother's nurture specify benevolence and inclination.

"Poem in October" appeared in the 1946 collection *Deaths and Entrances*. The poem abounds in reliability, autonomy and poetic excellence. This particular poem calls him a man of poetic craftsmanship who indulges himself in the spirit of re-association and resonance. His mother's presence tremendously affects his configuration with natural resources. He begins to fathom the past twenty-nine birthdays which he had spent as a part of an entity in nature. He remembers the time he spends with his mother which he can never forget in his lifetime. It is through his mother that he recalls his birth and infancy, childhood and memory and life and belongingness. His birthday falls on 27th October. The setting of the poem is Laugharne, which witnesses his growth and upbringing. He relishes his transformation from innocence to maturity. His survival as a child and his existence as a mature persona fill in the fundamental proximity in the poem.

His last volume of poetry titled *Country Sleep* published in 1952 contains the poem "Do not go Gentle into that Good Night". Here 'death' acts as a metaphor that identifies the poet's mental imbalance. His father's physical decay procures him to write this poem. His father was his guide and tutor. He becomes awestruck by the thought of losing his father. When he talks about the death of his father he directly refers to the element of 'sleep'. He holds the view that with the death of his father, the whole country will live in sleep. He here remembers the good and gentle time that he had spent with his father when he was all well. The poem's emotional emphasis makes it a villanelle. It is sickness and old age that define the reality of human life and not radiance and skill.

His poetic world is filled with absorption and exclusiveness. Both the poems converge to uncover his family life and natural sentiments. His urge for motherly love and his father's advice condition him to grow in nature and intellect respectively. He cherishes nature and its abiding force that helps him recall the aesthetics of realization, suffering and fulfillment. As a child, he seems to be engrossed with his parents so much so that his poetic diction radiates their energy and vigour. Their memory engulfs him with fortitude and strength. The memory of his parents strengthens his mind and consoles his soul. The nature of his poems is not conventional rather he adopts to stretch their involvement in the elements of his existence and survival.

This paper highlights how each word, thought, image and idea amounts to the power of recording and preserving the past, holding the present and relying on the

future. His self-observation and self-assessment become a core issue in the realm of evocation. Thomas here subjectively recounts his poetic imagination and creative undertone to locate his vision of memory. In both poems, Thomas concentrates on the vision of memory that accounts for every instance of his life and living. Memory helps him recount his structured life and uneven thoughts. It modulates him to counter the sad and painful circumstances of human life. In the first poem, he remembers his mother and in the second he recollects the memory of his father. Through both poems, he focuses on his grand and elevated way of regenerating his life's axioms. Urania Milevski and Lena Wetenkamp rightly say: "... literature, are being studied for their potential to represent the past in the present". Memory in Thomas's poetry plays a cognitive role in molding him to remember the past. It is the past that serves as a common semblance in both of his poems. His remembrance of his parents serves as one of the prominent devices in uncovering the memory lane. This recollection aids him to understand the value and meaning of human life. It acts as a source that illuminates his understanding of the varied sequences of time.

Thomas's poetic narrative appears to be a matter of personal recollection that combines his self with the different frames of time. Thomas's poems truly disseminate the aspect of writing that personifies the spirit that we generally get in the writings of the Renaissance humanists like Shakespeare, who talks about immortalizing the memory of fair youth through his poetic essence by the manner in time. One of the most noted German philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer renounces the power of writing: "This is like nothing else that has come down to us from the past" (Gadamer 145). Similarly, Dylan Thomas also endorses to immortalize his parent's memory along with the memory of various exigencies of nature. He wishes to sing in praise of the cosmos and announce his awareness of his conscious poetic persona. The spirit with which he writes rationalizes with his congenial mind, sublime thoughts and grounded psychological belief. "Poem in October" categorizes time in the form of the morning majesty and midday grandeur. He here skilfully compares his childhood with the ideal beauty of nature and his adulthood with the cosmic greatness of nature. He dedicates this autumn month which is his birth month to his genitors. Being inspired by his mother who died in 1958 he becomes a storyteller. She was a woman of amazing personality. During his childhood, he was a very delicate child. His birthday helps him to restore his mother's unconditional support to lead a pleasant life. It is always in response to the country landscape that he refers to his mother. Moreover, the last lines of his poem "Do not Go Gentle into that Good Night" mark the profundity and the indomitable spirit of death. The poem expresses his lament and grief over the aging of his father who is nearly approaching death. His father David John Thomas died on 16th December 1952. His father's love of literature inspires him to learn the English language. He dedicates his poem "Do not Go Gentle into that Good Night" to his father's last day's struggle.

Further, Horace is of the view: "Memory and imagination are so closely linked that imagination can only use what memory has to offer her, ..." (21). Further, Aristotle is of the view that memory "relates to the past". He also claims: "Memory is, therefore, neither perception nor conception, but a state or affection of one of these, conditioned by lapse of time". Moreover, in one of the Odes Horace writes that poetry is the best medium for planting memory. Classical writers like Aristotle and Horace opt for a superior range of time in recycling images and objects from the past. Both poems explore the elements of rejuvenation and adjustment.

As far as Thomas is concerned, each word that has been used is of greater orientation to visualize memory. Memory for Thomas performs as a stimulus to his thoughts and imagination. The selected poems here talk about family values that symbolize the element of togetherness and cohesion by merely referring to his mother and father in "Poem in October" and "Do not go Gentle into that Good Night" respectively. His past is a constant phenomenon that overflows with both ceremonial and generational insinuation. The implication of birthday and that of nearing death elucidate childhood recompense and matured inevitabilities. The different parts of a day act as a compatible device to strengthen his unified relationship with the past. He also caters to a consolidated equilibrium between his mother's contiguity and his father's exhaustion. His poems offer an amalgamation of his idealized existence and solitary survival. His poems thematically analyze his childhood struggles and manhood exploration.

Michelle Lowrie in "Spleen and the Momentum: Memory in Horace and Baudelaire" argues for a "kind of poetic memory" in Horace's first lyric collection "Odes 3,30" that offers a triumph of the past events in ushering his present. Further, S. Thom calls memory the "very basis for all human development". Nevertheless, his poems are autobiographical in nature. His intellectual and literary responses mark the basis of his poetic style and narrative content. He seems to be a 20th century extended romantic who projects human emotions, societal configuration and life values. His organic poetry offers a catalogue of spontaneous categorization of natural sentiments and intuitive formation of prophecies. Dylan Thomas is a man of expression and a poet of excellence. He intends to resuscitate multitudes of his personal exposures and individual empathy. His subjective response alludes him to be circumstantial.

Moreover, Andre Bago writes: "Reading a poem is like reading a poet and, in turn, everything that has touched him". He also remarks that "Poem in October" is an "immersive experience, transformed when read in situ at the Dylan Thomas walk which overlooks Laugharne". Further, the Dylan Thomas Society considers the Swansea-born poet and author, Dylan Thomas as one of the "most influential figures in literature in Wales and the world". The Chairman of the society Geoff Haden shares his vision "to restore its position as the pre-eminent source of information about

Dylan, his life, his work and his family". Further, he describes Thomas as the 'man of words'.

His love and gratitude situate the enduring beauty and abiding novelty of the town. The clouds and the bushes sing in praise of the poet. They greet him in the woods. The soothing wind illumines the poet's mind and thoughts. It was a pleasant panorama altogether. The cold wind and the rhythmic rain mark the beauty of the horizon. The wood seems to be the constant companion of the poet. The blue altered sky persuades him to recollect his childhood provocation. He here remembers his mother. His childhood tears and wandering mind make noise amid trees, stones and fish. The blue clouds and the green chapel marvel his special day with-love, peace and satisfaction. The magnificent thoughts, the added emotions and the accuracy of phrases contribute to the reshaping of his memories. He is accustomed to the basic psychology of remembrance and its validation. His personification of memory helps him to recreate his past events and episodes. Memory acts as a mechanism to situate his association with time, place and representation. It also acts as an invocation to locate one's cultural proliferation and individual amalgamation of private and public self.

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