

The Concept of Life and Death in the Poems of Dylan Thomas

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Abstract:

The English poet Dylan Thomas, regarded as a genius, is famous for his metaphorical imagery. His poems often discuss the three themes of life, death, and desire. In them, his views on life and death are contradictory yet mutually integrated. This paper explores the fantasy world of life and death constructed by Dylan Thomas by studying a series of symbolic images in his poems. It also aims to sort out the framework of the poet's general view of life and death by combining the social background of the time and the poet's religious background. The poet acknowledges the objective existence of death but does not merely produce fear. He believes that death cannot end everything. From a religious perspective, he believes that death must be followed by new life, which reduces the prestige of death to a certain extent. The poet even despises death. The opposition between life and death and the cycle of life and death are two parallel views in Dylan Thomas's cognitive world. On top of life and death, another greater cosmic force runs life and death — ruthless nature itself. Death is the return from organic matter to inorganic matter, from consciousness to unconsciousness. In the face of this view, death is only a necessary way back to nature.

Keywords: Dylan Thomas; metaphor; irrationality; concepts of life and death

1. Introduction

Born in Swansea, South Wales, Dylan Thomas was one of the most influential poets in the British poetry scene of the 20th century. His poems often focus on the three themes of life, death, and desire. Influenced by the Irish religious background, Dylan Thomas's poems frequently use surrealism, divinism, and other symbolic imagery. These images are often contradictory and interrelated; they follow one after another endlessly, forming a romantic style with strong, irrational characteristics. This style broke the situation of rational writing led by Auden and Eliot at that time, injecting new vitality into the faintly rigid British poetry scene of that era. The uncertainty and ambiguity brought about by metaphor amplify poetry's aesthetic tension and expand poetry's imagination space. Because only a very small number of people can use and create surreal metaphors flexibly, Dylan Thomas is known as a genius poet.

Dylan Thomas's irrational poetic style is a rebellion against the rational trend that has been rampant since the eighteenth century. His poetic creation is based on the poet's passion and vitality, and the images he creates are all personal to Dylan Thomas. He almost roars and infuses all his emotions into the poems, adding his fantasies to the world ruled by reason. This distinct personal color allows us to see in his poems a very exuberant primitive

life force, which comes entirely from human instinct and explores the unfathomable subconscious in the human spiritual world. In composing poetry, Dylan Thomas is torn between dream and reality, between the unconscious and the conscious, blurring the boundaries between the two, thus giving birth to poetry of genius.

Dylan Thomas's perception of life and death has always been one of the most popular views in the academic community. This paper integrates the research views on the concept of life and death with different opinions, especially from the metaphorical imagery to explore the author's inner world. It systematically sorts out the structure and framework of the poet's inner world of life and death. Moreover, the origin of this contradictory and integrated concept is due to the religious influence of the poet's birthplace and the people's inner turmoil brought about by the political tide of the world at that time.

His concept of life and death is contained in these symbolic images. From the Freudian psychoanalytic point of view, his meditation on life and death in the poem, "Instinct is a strong desire inherent in organic life, which tries to restore to its earlier state what life has given up under the pressure of external disturbances." "When the poet avoids death, he has a vague life instinct to chase death, and he instinctively fears death but is also close to death. The poet knows the objective existence of death but does not just produce fear because he knows that death cannot end

everything; from the perspective of religion, he believes that death must be followed by new life, which reduces the prestige of death to a certain extent, and the poet even despises death. The opposition between life and death and the cycle of life and death are two parallel views in the cognitive world of Dylan Thomas, and on top of life and death, there is another greater cosmic force running life and death, that is, the ruthless nature itself, and death is the return from organic matter to inorganic matter, from conscious to unconscious. In the face of this view, death is only a necessary way back to nature.

This article intends to analyze Dylan Thomas's concept of life and death from the perspective of multiple images of metaphors to help readers see the world of life and death through the eyes of Dylan Thomas more clearly.

2. Inevitable Death: Life Versus Death.

Dylan Thomas' poems often consist of a great deal of symbolic imagery, and metaphor is the creation of new meanings by violating the customary use of words[1], an organized violence against everyday language, which systematically deviates from everyday language and enhances its infectiousness. By the vagueness and uncertainty of metaphor itself, it can expand the reader's and the poet's imagination and add to the tension of language. He often uses this device in his poems to conceal the deep meaning behind his poems by creating one after another associative surrealist or divine imagery. The charm of metaphor lies in the fact that readers can never know 100% the true meaning of Dylan Thomas's creation, nor can they say that they truly understand the poem, and the world of the poem becomes incomprehensible and infinite because of the existence of metaphors. This infinity inspires the reader to delve into the world created by Dylan Thomas over and over again.

Dylan Thomas's poems often involve two themes: life and death, such as „The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower,“ „The Almanac of Time,“ and „In the Beginning.“ These two themes are both related but also opposite. During the creation, the poet uses irrational emotions to break through the constraints of reason. He uses great linguistic tension to depict his contemplation of life and death. Moreover, the poems contain a variety of symbolic imagery that makes the reader feel dizzy to read. Moreover, this concept of life and death seems to be shrouded by another larger object, nature, and there seems to be a kind of indifference that can be called rationality above the wave of irrational emotions[2], showing the contradictory and complex concept of life and death of Dylan Thomas.

Humanity's deep contemplation of life and death comes

from cognition, and when humans recognize death and therefore fear it, it is not surprising that these two themes recur in various famous works; after all, it is the starting point and focus of humanity, and the theme of death has always been a popular one for English poets[3]. Because they are not sure what kind of world they will go to after death and what kind of world they will come from before their birth, human beings often have many speculations and fantasies about life and death. Hamlet's „delayed“ behavior also has some fear factors. Many of Dylan Thomas's poems contain his fantasies about life and death, and he creates one image after another to show the abstract world of life and death in his mind.

Before death comes, his emotional attitude towards death is complex and contradictory. Dylan Thomas believes that life and death are confrontations, and death is the opposite of new life. He is afraid, angry, and hopeless about death. He resists death but at the same time knows that death is inevitable, and it is this concept of „death is always with him“ that makes him see the death of any living and vivid thing first. This pessimistic emotional tone is always hidden at the bottom of the poem. „I See the Boys of Summer“ is a poem that exemplifies his concept [4]. „Boy“ is the most energetic time in a man's life, when they are young and vigorous; during this period, they are proud and indulgent as if they have the whole world, and the most suitable season for this young segment is „summer,“ because „summer“ is also the most energetic season of the year. However, this vivid imagery is combined with „ruin,“ which has a despairing, dark emotional overtone and symbolizes „death.“ „in“ shows a slow process of change because the summer boys are moving towards death step by step, and no matter what lies ahead, their endpoint will be death. In this shadow of death, even „gold tithings“ are „barren“ because everything goes hand in hand with death.

According to Freud's psychoanalytic method, Under external pressure, organic life forms often have an instinct to revert to an inherent state of affairs that cannot be eliminated. This death instinct gives mankind a self-destructive tendency at its root[5]. Thus, Dylan Thomas appears to be saddened by the fact that death will eventually come, but at the same time, there is an uncontrollable inner instinct to want to be close to death, too long for it.

There is a great deal of surrealistic imagery in this poem. These images form an ‚anti-logical‘ combination that breaks with traditional imagery, such as the energy of ‚boys‘ and the desolation represented by ‚ruin,‘ the stark colors of ‚tithings‘ and the destructive ‚barren,‘ all conflicting and contradictory. The life force of the ‚boys“ and the ‚ruin“ symbolizing barrenness, the brightly colored ‚tithings“ and the dark ‚barren“ are all contradictory, but

they also exist at the same time. Therefore, life and death go hand in hand and coexist, and life itself grows together with death[6].

The poet believes that death is an objective existence and that no one can stop him. „A Chiming Quarter“ is the resting place of death, and „Season“ refers to all living beings. The result of a failed challenge is to fall into the silence of death. „Punctual as death,“ says that death comes punctually at the end of life and is never absent. In Dylan Thomas’s view, death is inevitable. No matter how energetic and youthful he is when he is alive, it is only slowly moving towards the end of death. Then death will end everything and bring destruction to everything. These contradictory sensual imageries combine to create a grand picture of fate for the reader and feel the heaviness of death.

3. The Cycle of Life and Death: Death Brings New Life.

Moreover, from the second half of this poem, Dylan Thomas also believes that a new life follows death: life and death are cyclical. They alternate endlessly, so life and death are not static but fluid. Under this concept of the cycle of life and death, the objective existence of death is no longer so unbearable because, at the end of despair, there is still the joy of new life. Under this concept, the power of death is weakened to a certain extent. Death is no longer the supreme cold law of the world, and its threat is reduced, but it gives people the courage to denounce it and despise it. For example, Dylan Thomas wrote to his dying father, “Do not go gentle into that good night.”

For many people, the approach to death has a prudent meaning, and the ideal way to face it is a matter of disagreement[7], perhaps joyful, serious, or silent about its arrival. Humans, because of their limited lifespan, seem to have been ruled by death without being able to fight it, and in this respect, they are below death. On the other hand, Dylan Thomas chooses to defy death and fight it; he does not care if he will eventually lose; he cares about his attitude towards death.

When the author tells his father, who is critically ill, he is also telling himself and everyone that he should “rebuke angrily, angrily denounce the passing of light.” Facing the end of oneself with a ferocious attitude, humans must not be obedient like a lamb and silently let death come. Neither wise, kind, wild, nor serious people will face death gently. The poem uses vibrant imagery such as “lightning,” “sun,” “meteor,” and “bay” to describe the vitality of life. Even a dying old man like his father has to burn and roar before the “sunset” and bravely fight against death. This confrontation is not stupid because human beings now

will understand darkness and reason. They understand that human actions will not stop the pace of death, but the nobility of being human beings will not stop there and should intensify the fierce struggle against fate, not for life and death, but for their personality and pride. This view of death embodies the impact of finite human beings on the irresistible laws of nature, and Dylan Thomas is fighting death with his contempt.

From Dylan Thomas’s point of view, death is a journey to a noble feast, and this is heavily influenced by his Irish religious background, where in the Welsh tradition, the poet is somewhere between “man” and “God”[8]. He is slightly more than human, not dominated by the fear of death, instead denouncing it, but ultimately unable to reach the level of God, losing the final race to death.

Even if humans lose death, it does not mean they will never be able to return to the game. Dylan Thomas’s view of life and death does not stop there. For the poet, death is only an objectively existing process of life, which must be with all living beings, but the dignity of living beings lies in the fact that they do not completely prostrate at the feet of death, and death cannot end everything. Everything in the world alternates between life and death; there is death and new life, so the destructive power of death cannot prevent the arrival of new life, weakening the prestige of death. It cannot rule everything in the world. The song “And Death Shall Have No Dominion” proves that new life exists after death.

The poem’s title comes from the Bible, and the poem contains many metaphors about religious imagery, while Christianity believes in the soul’s immortality. They believe the dead can be resurrected and ushered in new life by receiving the final judgment after death [9]. That is to say, death is not the focus of life; it is closer to a transit station, connecting two lives. The front end is the present life, and the back is the new life.

The poem shows Dylan Thomas’s attitude towards the cycle of life and death. He despises death because “death shall have no dominion,” and the tendency of rebirth is unstoppable. The dead are “naked” after death, returning to the most primitive state of nature, and “in the wind and the west moon,” these natural creations become one family again, which involves the poet’s view of life and death and nature. However, no matter how death destroys everything so that “their bones are picked clean and the clean bones are gone” and “have stars at elbow and foot.” “Stars” symbolize eternal things; even after death, there are eternal things around our bodies, hinting at the next rebirth. “Shall” can see the author’s relentless attitude, and everything that is destroyed will “be sane” and “raise again,” that is, regain control of one’s consciousness and come to this world. Therefore, death cannot dominate the

world because it cannot prevent the arrival of new life, and everyone who dies will be reborn with another attitude. So, there is no need to fear death; there is something in the world that is harder and more eternal than death.

4. The Essence of Death: to Return to Nature

Whether it is the objective existence of death or the perspective of the cycle of life and death, the poet is passionate and enthusiastic. Whether it is to denounce the arrival of death with full emotions or to praise the existence of new life with joy, he fills the world of his poems with his irrational emotional tone. Above all these rampage chaotic emotions, there is a much larger thing, similar to the supreme cosmic law, that rules his world of life and death, which is the place of return for all and the starting point for all people.

In Dylan Thomas's view of death, there is a larger object that envelops his passion: nature. When the poet examines life and death, which have become a fact, on a higher level, he is calm because the essence of death is a return to nature, and this act is a world ritual that man must follow. Death is noble and commendable in this conception because the final creature decomposes into a part of nature and becomes an eternal being. For example, „Refuse to mourn for a child who died in a fire in London.“

The death of the child is „majesty and burning.“ The poet believes that returning to nature is the only way for human beings. Combined with the divine imagery in the poem, death may also mean „purity.“ After the body is destroyed, the soul ascends to a pure heaven and can see „Zion of the water bead and the synagogue of the ear of corn.“ This return ritual is solemn and heavy and does not allow „Elegy“ of innocence and youth. Desecration of „the stations of the breath“ and „After the first death, there is no other.“ Perhaps it is because, after the first death, human consciousness returns to the universe and subsequently remains in an „eternal“ state with any unconscious object, a state of neither life nor death. Changing from a „finite“ life to an „eternal“ part of nature is an awe-inspiring solemn ritual of soul ascension.

The religious imagery of „the round Zion of the water bead“ and „the synagogue of the ear of corn“ are, in fact, metaphors for a spiritual level of solace, and Dylan Thomas' refusal to mourn the child is, in fact, a rejection of the formal level of mourning. He believes it is more appropriate to mourn the child's death on a higher spiritual level, „Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath with any further Elegy of innocence and youth.“ This verse expresses the poet's strong protest against the superficial mourning rituals.

The essence of death is a return to nature. „Robed in the long friends,“ „Secret by the unmourning water of the riding Thames.“ All of this nature imagery suggests that the dead child has returned not only to nature but also to history, becoming a part of nature and history[10]. She is broken down from the whole into particles and reintegrated into the place where she was first born in a form that could be called „return.“ Because after the establishment of modern society, human beings have left nature to a certain extent, leaving their original hometown. It can be called a long journey away from home when they are alive. When the living beings arrive at the end of their life, they once again become unconscious and disembodied before birth and return to the nature that gave birth to everything, which is the real homecoming.

Judging from the imagery used throughout the poem, the poet gently mourns the child's death with a solemn attitude. He does not show the same sadness, anger, or hope for the arrival of new life as shown in the previous poems, but he looks at death calmly from beginning to end because death at this time is no longer just the end of the eve of new life. Dylan Thomas saw the nature of death on a higher level, as if he no longer had the joys and sorrows of the world, as if he had divinity, and saw the process of returning to the embrace of nature. Therefore, nature, the laws of the universe, occupy the highest peak at this time, and it is difficult to raise the thought of angry denunciation of death.

Indeed, Dylan Thomas was mourned by others in the way he wished to be mourned after his death, and in the eulogy, he melted into nature after his death, transforming into all the changes of the seasons, which was perhaps the outcome of his death that he was most satisfied with and most wished for.

5. Conclusion

Dylan Thomas uses the unique Welsh way of expression to build his writing style with extremely abundant, passionate, and fiery emotions. In those metaphors of divine or surrealistic imagery, he expresses his deep thoughts about the world, depicting a world of life and death with strong romanticism. This kind of expression is also very suitable to the background of the poet's time. The world of war, which was dominated by irrational will, crushed the concepts of fraternity and humanity that the West had always proclaimed, and under the horrors of this harsh world war, modernism was born. Dylan Thomas's anti-rational philosophy was also deeply influenced by the modernists. In such an inhumane world, he had to declare his feelings to the world with unstoppable and fierce language to express his feelings to the world, and Dylan Thomas's

anger, joy, disappointment, and calmness were all hidden in the metaphors of the imagery of his poems.

The two themes of life and death have always been the most solemn part of human society, especially during war. This sense of anxiety is more profound than in times of peace when Dylan Thomas once said that the world was like hell, and indeed, the irrational reality of the erasure of humanism was so heavy that people could not breathe. Perhaps the poet's extremely rich fantasies and rich perceptions become more intense in this harsh environment. Finally, he pours out all his emotions, depicting life and death in his heart with various sacred, surreal, and irrational imagery. At the same time, they are contradictory and interrelated, which coincides with the vague imagination of human beings about the unknown. However, due to the harsh social reality, he could not directly express his emotions to the world through sharp words. He could only use metaphors to create new images, burying the surging and magma-like fiery emotional waves under those contradictory and continuous images, blurring the boundary between reality and dreams.

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