

THE NIGHTMARE WORLD OF DYLAN THOMAS

by

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A THESIS

IN

ENGLISH

**Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of Texas Technological College
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
the Degree of**

MASTER OF ARTS

August, 1964

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No. 72
Cop. 2

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply indebted to Professor Hugh Pendexter III
for his direction of this thesis.

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THE NIGHTMARE WORLD OF DYLAN THOMAS

CHAPTER I

THE NIGHTMARE WORLD OF DYLAN THOMAS

Dylan Thomas, the man, can never be separated from Dylan Thomas, the poet, for the poet was intensely subjective and recorded the nightmare vision of life which drove the man to self-destruction. Thomas left a legacy of perhaps the most obscure and tortured poetry in the English language. He wrote about birth and death, the joys of childhood, nature, and religion. His poetic themes are familiar and as old as poetry, yet the nightmare world which he evokes is strange. It was created from his own morbid view of life--a view which seems to have resulted from the combination of his preoccupation with sex, and his puritan conscience; of his fear of death, and his inability to find religious faith.

Thomas' intense awareness of the presence of death in an individual, even before birth, causes him to long for religious faith. His attaining faith is complicated by his view of God and nature--both are seen as corrupted by sex, which Thomas fears. God, toward whom he yearns, is seen as a terrible fraud, and life, masking "Cadaver," is a nightmare.

The difficulties in understanding Thomas' work are many. He refuses to clarify his poems by giving them revealing titles. Neither does he give notes explaining

references to purely welsh allusions, such as geographical references and folklore. His early compressed poetry demands a reader prepared to leap unmarked chasms of ellipses. His later poetry requires a reader nimble enough to snatch a sentence's subject and verb out of a musical but unpunctuated maze of adjectives and parenthetical asides. At the same time, the mind must be relaxed to sense the associations and conjure up the visual images through which his poems move.

Thomas' use of paradox looms as a hurdle. Clearing such lines as: "Though they go mad they shall be sane," "Break in the sun till the sun breaks down," and "The womb drives in a death as life leaks out," requires lively perception. Understanding "Light breaks where no sun shines," requires an experience akin to the illumination Thomas discusses in the poem:

Light breaks where no sun shines;
 Where no sea runs, the water of the heart
 Push in their tides;
 And, broken ghosts with glow-worms in their heads,
 The things of light
 File through the flesh where no flesh decks the bones.¹

Thomas' insistence on multiple meanings adds to his poems' obscurity. This technique extends from his continuous punning, through his development of whole poems

¹Dylan Thomas, The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas (New York: New Directions, 1957). All subsequent quotations of poems by Dylan Thomas are from this source and will be identified in the text.

with dual or multiple meanings. Two or more trains of conscious thought may be developed in one poem, with an additional idea arising from the emotional implications of each train of thought. To these are added suggestions of sub-conscious desires, such as the return to the womb (indicative of a desire for security and renewal). Idea files beside and beneath idea--a poem by Thomas is a many-dimensional thing.

The reader must be prepared to interpret Thomas' poems on the basis of both conventional and private symbolism. One can only interpret Thomas' private symbols by reading his work with an open mind and by observing his use of unfamiliar symbols. The sea is a symbol of both death and the source of life. Salt symbolizes genesis in the sea, and suggests "sweat of the brow"--man's legacy from Adam. Wax is used as a symbol of dead flesh. Scissors and knives are symbols of birth because the birth-caul is cut open and the birth-cord cut. They also symbolize death because the thread of life is cut. Symbols from modern life, such as the electric light and the moving picture show, intermingle with symbols relating to Egyptian embalment, Christian symbols, and symbols from astronomy.

The very weirdness of Thomas' poems presents an obstacle to their understanding. One finds it difficult to participate in a poem such as "Before I knocked," in

which the narrator describes his prenatal life, his birth, and even his existence before his conception. When, well into the poem, one realizes that the speaker is Christ, participation is made no easier. Not only does Thomas have infants speak from the womb, he endows fetuses with a knowledge of the past and future, and with an understanding never achieved outside the womb.

Nightmarish images haunt Thomas' poems. The Creator is seen as a "taylor's master" who stuffs men with nerves instead of cotton. The grave is seen as running in pursuit of man. A man goes fishing and uses a girl with hooks through her lips as bait. Eternal Sexual Desire, in man-like form, crouches with Death under a pyre, waiting to snatch Thomas from life. Frightful bagpipe breasted women with "teats of music" are shown, along with a "fake gentleman" who is described as "black tongued and tipsy from salvation's bottle." On awaking, Thomas finds invisible coins, like those placed on the eyes of the dead, resting on his own eyes and telling a death knell.

Interpretations of poems based on such private symbols and such wild and unfamiliar imagery, must vary, and cannot be proved. The reader and critic can only participate as fully as possible in the poems themselves, and suggest explanations which seem to be in the spirit of the poem and which are indicated by the nature and the

technical habits of the poet.

One may question whether such obscure poetry merits the time and effort required to understand it. Certainly no key to the riddles of the universe is found from a study of Thomas' poetry. An increased understanding of the workings of the human mind, and of the tortures resulting from a mingled sexual and religious obsession, is found. A reading of Thomas' poetry unmasks the primitive hidden fears of mankind. His poetry is an artistic, psychological casebook.

Thomas' work, like his life, shows the weakness of genius when it has no working philosophy of life and no sustaining faith as a support. Thomas' genius is apparent, both from his technical achievement and from the depth of his narrow perception. His influence alone makes him worthy of consideration. Thomas' technique of using multiple allusions and multiple meanings has swept the poetry writing world. His influence can be seen in the poetry of the most talented young poets and in the labored verse found in the least of the little magazines.

The faults as well as the virtues of Thomas' poetry relate to his own suffering, and rise to the tragic. Both the artistry and the authenticity of Thomas' work make his poetry worth considering.

Thomas' poetry reveals that he was haunted by sexual and religious nightmares. Most of his poetry

involves both sexual and religious themes. Nevertheless, his poetry can be divided into inter-relating but fairly clear-cut categories. In this consideration of Thomas' poetry, Thomas' poems are divided into four "nightmares." "The Sexual Nightmare" discusses Thomas' tortured view of his own sex life and his weird sexual approach to religion and nature. "The Child-Parent Nightmare" discusses the nightmare of loneliness and misunderstanding between children and parents; it discusses Thomas' womb poems; and also discusses Thomas' fear of death and the religious conflicts which stem from Thomas' attitude toward his father's atheism. "The Nightmare of Death" discusses Thomas' horror of Death. It shows Thomas' varied rationalizations about death and his view of death as omnipresent. "The Religious Nightmare" shows Thomas' conflicting attitudes toward Christianity and his struggle for faith.

THE SEXUAL NIGHTMARE

CHAPTER II

THE SEXUAL NIGHTMARE

Thomas' preoccupation with sex extends throughout his poetic career, forming the primary subject of many poems and playing a part in almost every poem he wrote. Locker-room vulgarities lie side by side with elevated rhetoric. Thomas' highest religious flights are described in cadenced crudities.

While nothing is unmentionable, sexual terms are often clothed in images reflecting Thomas' particular viewpoint. The hymen is referred to as the "roped sea-hymen" ("I make this in a warring absence"). The female secretion is called "the maiden's slime" ("My world is pyramid"), "the horney milk" ("When, like a running grave"), and "the ready-made handy water" ("Once below a time"). The breasts are once described as "full of honey" ("In the White Giant's Thigh"), referring to their appeal to men, but are more often considered biologically--"the two milked crags" ("Find nest on bones"). The womb is directly referred to as "the womb." It is also called the "moon blown shell" ("Then was my neephyte") and "that town of ghosts" ("The seed-at-zero").

Among other terms, the male organ is called "a candle in the thigh" ("Light breaks where no sun shines"), "my naked fellow" ("All all and all the dry

worlds lever"), "cherry capped dangler" ("Once below a time"), "the bridal blade" ("All all and all the dry worlds lever"), and "the stick" ("When, like a running grave"). The erected male organ is referred to as "the lame flower bent like a beast" ("Not from this anger"). The male ejaculation is called "oil" ("All all and all the dry worlds lever"), "the plum" ("From love's first fever to her plague"), and "the swing of milk" ("My world is pyramid").

The sex act is described as "horning" ("My world is pyramid"), "seeded milling" ("All all and all the dry worlds lever"), and being "bounced in a gambo bed" ("In the White Giant's Thigh"). The Don Juan in "Into Her Lying Down Head," is said to have "rode and whistled a hundred times."

Although Thomas' poems contain terms which could be read with homosexual overtones, such as the word "fairy" in "I see the boys of summer," and "hermaphrodite" in "Then was my neophyte," these terms do not indicate perversion. Rather, they suggest the sexual indeterminacy of the fetus. Homosexuality was offensive to Thomas. "It is the only vice, I think, that revolts me."²

²Ralph Maud, Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1963), p. 26.

Thomas sees the sexual process as fundamental to the cycle of life and death. The sexual urge is always presented in relationship to this cycle and never in what is generally considered its normal atmosphere-- that of tenderness between man and woman. Thomas "skips into the land of love, like somebody else's garden and skips out again. And he is too good a poet to fake love. He doesn't feel it; he distrusts it; he doesn't believe it. He falls back on the love process, the assault, the defeat, the shame, the despair."³ An aura of fear, an awareness of the presence of sin, envelops the sexual urge. Thomas viewed the sexual act as a process of creation with a human creator. This view raises immediately the question whether God is necessarily present in human procreation or whether His presence is actually precluded by the sinful nature of the sexual act, which Thomas, nevertheless, hopes will somehow lead him to love in life and in the cosmos.

Thomas' view of sex is a nightmare because it poses questions which he finds fearful and unanswerable. Its horror is inescapable since Thomas views sex as

³Karl Shapiro, "Dylan Thomas" from In Defense of Ignorance (New York: Random House, 1960) pp. 171-186, quoted in John Malcolm Brinnin, A Casebook on Dylan Thomas (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1960), pp. 173, 174.

basic to all life. He sees sex in nature; as part of the Holy Ghost; and as existing for mankind even after death. Thomas' view of the sex act as united with death, intensifies his nightmare.

"I make this in a warring absence" discusses the cycle of birth, death, and reconception. Thomas' peculiarly weird vision of the sex act and of the cycle of life is illustrated in this poem. A nunny, speaking from the tomb, described the sex act in which Thomas was conceived:

'A lizard darting with black venom's thread
Doubled, to fork his back, through the lockjaw bed
And the breath-white, curtained mouth of seed.'
'See,' drummed the taut masks, 'how the dead ascend:
In the groin's endless coil a man is tangled.'

A detailed explication of six poems showing the range of Thomas' sexual themes, his characteristic viewpoints, and his use of language, follows. These poems are considered chronologically.

"My hero bares his nerves" is a poem which typifies many of Thomas' poetic habits. Its subject is an unlikely one--masturbation. The poem becomes clear when one realizes that Thomas refers to his own male organ as "my hero" and uses the phrase "the head" to refer to its summit. "My hero" is personified and this usage suggests the impersonality with which Thomas views even the normal sex act. This act is something performed by "my hero," and is largely unrelated to the sentiment

of love. Thomas always considers the sex act in relation to procreation, however, thus posing the question of the value of life and raising the question of man's immortality and the truth of Christianity.

In stanza one of "My hero bares his nerves," we are presented with the picture of Thomas, engaged in masturbation:

My hero bares his nerves along my wrist
That rules from wrist to shoulder,
Unpacks the head that, like a sleepy ghost,
Leans on my mortal ruler,
The proud spine spurning turn and twist.

In stanza two, Thomas sees a subject for poetry in this sex act. His "poor nerves ache on the love-lorn paper," and in his writing he "utters all love hunger" but can only "tell the page the empty ill." This sex act is an unfulfilling one which "bares his side" and "strips his loins of promise"--it is a barren act which can beget no children.

In the last stanza, the poem takes on larger implications:

He holds the wire from this box of nerves
Praising the mortal error
Of birth and death, the two sad knaves of thieves,
And the hunger's emperor;
He pulls the chain, the cistern moves.

In his sexual excitement, Thomas also experiences a religious ecstasy in which he praises birth and death, though he considers them an error. This is a basic conflict between Thomas' emotion and reasoning, typical of

the conflict seen throughout his poetry. He praises the "two sad knaves of thieves," suggesting the thieves who were crucified with Christ, and, mingling the mystic with the physical, suggesting the testicles. He praises the sex hunger and his own body although he considers life a "mortal error." The last line indicates the movement of his own body, and the flushing of an old-fashioned receptacle. This line is anticlimactic--as the onanist may feel after his vacant release. This anticlimactic sensation also relates to the religious emotions which were experienced with the sex act--the surge of praise becomes a void.

It is doubtful whether anyone could consider "My hero bares his nerves" a good poem. The tone seems mock-heroic and the final effect is ludicrous. It is interesting only in its revelation of Thomas' thought and poetic technique which are significant throughout his work.

"If I were tickled by the rub of love" succeeds in uniting the ludicrous and sublime to form one of Thomas' most typical early poems. It illustrates his sexual attraction-repulsion, and is an excellent example of his use of multiple meanings. In it he questions the value of life.⁴

⁴Elder Olsen, in The Poetry of Dylan Thomas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954) has an excellent discussion of this poem.

"Tickle" means amuse and rub. The "rub of love" refers to the sex act and to the joy of love (aside from sex). "Rub also indicates "flaw" in the same sense in which Hamlet said, "Ay, there's the rub." All these meanings are not intended each time the word "rub" is used. Rather, the poem develops until the "rub" (flaw) is discussed with a seemingly cynical laugh. Life is crowded with "rubs." The question is whether any of them can 'scratch a laughter from the lung' so that in enjoyment of the grisly joke, one can forget his fears.

A paraphrase of the poem follows: If I were tickled by the rub of the sex act, or having become an unborn child again, were tickled by the friction of birth, I would not fear "the apple, nor the flood, nor the bad blood of spring." "The apple" is symbolic of sin. It is noteworthy that Thomas habitually associates sin with sex and with death. Death represents the expulsion of seminal force. Death and dying involve a shrinking or detumescence, and life comes through such "dying." Sex is often viewed as a sin, and since sin is death, the words unite. Also, since sex causes birth, and birth is the beginning of a movement toward death, the words unite again. It is probable that Thomas considered the apple as symbolic of forbidden sex, which is one interpretation of the original sin. "The flood" suggests sex again (the male ejaculation and the female

secretion), and also suggests a Biblical flood of punishment. "The bad blood of spring" suggests the psychological misery and the physical weakness of adolescence. (Stanza one).

If I were tickled by a girl's pubic hair during the sex act, or by her unborn child during the sex act ("the itch of man upon the baby's thigh"); or, if I, as an unborn child, were tickled by the process of growth, I would not fear even execution or death in war. (Stanza two).

If I were tickled by the early sexual desires of adolescence, I would not fear "the devil in the loin / nor the outspoken grave"--sex (sin) and death. As in "My Hero," the sexual desire is referred to as "heat" and the "nerves" are also mentioned.

If I were sufficiently tickled by the sex act, even though it cannot erase age and illness, I would not fear time and age nor "the sea of scums" (the dangers of debauchery). (Stanza four).

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.
 An old man's shank one-narrowed with my bone,
 And all the herrings smelling in the sea,
 I sit and watch the worm beneath my nail
 Wearing the quick away.

Rather than conventional "love-madness," Thomas suffers a sexual desire that makes him "daft"--as daft as if he had been taking a narcotic which snakes out of a girl.

It is the drug, not the girl herself, that is responsible for the attraction. The girl is not beloved. She is given no individuality. She is simply "a girl"--any girl smoking with the opium of desirability. The drug curls up through her body, but is not part of her. It comes from the devil and curls around "the bud that forks her eye"--the branching veins of the eyeball. "Fork" suggests the devil's fork and the fork of the girl's loin reflected amid the smoke of hell-fire visible in her eye. These images strike out from her eye piercingly, perhaps seeming to pierce the eye itself.

As in "My hero bares his nerves" there is both a high sexual excitement and a repulsion. At the very moment that Thomas is "daft with the drug" he also feels "an old man's shank united with his own. "The sea" is suggestive of the source of life. Thomas uses it also as the source of death. Indeed, in Thomas the source of life and the source of death unite in sex. Sex, which brings life, creates that which must die. In this stanza he is aware of the stench of death in life. The sea, teeming with fish, is teeming with death. Also, as in "My Hero," the Christian allusions are significant. Christ's disciples were to be "fishers of men" (Mat. 4:19). The fish (men) are foul. They are rank with death, or sin. At the height of Thomas' desire he fears the impotency of age, fears the sin of the sex act, and is aware

of the stench of death in the very source of life. His reaction is to watch "the worm," symbolic of sex (because of the visual image of the male sex organ), and symbolic of death, present even in his fingernail, wearing his life away.

Thomas' tone now becomes satirical. Death's presence in the very source of life is "the rub." "The knobbly-ape" is another of Thomas' terms for the male sex organ. It also suggests the knobby-kneed youth who, swinging through life like the ape, his ancestor, can never "raise the midnight of a chuckle" (can never find anything that is really funny), from his conception and birth to his infant desire for his mother's breast, his later sexual desire, or his own death. One is reminded of the expression, "Everything that is important to a man happens in bed: his birth, the sex act, and his death." Thomas points out that none of these important events can "tickle" (amuse) one into forgetting his fears. (Stanza six).

The next stanza questions: What is the rub? Is it death? Is it the girl's mouth, which because sex is also sin and death, is a "thistle in the kiss?" Is it "my Jack of Christ born thorny on the tree?" Characteristically, both these phrases contain sexual overtones, "thistle" and "jack" each suggesting the male organ. Ralph Maud points out that this slang usage of "jack" is

common in England, "jack" providing the male counterpart to the hollow hive of the female. Of the possible primary implications of the word "Jack," the most likely one seems to be "knave." It echoes the phrase from "My Hero Bares His Nerves:" "the two sad knaves of thieves." Christ is seen as a deceiver, and perhaps as deceived himself. The tone is clearly contemptuous. Christ's passion is called to mind, without any hope of resurrection indicated:

My Jack of Christ born thorny on the tree?
My words of death are dryer than his stiff.

Thomas says that his poems, which are wounds (emotional wounds, sexual wounds, and spiritual wounds because they arouse religious doubts and call to his mind the wounds of Christ), are printed with the girl's pubic hair. In other words, his wounds, expressed in poetry, are marked by his sexual desire and his sexual fear. Thomas concludes that he would like to be tickled by "the rub that is"--he would like to be amused by life as it actually is. "Man [mortal man] be my metaphor."

It is obvious in this poem that those things which Thomas declares he would not fear "if he were tickled," are the very things that he does fear. He is wretchedly afraid of death and the outspoken grave; and of his sexual desire, "the devil in the loin." His nightmare is not only one of fear, and not only one of

horrible awareness of death in all life. It is complicated and made more weird by his own conflicting attitudes--what he fears, he desires; what he hopes for, he finds repellent.

"I Dreamed My Genesis" is another poem whose consideration of sex includes a discussion of life and death. In this poem Thomas is asleep and is having a dream. Sexually excited, he dreams about the sex act in which he was conceived. He experiences his entry as a sperm into the womb, and his fetal development. He describes his flesh as "filled / through all the irons in the grass." This suggests that he was formed from nature. His father's seed developed from earth's fruit. Thomas often describes man's union with nature pantheistically.

Thomas says that he inherited his own sex urge from his father as part of his heritage as a man. The impression is that he wishes to justify his sexual urges. A morbid view of his parents' sex life is implied, along with an immature blaming of his father for his own guilty emotions. His vision of his conception is anything but tender. It is rather a nightmare to be endured: he "breaks through the rotating shell," he is "shuffled / Off from the creasing flesh."

In his dream Thomas pre-experiences death in war,

and is resurrected. There is an ambiguity in his "second struggling from the grass." The implication is that in his dream he saw himself reborn as part of nature, and also envisioned his resurrection after death: "Rise of the skeleton and / Herobing of the naked ghost." Even his rebirth is nightmarish: "Manhood / Spat up from the resuffered pain."

In the last stanza, "sweat of sleep" becomes "sweat of death," which encompasses Thomas' desire for sex, his fear of it, and his fear of physical death. He hopes for union with nature and resurrection through Christ the light of the world--the sun and the son. He does not jeer as in "If I Were Tickled," but neither does he have faith. He only wishes for faith: "I seek the sun."

The reader feels that a guilt-ridden Thomas wrote this poem in a longing for catharsis. In it he confesses his nocturnal emission and his spiritual fears and doubts. He also attempts to probe poetically into the depths of the subconscious mind. Thomas himself stated, "Whatever is hidden should be made naked. To be stripped of darkness is to be clean, to strip of darkness is to make clean. Poetry, recording the stripping of the individual darkness, must inevitably cast light upon what has been hidden for too long and by so doing,

make clean the naked exposure."⁵

In "The tombstone told when she died," we see still another form of sexual nightmare. Thomas, as a fetus, is shown as having the extraordinary perception characteristic of the unborn in Thomas' poems. Through his mother's womb ("the looking glass shell"), he sees the tombstone of a dead girl. He then experiences a vision of her death. Death (personified) brutally attacked her sexually:

She cried her white-dressed limbs were bare
And her red lips were kissed black.

The dead girl speaks through the chipped beak of the bird on her tombstone. She relates her final sexual yielding to death:

I died before bedtime came
But my womb was bellowing
And I felt with my bare fall
A blazing red harsh head tear up
And the dear floods of his hair.

In view of Thomas' habit of punning, the word "head" must be understood, as well as in its usual sense, as representing the male organ and as suggestive of the breaking of the hymen. In Thomas' nightmare world even death has sexual attributes. In a letter to Vernon Watkins, Thomas said, "I wanted the girl's terrible reaction to orgasmic [sic] death to be suddenly altered into

⁵New Verse, XI, (October, 1934), cited by Henry Treece, Dylan Thomas (London, 1956).

a kind of despairing love."⁶

"On the Marriage of a Virgin" seems to discuss the Virgin Mary's marriage to Joseph and her earlier immaculate conception, which Thomas views as caused by a sexual experience with the Holy Ghost.⁷ The "sun," the masculine principle in many fertility myths, also symbolizes the deity, who "leapt up the sky out of her thighs" after impregnating her. These lines may also be read as an anticipation of the birth and ascension of Christ, "sun" referring to the Son. This intermingling of terms and meanings is characteristic of Thomas, particularly in his consideration of God. The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are not three, but parts of one, all symbolized by the "sun." Mary was impregnated by the "sun" and gave birth to the "sun."

"And the shipyards of Galilee's footprints hide a navy of doves:" "Galilee's footprints" suggest the love of Christ and the path of Christ. "Doves" symbolize God's covenant with man since the dove brought the olive leaf to Noah, and since the Holy Ghost descended like a dove upon Christ at his baptism. "Doves" are also the birds of Venus, and symbolize venereal love. The uniting

⁶Dylan Thomas: Letters to Vernon Watkins, (London, 1956).

⁷The Explicator, Johnson, S. F., X, 27; Feb. 1952; Knieger, Bernard, XIX, 61; May 1961.

of fleshly and Godly love in one image is consistent with the theme of Mary's sexual relations with the Holy Ghost, and with Thomas' habitual usage. Venereal love is associated with creation and the love of God.

The "waking" in this poem occurs after Mary's marriage to Joseph. She recalls the "vibrations of the sun," and how her "lips caught the avalanche of the golden ghost"--her sexual experience with the Holy Ghost. This description is reminiscent of Zeus' impregnation of Danae in the form of a shower of gold. Now the Holy Ghost will no longer "desire on her deepsea pillow," for a man "sleeps where fire leapt down," and Mary learns the unrivalled happiness of uniting with a mortal:

For a man sleeps where fire leapt down
 And she learns through his arm
 That other sun,
 The jealous coursing of the unrivalled blood.

"On the Marriage of a Virgin," lends itself to dual interpretations, as do many of Thomas' poems. It is impossible to know whether, in his predilection for compression and multiple meanings, Thomas wrote the poem with dual interpretations in mind, or whether, in a rush of enthusiastic explication the critic reads meanings into the poem which were never intended. One can only say that if in an explication the metaphors can be consistently and logically interpreted throughout the poem, and are in keeping with Thomas' observed technical habits and philosophy, the explication is defensible.

This poem may be understood as a glorification of the natural and the physical, and as revealing Thomas' particular pantheistic view of life.⁸ He regarded all nature as having sexual attributes. In this poem, Pagan, natural, and Christian images mingle and are contrasted with physical human love. The solitary waking of a virgin is presented in erotic terms. The rising sun leaps "up the sky out of her thighs" and the morning light looks down upon her like a lover. The virgin, in her erotic imagination, experiences the love of the sun. Her bed is referred to as the place where she "married alone," since in this pantheistic view all things are interdependent and intermarried--there is no single existence.

After marriage the girl, having experienced intimate physical relations with a living man, is not aroused to desire by inanimate nature. Love for nature cannot rival marital love.

"In the White Giant's Thigh," representing along with "Elegy" Thomas' last work, was part of a projected four part poem, to be called "In Country Heaven." "In the White Giant's Thigh" and "In Country Sleep" were to each form one part of the poem in which God hears the

⁸Derek Stanford emphasizes Thomas' pantheistic view of life. See p. 120 for his discussion of "On the Marriage of a Virgin."

the end of the world and the dead calling to each other.

"In the White Giant's Thigh," is a fitting swan song for a poet who celebrates sex. Forsaking his rampant punning, Thomas speaks in the clear though verbose style of his later poetry. This poem again reveals his sexual view of nature and also his vision of mankind's eternal sexual desire.

In the poem as it may be logically interpreted out of its planned framework, the poet, rather than God, seems to hear the calling of the dead. The poet muses in the moonlit graveyard of "the white giant's thigh"--a landmark on a Welsh hill. He senses the yearning of the women buried there, for their "unconceived and immemorial sons." Women who died before they could bear children, are pictured as "longing still / To labor and love." These women plead from their graves for the "seed to flow"--both lusting, and longing for motherhood. Thomas pictures them in life as bouncing or shy--varied in personality, but each in a glow of youth and occupied with adolescent sexual experiments. These girls died young and so were barren--they "nothing bore, no mouth-ing babe to the veined hives / Hugged."

The near-human quality of nature and its sexuality is suggested in such images as "the conceiving moon," "throats where many rivers meet," and "the night's eternal curving act." Physical nature, overpowering in

its beauty, cries out for recognition.

Thomas evokes the sense of physical longing in these women and plants it in the fertile life of nature. He is then compelled toward them: "Now curlew cry me down to kiss the mouths of their dust," and "They hold me hard," he says. He wishes to learn from them a love that is "evergreen"--eternal.

Thomas' tortured view of his own sex life, and his weird sexual approach to religion and all nature, is seen in these representative sex poems. He is shown to be both desirous and fearful; filled with hunger and contempt; torn between hope and religious disbelief. His own sexual problems intermingle with his spiritual problems: Is death the only truth? Is man lost in sin? Is there an eternity even in nature? These are questions Thomas posed from within the framework of his own body:

I sent my creature scouting on the globe,
That globe itself of hair and bone
That, sewn to me by nerve and brain
Had stringed my flesh of matter to his rib.

("When once the twilight locks
no longer")

THE CHILD-PARENT NIGHTMARE

by [illegible]

CHAPTER III

THE CHILD-PARENT NIGHTMARE

To Dylan Thomas the child-parent relationship was a nightmare, haunted by bizarre images and specters of fear and misunderstanding. His early poems could have been composed in a maternity hospital. Thomas views the child from conception to birth, always in relation to the life-death cycle. The child in the womb ponders the pain and the significance of life. Thomas discusses the presence of death, even within the seed before its conception.

Thomas employs various imagery in describing birth and prenatal life. He calls the umbilical cord a "worm of ropes" ("If my head hurt a hair's foot"). The sperm, within the seminal fluid, taps on the womb with liquid hands ("Before I kneced"). The Creator, a "cloud perched tailors' master," snips out men, while birth itself is seen as an emergence "swift from a bursting sea" ("Once below a time"). The "summer children in their mothers . . . divide the night and day with fairy thumbs" ("I see the boys of summer"). Thomas considers the child's inheritance of genes from each parent:

Half of the fellow father as he doubles
His sea-sucked Adam in the hollow hulk,
Half of the fellow mother as she dabbles

To-morrow's diver in her horny milk.
 ("My World is Pyramid")

The fetus, "ducked in the twelve, disciple seas," foresees the future and has knowledge of pain and death. It suffers for mankind's never-to-be-realized ideals, and sees on a "tide-hoisted screen / Love's image till my heartbone breaks" ("Then was my neophyte"). In fact, Thomas imagines a complete physical and emotional development from conception to birth, or in his words, "from love's first fever to her plague . . . from the unfolding to the scissored caul" ("From love's first fever to her plague").

In Thomas' nightmare view, as revealed in "My world is pyramid," the sperm which are ejaculated but do not reach the ovum, are seen as "planted in the lost / and the unplanted ghost." The physical conception results in the physical child who must die. The sperm that are ejaculated but do not reach the ovum are seen as causing a ghostly conception, resulting in a "secret child"--the unconceived, unborn, who met death before conception.

In "The seed at zero," man who is dead, or man existing unformed in matter (the life-potential), is called the "seed at zero." This life-potential is shown as helpless to procreate mankind, but the life-potential which happens to exist in the sperm, does procreate mankind, storming the worm as in a military attack:

Man in seed, in seed-at-zero
 From the star-flanked fields of space,
 Thunders on the foreign town.

In "Then was my neophyte," Thomas imagines his own fetal life and pictures himself as a "child in the white blood on its knees," in a "moon-blown shell." There, he sees the turning of time. Christ promises life to Thomas, calling Thomas the "green unborn and undead," but Thomas, the fetus, knows that Christ's promises are false, foreseeing the futility of life and the soul's death: "I saw time murder me."

"Before I knocked" is one of Thomas' most typical, and yet one of his least obscure poems. It is typical because the speaker is not introduced to the reader in a clear manner; because the action of the poem, shown in retrospect, takes place in the womb; and because it uses some of Thomas' most persistent images. The syntax and language of this poem are conventional--the only difficulty lies in the reader's need to understand that the speaker in the poem is Christ.

In this poem, Christ speaks of his prenatal life. He says that before his conception he was "brother to Mnetha's daughter / and sister to the fathering worm." As Elder Olson points out, Mnetha is a character in Blake's Tiriel, but there is no real particularity in the allusion.⁹

⁹Blake, William, "Tiriel" The Complete Writings of Wm. Blake, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (New York: Random House Inc., 1957).

It only seems to indicate that Jesus was formless and had both every and no relation to everything and everybody. The "fathering worm" is a sex image--one of Thomas' favorites--referring to the male organ. It also refers to death--we are bred by an act of death (sex), only to die and be eaten by the only all-powerful entity (all-powerful equating father)--the "worm." The "fathering worm," in relation to Christ, resuggests Thomas' peculiar view of Mary's sexual relationship with the Holy Ghost.

While in the womb, Christ was aware of physical life outside the womb. "Ungotten I knew night and day." He had foreknowledge of his destiny on earth--a destiny so certain that it was inscribed in his flesh:

And flesh was snipped to cross the lines
Of gallow crosses on the liver
And brambles in the wringing brains.

The Creator who tailor-like cuts men to measure, is suggested in the phrase "and flesh was snipped." Thomas' persistent tailor-Creator imagery calls to mind Swift's Tale of a Tub in which a clothesmaking deity sits tailor-fashion on a table and says that the universe is a "large suit of clothes." Carlyle used this tailor-Creator image in Sartor Resartus, in which he considered the body of man as only the clothing of the God-spirit in him, and the physical world as the clothing of the God-spirit in the universe.¹⁰ This view is similar to Thomas' view as

¹⁰John Wilson Bowyer and John Lee Brooks, The

shown in his pantheistic poems, and suggests Carlyle's influence on Thomas--an influence which has gone unobserved.

Christ, while in the womb, experienced emotions and physical cravings and was aware of death. He had the same marvelous powers that Thomas imagines all the unborn to possess:

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

Christ is called a "mortal ghost." He was, in another of Thomas' much-used images, "struck down by death's feather." "Death's feather" may suggest the winged death angel, and the elusive ebbing away of the spirit at death. It also calls to mind the old custom of holding a feather near the face of the deceased to determine whether or not there is a stirring of breath. The feather, used to determine the presence of death, becomes one (in Thomas' image) with death itself.

In the final stanza the Christian is asked to remember Christ, the mortal part of the Trinity, and to pity God, who used a man's flesh "for armour," thus cheating and deceiving Mary:

You who bow down at cross and altar
Remember me and pity Him
Who took my flesh and bone for armour
And doublecrossed my mother's womb.

This poem contains Thomas' characteristic Christian belief mingled with contempt for basic Christian theology. Thomas' compassion and tenderness for Christ is clearly illustrated in the lines:

As yet ungoten, I did suffer:
The rack of dreams my lily bones
Did twist into a living cipher.

God is seen as a super-human figure--a Zeus--who is guilty of rape. Christians' bowing reverently to such an act, is seen as ridiculous, yet Thomas feels a "pity" for the super-man (God) who "doublecrossed" Mary's womb.

Many of Thomas' womb poems are of a more personal nature. In them he imagines his own pre-natal life or that of his children. "A saint about to fall" was written in anticipation of the birth of his first child. It is not spoken from the womb, but is addressed to the child in the womb. In a letter to Vernon Watkins, Thomas said, "Remember this is a poem written to a child about to be born--you know I'm going to be a father in January-- & telling it what a world it will see, what horrors and hells. The last four lines of the poem, especially the last but two, may seem ragged, but I've altered the rhythm purposely; 'you so gentle' must be very soft and gentle, and the last line must roar. It's an optimistic, taking-everything, poem. The two most important words are 'Cry joy.'¹¹ These last four lines, which Thomas

¹¹ Dylan Thomas: Letters to Vernon Watkins, p. 45.

discusses in his letter, are:

Ory joy that this witchlike midwife second
 Bullies into rough seas you so gentle
 And makes with a flick of the thumb and sun
 A thundering bullring of your silent
 And girl-circled island.

Thomas' style in this poem is a combination of his later use of long, involved sentences (which he uses in this poem to describe earth and heaven's reaction to the forthcoming birth), and his early compressed, vigorous style (used to exhort the unborn to certain actions). Even though Thomas considered this an optimistic poem, it contains such nightmarish images as: "Glory cracked like a flea;" "The sweet, fish-gilled boats bringing blood / Lurched through a scuttled sea / With a hold of leeches and straws;" and "the horrid / Woe drip from the dishrag hands."

"A saint about to fall" was sent to Vernon Watkins on October 14, 1938, before Llewelyn Thomas' birth on February 1, 1939. "If my head hurt a hair's foot" was sent to Vernon Watkins on March 3, 1939. Dylan Thomas' habit was to work for months on each poem. Therefore, it is possible that "If my head hurt a hair's foot" was begun before Llewelyn's birth. It was certainly completed after his birth, however, and takes into account the birth-pains of the mother, whereas "A saint about to fall" is entirely concerned with the child.

"If my head hurt a hair's foot" is a conversation

between a mother and her unborn child. With unusual politeness toward the reader, Thomas condescends to use quotation marks. Therefore, one can clearly determine when the speaker changes. In this poem the unborn child (with unchildlike selflessness) says that if his birth will cause his mother pain, he would rather not be born:

If my bunched, monkey coming is cruel
Rage me back to the making house. My hand unravel
When you sew the deep door.

The mother replies that she would not unmake her child even "for Christ's dazzling bed / Or a nacreous sleep." She tells her child that "to escape, there is none, none, none" and, consistent with Thomas' view of birth as re-birth, that "The grain that hurries this way from the rim of the grave / Has a voice and a house, and there and here you must cough and cry." The mother is calmly philosophical, aware both of the joy and pain of life:

The grave and my calm body are shut to your
Coming as stone,
And the endless beginning of prodigies
Suffers open.

The last line of the poem originally read, "And the endless tremendous beginning suffers open." Thomas revised the line, calling it false. He agreed with Vernon Watkins that the second person (the mother) speaks better than the first, but was unable to revise it and in his own words had to "leave it unsuccessful."¹²

¹² Dylan Thomas: Letters to Vernon Watkins, p. 60.

The problems of life and death, and of good and evil, are considered in another poem for Llewelyn--"This Side of Truth." Llewelyn is six years old at the time of this poem, and it does not deal with birth. It is rather the speech of a disillusioned father to his son who is "This side of the truth . . . In the blinding country of youth," and cannot see that "all is undone." In this poem Thomas sees life as preordered. He sees good and evil as "crying through you and me / And the souls of all men." This good and evil, the innocence and guilt in each man, "Is cast before you move." The position of man is that of a rational being in an irrational universe. Man's existence is not justified in terms of higher values, and man is seen to face, not a Judgement Day, but the Last Day of Non Judgement.¹³ Ending the poem with confidence in the love of God, Thomas says:

And all your deeds and words,
Each truth, each lie,
Die in unjudging love.

Among Thomas' many poems showing child and parent, the father-image poems occurs in each of the three periods of Thomas' life as an author.¹³ The poem from the early period is "Find meat on bones" (1936); from the middle period, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" (1951); from the last period, "Elegy" (1953). "Elegy" was the last poem that Thomas wrote. It was made ready for

¹³Maud, p. 112.

publication by Vernon Watkins, from Thomas' manuscript.

Thomas himself said that "Do Not Go Gentle" and "Elegy" were written about his father. There is little doubt that "Find meat on bones" was also to his father. The emotional tone of "find meat on bones" as well as the actual situation of the doubting, rebellious father, is basically the same in all three poems.

One does not have to be an initiate of Freudian psychology to see Thomas' tremendous emotional involvement with his father. The very fact that Mr. David Thomas was, or at least had been, an atheist, explains Thomas' tormented emotional attitude toward his father. Thomas spent his poetic life trying to resolve his own religious doubts. Throughout his career, poems of doubt and poems of faith are side by side. Even in the same poem, images of despair and hope lie together. ("Poem in October" is one example of this).

Thomas once told John Malcolm Brinin that his aim was to produce "poems in praise of God's world by a man who doesn't believe in God."¹⁴ This explains the conflict in Thomas' poetry. It also explains Thomas' emotional conflict in regard to his father.

"Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night" was written for David Thomas at a time when Dylan did not think

¹⁴John Malcolm Brinin, Dylan Thomas in America (New York: Viking Press, 1955), p. 123.

his father had long to live. It is interesting that when Thomas showed the poem to Brinin in July of 1951, he remarked that he had not read the poem to his father but "he hoped he would have the courage to read it to him very soon."¹⁵

Mr. Thomas had been a schoolmaster and much of Dylan's education was the result of his father's tutelage. Mr. Thomas, in his youth, had an unrealized ambition as a poet. Brinin noticed that when visiting Mr. Thomas with Dylan, "none of us--especially Dylan--could break through the formal father-and-son relationship to say freely and unguardedly just what he meant."¹⁶

Compared to the body of Thomas' work, these three father-image poems, even the early "Find meat on bones," are remarkably clear. "Find meat on bones" is a dialogue. It bears Thomas' stamp of obscurity in single images, but the substance of the poem is plain. In stanzas one and two the father speaks. In stanzas three and four the son replies. In stanza five the son mentally evaluates the conversation and ends with a silent plea to his father.

The father tells his son to live merrily with the ladies "before the ladies breasts are hags." He urges his son to rebel:

¹⁵Ibid., p. 125.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 112.

'Rebel against the binding moon
 And the parliament of sky,
 The kingcrafts of the wicked sea,
 Autocracy of night and day,
 Dictatorship of sun.

"Binding moon" refers to the social convention which binds certain acts to certain times, or seasons of the moon: we are expected to have certain experiences at certain seasons of life, just as the tide is drawn at certain phases of the moon. "Parliament of sky" refers to supposed regulations of our actions by the laws of God. "Kingcrafts of the wicked sea" refers to regulations on the act that causes birth--sexual mores. ¹ (In Thomas' poems "sea" frequently refers to birth because of Thomas' association of the sea with birth water, and also because of the theory that all life came from the sea.) "Autocracy of night and day" refers to regulations made by man as to what things may be done at what times, and "dictatorship of sun" refers to laws supposedly made by God. "Sun" refers to divinely ordained order, such as the movements of the planets. "Sun" also has overtones of "son," meaning the Son of God.

The father urges that the son rebel, not only against convention, but also against inevitable decay and death:

Rebel against the flesh and bone,
 The word of the blood, the wily skin,
 And the maggot no man can slay.'

It is obvious that no one can overcome physical death.

Both the son and father in the poem are aware of this. What the father is saying is that the son should live for today; live a longer span of sexual pleasure than is expected. He should rebel against conventions and in doing so, rebel against the meaninglessness of human life.

The son replies that he has no more hunger for such pleasure; that he is already withered from such loveless sexual experience. He says that inevitable death itself ("the maggot no man can kill"), along with the immortality of man ("the man no rope can hang"), revolts against his father's idea of life, and that he cannot kill the beauty and grace of life or smother his belief in immortality by adopting his father's philosophy:

I cannot murder, like a fool,
Season and sunshine, grace and girl,
Nor can I smother the sweet waking.'

In the last stanza the son hears the voice of fate. The voice says that the night, the sky, the sea, continue in their ways. The voice of the sea (both literal and symbolic of birth or rebirth) tells him that "Light and dark are no enemies / But one companion." In the paradox of birth and death, there is a unity.

In his mind, the son hears the father again declare "war on the destiny of man," and silently prays to his father, "before death takes you, O take back this."

"Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night" is a perfect villanelle. It is a plea from son to father that he

not soften as he nears death; that he not allow the fighting, rebellious spirit which dominated his life, to weaken in the face of death. There is a contrast in the son's early attitude in "Find meat on bones," when the son is looking far ahead to the time of his father's death, and in the attitude Thomas has when the father's death is actually close. Early he had prayed that the father change: "Before death takes you, O take back this." Now he begs that the father not change. The plea of "O take back this," becomes "rage, rage against the dying of the light." Dylan Thomas knows that his father's unsoftened attitude in death would wound him (Dylan), but it would also bless him because the father would be strong on his "sad height." The father's remaining loyal to his life-long philosophy would be admirable. "Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray," Thomas pleads.

"Elegy," written after the actual death of David Thomas is an even clearer poem than "Do Not Go Gentle." It is an interestingly arranged poem of three-line stanzas with the lines rhymed in quatrains. This gives the unity of quatrain rhymes while presenting stanzas of enclosed rhymes, varied by stanzas with no visual rhyme.

"Find Meat On Bones" and "Do Not Go Gentle" both anticipate the father's death. "Elegy" faces his death after it has occurred, and attempts to explain the contradiction that the father posed for Thomas. In this poem

Thomas returns to the use of paradox. He uses this device in "Find meat on bones" but abandons it in "Do Not Go Gentle." "Do Not Go Gentle," being a straightforward poetic plea, does not call for this device. The other two poems describe a paradoxical situation and thus call for the use of paradox.

The paradoxes of "Elegy" are clear because the symbols are conventional symbols, used frequently throughout the history of English poetry. "Darkness" symbolizes death; "light" symbolizes life and rebirth into eternity. The paradoxes themselves are among Thomas' clearest lines, for example: "Too proud to die; broken and blind he died," and "Too proud to cry, too frail to check the tears." There is also less clipped but perhaps more significant paradox in Thomas' final understanding of his father:

Being innocent, he dreaded that he died
 Hating his God, but what he was was plain:
 An old kind man brave in his burning pride.

The poem can be read richly on this level alone. However, to the reader who is acquainted with Thomas' work as a whole, the poem contains both symbols and ambiguous use of words, which are characteristic of Thomas. He prays that his father "lie lightly," which refers to attaining enlightenment as well as resting easily. "Lie lost" means to hold belief while dead in the atheism (lie) of his earthly life, as well as to rest among the

dead or the damned. "The rivers of the dead veined his poor hand" is reminiscent of many of Thomas' lines which picture the presence of death in all that lives.

"Roots of the sea" not only refers to the sea of death which Thomas sees in the old man's eyes, but also, in accordance with his customary usage, refers to the sea of birth. In this case, "roots of the sea" refers to birth into immortality.

Thomas' view of the sexuality of all nature is illustrated in "he longed for his mother's breast," and "I prayed in the crouching room." "Breast" refers to the earth to which the old man returns in death, and suggests a longing for childhood security. "The crouching room" suggests the womb. Thomas is in "the crouching room" because he is not yet born into eternity. His father is in "the crouching room," about to be pushed from the womb-darkness of mortal life into eternity. "Crouching room" also refers to the room of life in which we crouch in fear, and obviously, to the literal room in which the family crouched by the bedside.

"Wound" is one of Thomas' most frequently used symbols. "Wounds . . . stand for a number of things: the pain of life, the heart, the navel wound, the sexual parts and the sexual act, Christ, the effects of Time."¹⁷ "His secret wound" has overtones of all these meanings

¹⁷Olson, p. 8.

and also refers to the father's concealed pain, both his physical pain and the emotional pain of finding no solution to the meaning of man's life. His emotional wound is secret because the father did not admit that his own ideas wounded him.

The importance of David Thomas' religious attitude to Dylan's search for religious faith is revealed in the lines:

I am not too proud to cry that He and he
Will never go out of my mind.

The fact that Thomas was still influenced by his father's atheism, is implied, along with the obvious meaning of his carrying with him both the thought of Christ and his father's memory. In the line, "an old blind man is with me where I go," the word "blind" refers (as in all other instances) not only to David Thomas' physical blindness, but also to the blindness of death and to spiritual blindness.

In these three poems we find the development of a son's thought from his first painful rejection of his father's philosophy, through his later feeling of love and respect for his father as an individual, and through his final evaluation of his father.

The curse and blessing that Thomas asks for in "Do Not Go Gentle," seems to have come to pass. He is blessed with respect for the "narrow, proud man," but cursed with the picture of his father's dying without

having found salvation, and also cursed with inheriting his father's doubts. The father was dead. The conflict still existed: "Until I die he will not leave my side."

In "I see the boys of summer," Thomas enlarges the discussion of his particular child-parent relationship and discusses relations between the generations in more general terms. In the first section of this poem, Thomas, as an observer, sees mankind waste spirit. By producing nothing of value, man "freezes the soils." Thomas uses a term normally used to signify vigor and wholesomeness--"summer." But he sees the "boys of summer in their ruin" [*italics mine*]. These boys symbolize a certain type of human being and are also representatives of modern civilization. Thomas etches them for the reader in a series of paradoxes: the "pulse of summer is in the ice;" they "lame the air;" they "sour honey." Equated to Jack Frost, they are mischievous, but their playfulness is destructive: "the jacks of frost they finger in the hives."

In the phrase "jacks of frost," Thomas employs multiple meanings. "Jack" can simply mean boy, or as Hopkins used it in referring to his "jack-self," can mean the work-a-day, unaware self. "Jack" again suggests knavery and again refers to the male organ. This meaning is emphasized, as Maud points out, by the visual image of icicles, called to mind by the phrase "jacks of frost."

The boys bring their girls "frozen loves." "The jacks of frost they finger in the hives" suggests wanton sex acts, as well as various mischievous plunderings.

In pilfering the hive, the jacks-of-frost feed only their nerves:

There in the sun the frigid threads
Of doubt and dark they feed their nerves.

Thus we have an image of helpless self-destruction.

Thomas sees that the boys' ruin was begun in the womb, where even as they began life they were so distinct from ideal humanity that they might have been changlings. He observes that these boys are destined to superficiality-- as shallow-rooted as plants too often moved:

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

The boys fear the heat of genuine feeling and in their doldrum living the pulse of "love and light" cannot be expressed, but bursts in their throats.

In the second section the boys of summer defend their actions. With beautiful images of the old medieval bell ringers who rang the hours, the boys insist that the quarters and seasons of life (the expected pattern) must be challenged:

But seasons must be challenged or they tetter
Into a chiming quarter
Where, punctual as death, we ring the stars.

The boys call themselves "the dark deniers," and declare that they must summon from "the fair dead who flush the

sea / the bright-eyed worm on Davy's lamp." The word "flush" must be considered in multiple meanings: the dead clean the sea, flow through the sea, animate or thrill the sea, and heat it (as with a flush of fever). This use unifies the poem by connecting this section with the first one ("boiling honey," "pulse of summer in the ice").

Green with corrosion as well as with sea-weed, the summer boys stop ("hold up") the purposeful turning of the world, and pathetically, in the midst of life, seek a wreath (symbol of triumph and of death). They nail the "merry squires to the trees," crucifying with hollow mockery the spirit of love and joy. They "break a kiss in no love's quarry." The word "break" is apt with the word "quarry" since one hazard of quarrying marble is breakage. The poles of promise in the boys are as beautiful and as fragile as marble columns.

In the third section Thomas is first an observer. Then he identifies himself with both the sons and fathers-- he becomes both a sire and a "son of flint and pitch." The word "flint" is also connected with mining and suggests a hidden strength or hardness. It strikes a slightly optimistic note, as though the humanity in mankind might be hard enough to survive. The image of "the poles" becomes that of magnetic poles and we see in this image the unity of opposites--the disparity and unity of the

generations. We also see the visual image of the Christian cross--the symbol of unifying love: "O see the poles are kissing as they cross."

The desired human development and increased understanding between fathers and sons is thus seen magnetically united in Christian hope ("poles of promise"), and in futility ("man in his maggot's barren").¹⁸ The generations, while feeling affection for each other, are still at odds. This is indeed as much unity as Thomas was able to achieve with his own father ("that most unhappy of all men I have ever met"),¹⁹ and with his own children ("He always ate alone, apart from the children, and even went so far, like a respectable Victorian father, as not travelling in the same carriage with them.")¹⁹

Though Thomas' bizarre womb imagery did not persist throughout his career, the nightmare of religious fear and fear of death (that violent birth into eternity), as well as the nightmare of loneliness, and of

¹⁸Maud, pp. 165-166, points out William Blake's influence on Thomas. In "The fields from Islington to Marylebone" are the lines:

He [Satan] withered up the Human Form
by laws of sacrifice for Sin,
Till it became a Mortal Worm,
But O! translucent all within.

Maud says, "For a portrayal of man literally in his maggot, see Blake's frontispiece 'What is Man' to 'The Gates of Paradise'. This is reproduced in the Everyman edition of Blake, p. 292, a volume that the young Dylan almost certainly had access to."

¹⁹Caitlin Thomas, Leftover Life to Kill, (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown and Co., 1957), pp. 52, 55.

misunderstanding between child and parent, was with him
to the end.

THE NIGHTMARE OF DEATH

CHAPTER IV

THE NIGHTMARE OF DEATH

Thomas views death as omnipresent and as the ultimate reality. A sensitive, but not a deeply philosophical man by nature, Thomas considers the subject of death because of his personal fear. He fears death as a leap into the dark and as the ending of his physical life. Physical death, exemplified as the end of his sexual life, is a nightmare. Thomas considers death both from a Christian viewpoint and from a pantheistic viewpoint. He also imagines death as a sexual experience.

Thomas conjures death in the form of a man intent on sexual conquest, and in the form of a seductive woman, intent on luring him to the funeral pyre. He sees sexual waste as death-in-life, the sex act as a death deterrent, and sexual love as a manifestation of Divine Love. He views the sex act as a relief from the nightmare of imminent death, and sees eternity as accessible through procreation. Yet he also sees the sex act as a sin and an instrument of death.

Thomas sees death as final; as rebirth into eternity; and as rebirth into nature. He considers the destructive force of death as inherent in the life-giving force. Death permeates all life.

Just as sexual and religious images mingle through-

out Thomas' poetry, images of death infect even his optimistic statements. In "Poem on his Birthday," a poem declaring his increasing faith as he moves toward death, his thirty-five years are seen as bells that "sing struck / On skull and scar where his loves lie wrecked." Curlews "work at their ways to death;" "finches fly . . . on a seising sky;" and Thomas "sings toward anguish."

Grotesque death images stalk the pages of Thomas' poetry. In "Our eunuch dreams," the dead arise: "The shades of girls, all flavoured from their shrouds, / When sunlight goes are sundered from the worms." Thomas sees "the quick and dead / Move like two ghosts before the eye" ("A process in the weather of the heart"). He hears "through dead men's drums, the riddled lads, / Strewing their bowels from a hill of bones" ("My world is pyramid"), and observes that "a worm tells summer better than the clock, / The slug's a living calendar of days" ("Here in this spring"). He imagines "Death instrumental, / Splitting the long eye open," and the "corkscrew grave centered in navel and nipple" ("I, in my intricate image"). He visualizes death as coming "like a scissors stalking, tailor age" ("When like a running grave"), and in "Grief thief of time," conjures death in weird movie images:

Now Jack my fathers let the time-faced crook,
Death flashing from his sleeve,

With swag of bubbles in a seedy sack
 Sneak down the stallion grave,
 Bull's-eye the outlaw through a eunuch crack
 And free the twin-boxed grief.

"I in my intricate image," is a strange meditation on death. In it Thomas sees Cadaver, the hidden corpse in all flesh, as the "master of man."²⁰

In "When, like a running grave," Death is seen as the supreme conquerer, and sex as the only pleasure. Time is shown as a hunter tracking game, and also as a runner on a cinder track who, on completion of his course, shapes an oval--the zero standing for the nothingness of death.²¹ Even the blowing of the wind infects everything with death, like germs spread by a coughing man:

the unwholesome wind
 With whistler's cough contages, time on track
 Shapes in a cinder death.

"When once the twilight locks no longer" contains some of Thomas' most macabre images:

Some dead undid their bushy jaws,
 And bags of blood let out their flies.

It recalls "I dreamed my genesis" by suggesting nocturnal emissions: "To rob me of my fluids in his heart," and "He drowned his father's magic in a dream." "When once the twilight" (like "Our Eunuch Dreams" and "I See the Boys of summer"), discusses sexual waste. This sexual waste becomes the symbol for all the waste of youth in

²⁰Olson, p. 36.

²¹Ibid., p. 57.

the land of dreams--day dreams, night dreams, or even movies. Sexual waste, symbolizing all waste, is equivalent to death in life.²² Thomas concludes that life must be lived vigorously, since "all but the briskest riders [are] thrown."

The tomb is seen as giving up its dead to the "tides of time." Employing the word "tides" to introduce sea imagery, Thomas pantheistically observes that "sleep rolls mute above the beds / Where fishes' food is fed the shades / Who periscope through flowers to the sky."

In "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London," Thomas is deeply and powerfully moved. He does not participate in the child's pain. Rather, he considers the child's death in its relation to the whole universe, seeing her death as significant to man and nature throughout time. She is seen as united with the first dead, "robed in the long friends, . . . the dark veins of her mother." Thomas foresees his own death as entering "again the round / Zion of the water bead / And the synagogue of the ear of corn." The round Zion is the static paradise to which man returns. By stressing circularity, the poet suggests other associations: the life cycle, a zero, the world in the water drop.²³ The poem's final statement applies equally to the child, to

²²See Maud's discussion, pp. 57-80.

²³Maud, p. 52.

Thomas, and to every man: "After the first death, there is no other.

"Ceremony after a Fire Raid," like "A Refusal to Mourn," is occasioned by the burning to death of a child when incendiary bombs were dropped. Even in this moving and tender poem, Thomas introduced his concept of sex and sin as united, and of sex as being the original sin. The child, the product of sex, is called "the serpent's / Night fall." Thomas considers elements of the Christian tradition as present in the infant brain, innate like archetypes of human thought:

I know not whether
 Adam or Eve, the adorned holy bullock
 Or the white ewe lamb
 Or the chosen virgin
 Laid in her snow
 On the altar of London,
 Was the first to die
 In the cinder of the little skull.

The child's death is discussed as if it were a kind of sacrificial rite, perhaps partially expiating the evil of the adult world. The child, although a sacrificial victim, celebrates its own sacrifice and is both "priests and servants / Word, singers, and tongue." The poem ends with a hymn or anthem after the performance of a rite--the blazing neighbourhood and the dawn combine in a song of praise.²⁴

The child's death, consistent with Thomas' view

²⁴Stanford, p. 98.

of death as rebirth, is a "genesis," and the child is one with man and his traditions ("Into the organ pipes and steeples"); one with destroyed civilization ("Into the weather cocks molten mouths"), and destroyed nature ("Into the bread in a wheatfield of flames"); one with the sacrificial wine of the Lord's Supper ("Into the wine burning like brandy"); and one with the source of life and death ("the infant-bearing sea"), is exhorted to "erupt," to "fountain, and enter . . . The sundering ultimate kingdom of genesis' thunder"--the last kingdom of beginning.

"And Death Shall Have no Dominion," Thomas' magnificent hymn, is a statement of faith. Whether this poem represents only the faith Thomas desires, or a brief but towering belief, it remains one of the great religious statements of man.

As is often the case in Thomas' work, rather than a logical progression of ideas, a theme is stated and repeated throughout the poem, varied only in that it is presented in varied images. In "Death Shall Have No Dominion," the theme is that man will not die. The poem, while religious, does not have to be read as Christian. It is compatible with almost all religions and contains indications of Thomas' pantheistic faith in eternity:

Though they be mad and dead as nails,
Heads of the characters hammer through daisies.

Although the images in this poem are sister images to Thomas' most bizarre fantasies, they rise above weirdness. Paradox, one of Thomas' preferred devices, is beautifully used. Biblical images prevail.²⁵ The poem is as incomprehensible as a Zen statement, as clear as the Sermon on the Mount:

And death shall have no dominion.
 Dead men naked they shall be one
 With the man in the wind and the west moon;
 When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones
 gone,
 They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
 Though they go mad they shall be sane,
 Though they sink through the sea they shall rise
 again;
 And death shall have no dominion.

"A Grief Ago" describes the sex act, and sees that act, for the girl, as a possible union with the dead and the unborn if she should conceive a child. The girl, "she who was who I hold," is the sex partner who is now remote, though physically close. Knowing Thomas' promiscuous habits, one is inclined to imagine the girl as a brief acquaintance, rather than as a loved one who is at the moment emotionally estranged. "A Grief Ago" takes place within a few moments after sexual union, but typically, Thomas' flashes back to genesis ("the leaden bud / Shot through the leaf"), and forward to the day of

²⁵See the 37th chapter of Ezekiel. For a comparison with Paul's Epistle, Corinthians 15, see Stanford, p. 75.

judgment ("before the suncock cast / Her bone to fire").²⁶

In the first stanza, the girl's motions during the sex act are described. The girl is shown to "cement" a "stem," "wrestle" up a "tower," rise "maid and male," and like a "masted venus," "sail" through the "paddler's bowl" and "up the sun."

In the second stanza, the girl is seen as present in nature as "a chrysalis" even in the time of Moses. She "Who is my grief . . . was folded on the rod the aaron / Rose cast to plague." The male sexual organ is suggested in "rod of aaron," and "rose," a symbol for the female, suggests sharon rose.

In stanza three, the lines "And she who lies, / Like exodus a chapter from the garden," use Old Testament imagery to denote the resting of the withdrawn couple after the sex act. The girl is identified with Eve, and the sex act identified with the first sin. On expelling man from Eden, God commanded him to go out and multiply, and at the same time decreed that man must die. The fact of imminent death seems to demand sexual love.

In stanza four, Thomas gives us the image of the grave, with countries for hands, boxing the girl into love. Thomas pleads that all her "whelps" be shaped "with the long voice of water" in order that she may

²⁶ See Maud for an excellent discussion of this poem, 80-92.

"rise before dark." Eternity is to be had through procreation.

Maud suggests that in the last stanza, the "nitric shape that leaps her" is Death, who is also the virile "suncock" and the herald of doomsday. Thomas prays that before her death and judgment she may "inhale her dead, through seed and solid / Draw in their seas"-- he prays that she may avoid final death by giving birth, which is again seen as a rebirth of the dead who have reunited with nature.

"Unluckily for a Death" reveals Thomas' feeling for physical love as related to immortality and as a deterrent to death. He visualizes three supernatural beings awaiting his demise. The beings are Death, Phoenix (symbolic of heavenly aspiration), and "the woman in shades," (symbolic of eternal desire). The woman is also called the "saint" and the "nun." These figures merge to some extent, just as for Thomas the Trinity merges in an unorthodox manner. Heavenly Aspiration and Eternal Desire are both attributes of death, and death itself. The phoenix and saint try to lure Thomas to death, but his living love holds him to life.

This poem is one of Thomas' most obscure, and is typical of his later technique in which the subject and verb may be separated by long descriptive phrases and unpunctuated asides. In this poem the first phrase,

"Unluckily for a death," is followed by fourteen descriptive lines, and the essentials of the sentence are completed sixteen lines later, although the whole sentence is much longer--two complete stanzas, or twenty-eight lines. Without the padding, Thomas' first two stanzas say: "Unluckily for a death, my holy lucky body is caught and held and kissed." This does not mean that the "padding" is insignificant. On the contrary, most of Thomas' viewpoint as well as his poetry is found in the explanatory phrases.

Death waits with phoenix "under / The pyre yet to be lighted of my sins and days." Eternal Desire is seen as "the woman in shades / Saint carved and sensual among the scudding dead and gone." The anticipated experience of dying is seen as a physical encounter with the woman, Eternal Desire: "the brawl of the kiss has not occurred . . . that could bind / Her constant."

This poem recalls "The Tombstone Told When She Died," in which death is envisioned as a male sexual attack. In "Unluckily for a Death," death is a woman--a seducer. In this poem, just as in real life, Thomas wavers between desire to live and desire to die. He clings to life, yet longs for death as for a lover, sighing "for the seducer's coming."

Sexual and religious images intermingle in this poem. The habitat of sexual desire after death is

described as "the choir and cloister / Of the winter nunnery of the order of lust." Sexual and Christian attributes combine in the person of the "woman in shades." Her function as symbolic of sexual desire after death is shown in the lines:

I see the wanting nun saint carved in a garb
Of shades, symbol of desire beyond my hours
And guilts, great crotch and giant
Contenance.

In addressing his earthly love, Thomas says that the "saint in shades" cannot lure him "while the endless breviary / turns of your prayed flesh." Thomas addresses his earthly love in a passage that has multiple sexual-Christian meanings, especially when the connotations of the word "wound,"--(See page 44), are understood:

. . . blessed by such heroic hosts in your every
Inch and glance that the wound
Is certain god, and the ceremony of sculs
Is celebrated there, and communion between suns.

This poem explains more clearly than any other, Thomas' attitude toward sex and procreation:

All love but for the full assemblage in flower
Of the living flesh is monstrous or immortal,
And the grave its daughters.

Thomas believes that heavenly aspiration and desire after death are possible only through experiencing physical love--the closest a human can come to experiencing Divine Love. Heavenly aspiration and desire after death "Both shall fail if I bow not to your blessing / Nor walk in the cool of your mortal garden / With immortality at my side

like Christ the sky." Thomas sees all life-potential (eternal and physical) as resulting from physical love:

O my true love, hold me.
In your every inch and glance is the globe of genesis
 spun,
And the living earth your sons.

To Thomas, the sex act is a deterrent to death. Yet death is seen as inherent in the sex act, making the pursuit of physical love a terrible necessity--a nightmare of death.

Suggestions of Thomas' pantheistic view of death are seen in many of his death poems. Death, the lover and death, the counterpart of sin, are rooted in nature. Poems of Christian faith bear pantheistic overtones. Perhaps the best and certainly the most anthologized of Thomas' poems revealing a pantheistic attitude, is "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower." This poem is an example of Thomas' best discipline and control.²⁷ It is typical of Thomas' technique, not in compression or in use of elipsis and long modifying phrases, but in its sound technique,²⁸ its use of multiple

²⁷ See Maud's discussion of this poem.

²⁸ The poem is loosely traditional--cadenced rather than metered. The lines are uniform in length, having equal syllable count. They are patterned as to sound. The poem does not rhyme, but employs a scheme of echoed vowels and consonants. For verses one, two and three, the pattern of echoed end-consonants sounds is: a,b,a,b,a. For verse four it is: a,a,b,a,b and the ending couplet depends on the g sound in tomb and worn. A refrain occurs at the beginning of line four in each stanza, and in the first line of the couplet.

meanings with allusions increasing as the poem develops, and in its method of developing an idea. In this poem, as in "Death Shall have no Dominion," Thomas states and repeats a theme, varying the poem through use of varied examples.²⁹

"The force that through the green fuse" is a "process poem." The critics label many of Thomas' poems "process poems," indicating poems dealing with the interplay of forces. Thomas is particularly concerned with the contending forces of growth and decay. He uses the technique of antithesis in "the force," to portray these contending forces. The poem's central idea is the unity of contrary forces. It discusses the life-death unity in different aspects of nature--animal, vegetable, and mineral. It calls attention to the lack of knowledge and inarticulateness of the poet and of humanity. It portrays the presence of death in everything living, seeing the role of destruction as vital. It has Christian significance while revealing a pantheistic interpretation of life.

Stanza one: Thomas expresses man's unity with plant life. He sees that the force that matures the flower, matures him (And matures everyman. In the poem

²⁹Other poems which state and repeat a theme are: "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines," "A Process in the Weather of the Heart," "Where Once the Waters of your Face," "In the Beginning," "Out of the Sighs."

Thomas is not only an individual, but represents humanity). The force that "blasts the roots of trees" also destroys him. He, like the rose, bends with age. Death is present in all life and is inherent in development.

The phrase, "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower," suggests the flower as an explosion at the top of a gun barrel or fuse of dynamite. The use of "blasts" to describe the blighting of tree roots, retains this explosive connotation. The use of the word "wintry" in line five, supplies another allusion to the word "blast"--that of winter wind or wintry blasts. "Blasts" also indicates corruption or disease, this meaning being enforced by the word "fever."

Stanza two: Thomas expresses man's unity with water. "The same force that "drives the water . . . drives my red blood." The force that dries the streams, dries the source of Thomas' life.

The "mouthing stream may be thought of as a stream being sucked into the sea, or into any large body of water. The same force that "drives the water through the rocks" sucks the stream dry. The creating and destroying forces are one.

And I am dumb to mouth into my veins
How at the mountain stream the same mouth sucks.

"Mouth" suggests tell, and refers to Thomas' mouth. He is dumb to mouth into himself the secret of the life-death process. The word "mouth" also retains the

earlier suggestion of sucking dry. Thomas is thus shown as one with the forces of destruction and creation.

"Mouth unto my veins" implies sucking at the veins. The stream of life, its vitality drained, is pulled toward the sea of death.

Stanza three: Thomas sees that the source of life (symbolized by water), and the source of death (symbolized by quicksand), are the same force. God, or a personification of force, controls life. A "hand," rather than an unformed force, "whirls" water, "stirs" quicksand, "ropes" the wind (suggesting Christ's calming of the storm), and "hauls" the shroud.

And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
How of my clay is made the hangman's line.

The "hanging man" ambiguously indicates both the executioner and the man who is being executed. It also implies the state of all man--man is in suspension, awaiting the answer to the problem of mankind's destiny. Thomas is dumb to tell the executioner, the executed, and mankind (all united in the "hanging man"), how his living flesh ("clay") is united with the force of destruction ("the hangman's line"--quickline, the receptor for dead flesh).

The reader's natural anticipation of the word line rather than line, should also be considered, thus drawing meaning from a word that is unsaid, but is expected and is implied by sound--man, line. This added

nuance emphasizes Thomas as one with instruments of destruction, symbolized by the unmentioned gallows rope.

Thomas sees that positive effects can come from negative action, and that both the positive and negative are inherent in "the force." The image of a hand whirling a pool prompts the idea of a whirlpool. Water is a symbol for life. A whirlpool suggests destruction. Thus, life and death unite. Quicksand is a symbol for destruction. Yet "quick" means alive, and "sand" calls to mind the sands of life and the dust from which God formed Adam and to which man returns. Destruction and life unite.

Stanza four: This stanza uses liquid imagery. We meet moisture on the second word, "lips." These lips "leech" to the "fountainhead." Liquid image continues in the phrase "love drips and gathers" and "fallen blood."

In this stanza Thomas employs sexual images which a reader unacquainted with the body of Thomas' work might overlook:

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
Shall calm her sores.

The "lips" suggest the female vulva, which "leech" (meaning both glasp and drain) the "fountainhead" (male organ). "Love drips and gathers" indicates both the female secretion and the male ejaculation. The "fallen blood" of man calms the leeching passion of time, just as the male

ejaculation calms the heat of the female.

There are "sores" on the "lips of time," sores suggesting the wounded ideal of mankind, the wounding of nature by man, and man's own physical, emotional, and spiritual wounds. These "sores" shall be calmed by "fallen blood"--the death of man. Through death the scab of man is removed from the abstract ideal of mankind; man's body returns to earth and feeds (restores) nature; and man's own wounds are "calmed" (stilled) by his own death.

Examined from a different angle, time appears as a leech, sucking the blood of man and making a sore wound. In medical philosophy of the past, loss of blood is considered beneficial. Thus the wound is beneficial--negative is positive. Time (the agent of destruction) ticks a heaven (eternal bliss) "round the stars." Again, negative is positive.

Christian symbols inspire images in this stanza and the doctrine of the fortunate fall is indicated.³⁰ Conventional Christian images in this stanza include "fountain head," "love," "fallen blood," "sores," and "heaven." "Fallen blood" suggests the shed blood of Christ, shed (fallen) for the remission of sin. "Fountain" suggests the fountain of Christ's redeeming blood;

³⁰ See "Incarnate Devil" and "Today this Insect" for other poems dealing with the fortunate fall.

God, the fountain of living waters; and / a fountain of spiritual grace communicated by the Holy Spirit. Thomas must have often heard William Cowper's hymn "Cleansing Fountain," ring from the Protestant churches of Wales. The hymn begins, "There is a fountain filled with blood," and declares that sinners plunged beneath the flood of Christ's cleansing blood, will "lose all their guilty stain." This redeeming "fallen blood" shall "cure" (restore or heal) the sores of time. Time is a concept introduced after the fall of Adam. Adam's fall was a wound on Eternal Time. Christ's blood shall restore Eternal Time by purging the fallen (fallen from grace) blood of Adam.

The image of the leech, in relation to the blood of Christ, indicates man's parasitic dependence on Divine Grace. Man like a leech (parasite), leeches (sucks) grace from God (the fountain of living waters). The word "leech" also means doctor, and recalls Thomas' pseudo-Christian phrase "all Glory's sawbones" ("Altarwise by owl-light," sonnet eight) used to describe Christ, the doctor of man, the restorer of paradise.

Refrain: Throughout the poem Thomas uses the refrain, "And I am dumb to tell." "Tell" suggests the telling of the Rosary beads--Thomas is dumb to pray. "Tell" means find out or decide. Thomas, as an individual, a poet, and representative of humanity, is dumb to decide

the final truth of the positive-negative life-death process. He is therefore dumb to tell (relate) the truth. The refrain, through its emphasis on lack of knowledge and inarticulateness (or inability to relate the truth), is a poignant one. The poet, a person dedicated to discovering and relating truth, is "dumb to tell."

Stanza five (the final couplet):

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

"Lover" suggests the lovers of humanity and all who love life--all mankind; it suggests Christ, the great lover of mankind; and it suggests a sexual partner.

The tone of the couplet is sorrowful. Although Thomas sees the positive in the negative, though he philosophically sees both Christian and pantheistic rebirth in death, still he is horrified by the knowledge that he, and all humanity, is mortal. Belief in the unity of the life-death force does not lessen his terror of death, nor alleviate the nightmarish presence of the worm.

At Thomas' sheet is the same worm found in the "lover's" (Christ's) tomb. Thomas will die as Christ died. His destiny lies in Christ's grave--in Christ's final death, or his resurrection.

The phrase "crooked worm" in the last line, echoes the phrase "crooked rose" in the first refrain,

giving the poem balance.³¹ Both phrases are sexual symbols, rose again equating the female genitals, and "worm" equating the male organ. The sex act includes both beauty, like the rose (positive) and destruction, like the worm (negative). The worm in the tomb symbolizes death. The worm at Thomas' sheet symbolizes sex. Yet they are "the same crooked worm:" sex equals sin equals death.

Thomas' poem celebrating dual processes, ends with this emphasis on death. His hope for eternal life lies, like a frail ghost, in the tomb of Christ. In spite of his concept of the life-death unity of nature, and of his concept of life as coming out of destruction, death remains omnipresent--the ultimate nightmare.

³¹See Stanford, p. 60, for a comparison of "The Force" with Blake's "The Sick Rose."

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THE RELIGIOUS NIGHTMARE

CHAPTER V

THE RELIGIOUS NIGHTMARE

Dylan Thomas is widely acclaimed as a religious poet. His poetry is always religious in the sense of searching for answers to man's eternal destiny and his relation to nature, God, and Christ. Thomas is concerned with sin, death, resurrection, and salvation, but creeds do not interest him, nor do the social aspects of Christianity. He never really considers how others think or feel. People exist only as objects of his own emotion. Any universal application of his poetry can be found only in the ways that his specific, subjective concerns may apply to every man.

In the note of his Collected Poems, Thomas says that his poems are "written for the love of Man and in praise of God, and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't." Nevertheless, neither God nor Man is present in his poetry. Only Dylan Thomas appears in Thomas' poetry. From within himself Thomas draws lust, fear, the dreaming unconscious, horror, and hope.

Thomas' poems contain neither humanism nor a sustained faith. Rather they unmask his self-laceration and his nightmares. Just as it is impossible to separate Thomas' poetry from the man, it is unrealistic to judge his religious conviction solely on the basis of those

isolated poems demonstrating faith. Both the life of the artist and his total religious philosophy as revealed in his work throughout his career, must be examined.

Henry Treece observes that the perfect poet must have that balance of intellect, emotion, experience, and technique which will make him a fully-developed man. "Dylan Thomas is extremely (and unconsciously) ill-balanced: yet in that unbalance lies much of his charm and most of his function as a 'Dog among the Fairies.'"³²

Whatever his charm, Thomas was unbalanced. He was totally undependable. He failed to pay bills, even when he had the money. He did such foolish things as steal shirts from friends in whose house he was a guest. Caitlin Thomas, his wife, describes him as having "Welsh hypochondrias" and says that "if there ever was a danger of his becoming 'whole,' which was very remote, he would crack another of his chicken bones, without delay . . ."

. . .³³ She describes his passion for lies as "congenital." "He would tell quite unnecessary ones, which did not in any way improve his situation: such as when he had been to one cinema, saying it was another, and making up the film that was on"³⁴ These are character-

³²Henry Treece, Dylan Thomas (London: Lindsay Drummond, Ltd., 1949), cited by Brinnin, Casebook, p. 108.

³³Caitlin Thomas, Leftover Life to Kill (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1957), p. 32.

³⁴Ibid., p. 32.

istics of a damaged brain and are often manifest in alcoholics.

In 1934, at the age of twenty, Thomas was suffering from tuberculosis, and is reported to have been given a matter of only a few months to live if he did not live quietly.³⁵ At that time he spat blood. Yet he pursued his dissipated way of life, deriving no real satisfaction from it. After a typically drunken week-end, Thomas "raised miserable eyes and said, 'O God, I'm so tired of sleeping with women I don't even like.'"³⁵ His conduct remained irresponsible, however, even after his marriage and parenthood.

Thomas killed himself. Already in wretched health, neither his stomach, liver, nor kidneys functioning properly, Thomas drowned himself in spirits. After spending years acquainting himself with intoxicants and their effects, Thomas deliberately drank a fatal amount of whiskey. On returning to his New York hotel after an absence of an hour and a half, he said, "I've had eighteen straight whiskies. I think that's the record."³⁶ It was indeed the last record. The next afternoon he went into delirium tremens and passed into a coma. The damage to his brain was so great that had he survived, he would

³⁵Raynew Heppenstall, Four Absentees (London: Barrie and Reckliff, 1960), p. 96.

³⁶Brinnin, Dylan Thomas in America, p. 272.

have been a permanent invalid, physically and mentally.

Something in Thomas' nature made him a destroyer. He is said to have had an instinct for drawing to him those persons most capable of being annihilated by him, and while he persisted in his Machiavellian role, it brought him neither pleasure nor security, but only further self-distrust and a deep sense of self-degradation. It may be that Thomas' sexual obsession was the root of his problems. During the last week of his life, before alcohol had completely destroyed him, he said, "I'm really afraid I'm going mad, there's something terribly wrong with my mind. Perhaps it's sex. Perhaps I'm not normal."³⁷

Perhaps Thomas' morbid sexual compulsion, at war with his basic Puritanism, destroyed him. Perhaps, although his problems began before his marriage, Thomas' marital discord drove him deeper into illness. Perhaps in his search for love, Thomas fell back on the tangible reality of the sex process. Perhaps he felt trapped by his own brilliance, which was not balanced by profundity or strength. It may be that he felt compelled to perpetuate the myth of the Enfant Terrible, or that he expected more of himself than it was possible for him to achieve. "I've always wanted to be my own psychiatrist, just as I've always wanted everybody to be their own

³⁷ Ibid., p. 260.

doctor and father," he said.³⁸ Perhaps he was merely trying to be clever. Caitlin Thomas writes, "There was in that frivolous age, a trivially crazy idea that it was clever to drink to extinction; and clever to be promiscuous to dulling the discrimination of the flesh. Which gave a mock glamour to these tawdry occupations; and people who did neither were considered unutterably drab and boring."³⁹

One may pose endless possibilities as to why Thomas was unbalanced. They remain hypotheses. What is plain is that Thomas was not a "religious man" in the normal sense of the phrase. He was brilliant, sick, and concerned with certain aspects of religion.

Thomas wavers between Christian belief and unbelief. He mocks and adores God. He believes in a Judgement Day, a Non-Judgement Day, and an absorption into nature. He sees life as meaningless and Christ's promises as a farce, yet he hopes for mercy through Christ.

Thomas' interest in religion, motivated by his fear of death, is narrow. He never looks beyond Christianity, never seriously examines other faiths. Nor does he delve deeply into Christian theology. His Biblical

³⁸ Ibid., p. 253.

³⁹ Caitlin Thomas, Not Quite Posthumous Letter to my Daughter (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1963), p. 10.

knowledge and Christian concepts are those that any English speaking Protestant has as a background. Thomas doubts and believes. He mocks and shows reverence. He blasphemes the judge, then throws himself on the mercy of the court. He exhibits no final hard-won faith, rather, a final hope that Christ is true and that salvation is freely granted because of His love.

Thomas' Christian concern is specifically a concern with salvation. The Christian way of life is scarcely mentioned in Thomas' poetry. Yet Thomas' narrow approach to Christianity encompasses a variety of approaches and emotional reactions. Thomas' preoccupation with Christian salvation, like his preoccupation with sex, plays a part in almost all his poetry. A number of poems have Christianity as their primary theme. The sampling of Thomas' poems considered here are selected to show his varied approaches and attitudes, and are given in chronological order.⁴⁰

Thomas' approaches range from straightforward discussion of a problem ("Why east wind chills"), to terrifying visions ("Altarwise by owl-light"), to lyrical celebration of Christ's love ("There Was a Savior"), to allegory ("Ballad of the Long-legged Bait"), to mystic experience ("Vision and Prayer"). Thomas' attitudes

⁴⁰For a chronology of composition, see Naud, pp. 121-148.

range from agnosticism to faith, from ridicule to mystic affirmation, from emphasis on self-purification to complete reliance on God's mercy.

"Why east wind chills," a beautifully constructed poem in assonance, reveals Thomas' agnostic attitude.

"Children" question why "silk is soft and the stone wounds," why both "rain" and the "breast's blood" quench thirst, and when death will come. Thomas says that there are no answers in this life. Such questions may be answered after death, or the answers may never be found. Man is told to "'Be content'" and "'Know no answer.'" Thomas vows that he knows "No answer to the children's cry." The tone of the poem is sad, but not bitter. Thomas seems humbled by the profundity of the universe. His agnostic statement is religious in its recognition of man's finite view of the infinite.

The "Alarwise by owl-light" sonnets are more Christian than agnostic, but they reveal Thomas' warring doubt and faith. In them he ridicules Christianity, yet hopes for Christ's mercy. These sonnets are a connected series of ten poems in loose sonnet form. They have been acclaimed as Thomas' best work and have also been condemned as a perverse and senseless jumble. Because of their obscurity, they command attention, holding the fascination of an intricate puzzle. Obscurity alone, however, cannot account for the gripping power of these poems,

whose images and sounds arouse an emotional response at first reading--long before they can be comprehended.

The "Altarwise" sonnets are perhaps the most difficult serious poetry ever written. Their difficulty lies in their unusual symbolism and in Thomas' use of multiple implications on almost every word. These sonnets are baroque in their complexity. They typify the best and the worst of Thomas' unique technique, both in sound patterns and in symbols, puns, and allusions. These sonnets also express the conflicts within Thomas' ideas and within Thomas' emotions.

The tone of the sonnets is that of fear. They relate a vision, but that vision is a nightmare. Belief and disbelief war. The poems include all the facets of Thomas' nightmare world: the sexual nightmare, the nightmare of death, and the nightmare of religion. They include the child-parent nightmare since there is a breach in the understanding between man and the father figure, and since Thomas' own child-parent problem in relation to atheism, is shown.

In the first sonnet, the "long-world's gentleman" from his half-way house, a limbo between heaven and earth, is concerned with the plight of mankind and appears to Thomas in a vision. The sonnet contains an underlying tone of mockery. Christ is referred to as "a dog among the fairies" who was "hatched" from an egg

fertilized by an "old cock." This tone of underlying ridicule and doubt rises and subsides alternately throughout the sonnets, expressing Thomas' search for Christian enlightenment, but also expressing the conflicting ridicule that he feels for Christianity.

In the second sonnet, the gentleman, whose speech begins with line thirteen of the first sonnet and continues through the eighth sonnet, tells Thomas that all physical life ends in death, but that even though man hangs over the pit of hell, he can find his way to heaven. Physical life is temporary. Sex, the "root" of sin, will perish with physical life. In this sonnet the surge of Thomas' doubt has subsided.

The third sonnet contains the gentleman's recounting of Christ's ministry and death. He says that because of Christ's death for men, he (the gentleman) was ripped from death and dipped like Christ in mankind. Only death seemed permanent, but the opposites of life and death were united by the resurrection of Christ. The promise of salvation chimed for mankind.

Thomas' thought swings toward doubt in this sonnet. Although this is a poem about the promise of salvation for men, such sneering phrases as "butt of the tree-tailed verna" and "horned down with skullfeet" indicate an underlying doubt, as does the use of "Rip Van Winkle" in reference to Christ.

The fourth sonnet begins with the gentleman's posing some apparently unanswerable questions. It is reminiscent of a form used frequently in sermons, when the preacher poses questions, then answers them. The gentleman indicates that Thomas may ask such questions as: What is the meaning of life and of the promise of salvation? How can salvation be possible when men are crooked and are blasphemers? These questions are deformities. All Thomas needs is faith. Love reflects Christ. After death, man is thrown back into the light of God.

This sonnet contains no sneering undertones to the affirmation of eternal life in Christ. Thomas' doubts are expressed in honest questions which the gentleman poses, then answers.

The fifth sonnet considers the Christian problem, picturing it as a wild West movie and a card game. "Two-gunned Gabriel" comes from the "windy West." Gabriel, when understood as the herald of good news and as the angel who announces salvation to the elect, is himself a symbol of salvation. Christ is also a symbol of salvation, and in this sense the image of Gabriel unites with the image of Christ. This is characteristic of Thomas. He often exhibits belief in the union with Christ and in the uniting of the divine element in mankind with Christ. Thomas' theology absorbs conventional

Christian ideas and adds a pantheistic overtone.

Throughout these sonnets Christ merges with other primary figures. Since these poems are presented as a vision or dream it is easy to understand how persons can merge. Such merging is a common dream-experience.

The use of "two-gunned" suggests the destruction Gabriel brings. The phrase is also a sneering expression. Two-gunned Pete usually refers to a pseudo-hero-- a silly fraud. The implication is that Christ and the Word are not divine, but a ridiculous fraud. This is only one example of the many sneering implications in this sonnet, which contains Thomas' most obvious ridicule of Christianity.

In this sonnet, the pattern of showing faith and veiled doubt is reversed: we find obvious doubt with a strong undertone of faith. In the last line, "And sirens singing from our lady's sea-straw," the wonderful promise of union with Christ is veiled with mocking images.

Christ, in agony on the cross, is shown as seeing death calling him. "Sirens" sing to him. They are the sea-sirens who woo men to their death. They also represent sensual pleasure. (In the Divine Comedy, Dante uses a Siren in "Purgatorio" as a symbol of the three sins that remain to be purged: avarice, gluttony, and lust.) The idea of Christ's experiencing the temptation of sex is basic in this poem, as is the idea of his slaying

earthy hungers, and as a sexless entity, unsexing mankind.

"Sea-straw" refers to the refuse of the sea, and to the manger straw. It also refers to Mary's pubic hair. (For other use of "straw" as a sex symbol, see "If I were tickled by the rub of love.")

Christ, in effect, becomes a siren himself, wooing mankind toward death with his promises to those who die in Him. Christ also merges with the "sea" (symbolic of birth and death), and with the "straw" (symbolic of sex, which for Thomas includes birth), because unless man is born again through Christ, he cannot be saved. From sexual desire man rises to de-sexing, or a depersonalized flowering through Christ. Uniting with Him is the climax of life.

Though this sonnet obviously reveals doubt and ridicule, the undertone of faith is also present. The use of sexual images should not be considered as derogatory in themselves. They are basic throughout Thomas' poetry.

In sonnet six, the long-world's gentleman says that Christ's crucifixion was harmless to him and to his message--both are divine. Christ removed the vengeful beliefs of the Mosaic Law. An eye for an eye does not apply since Christ took man's sins on himself. Christ, the light of the world, was a human sacrifice whose death, at the hands of sinful humanity, opened a path to Heaven

for mankind.

The flagrantly mocking tone of the fifth sonnet subsides, and the sixth sonnet overtly expresses faith. However, Thomas is still using little-boy-bad-words. "Lep, love, my fork tongue;" "pluck, cock, my sea eye;" "old cock from nowhere;" and "Adam, time's joker;" all express doubt and have a childishly impertinent sound.

In the seventh sonnet, Thomas does not express doubt or ridicule, but his expressions are anything but conventionally reverent. The Word is "the scarecrow word." The earlier mentioned "sirens" are "scaled sea-sawers." These women fix "time's turn" (destiny) in a "naked sponge." Christ is the "sponge." (He is destiny; He absorbs the sins of man; He was given a sponge of vinegar while on the cross; He was sponged after death.) Christ, the sponge, is an all-uniting image. The fearful ladies are instruments of destiny. The significance of Christ is a part of all human destiny and a part of the whole plan of divine destiny. Christ is the "sponge / Who sucks . . . Adam out of magic." He pulls man from the misunderstandings of magic and primitive religions into truth. God is seen as manifest in all creation. The pitiful handprints of Christ, marked with nailprints, are manifest in all creation, which without Him has no significance.

The eighth sonnet discusses the crucifixion. The

gentleman describes part of the crucifixion scene, showing its painfulness and describing Mary's grief. He declares that the crucifixion was divine destiny and that from Christ's death (his death, for the gentleman has now made himself completely known as Christ), came a new promise for mankind. He declares that he destroys death and unites with mankind, suffering "heaven's children" by his love.

The tone of mockery reappears in this sonnet in the phrases "Jack Christ" and "all glory's sawbones." These phrases, while suggesting disrespect, do not have the strong note of derision we have previously seen. This sonnet contains the last example of doubt or mockery in the "Altarwise" series. This sonnet also contains the last of Thomas' vision. Thomas was serious about his vision, but at the same time he doubted and mocked it. In the last two sonnets Thomas speaks in his own voice rather than quoting the gentleman. This accounts for the more straightforward tone found there.

The ninth sonnet employs imagery drawn from Egyptian burial. Thomas deploras errors and falsity in religious beliefs and deploras the lies, propounded by false scholars, which show Christ as dead or show him as an instrument of vengeance. Thomas prays in the last four lines to be buried in the earth which is a testament to the Trinity, along with all humanity. He wishes to be

buried wearing holy and precious stones gathered on his voyage in search of Christian enlightenment, as symbols of repentance and of victory.

The tenth sonnet begins with a prayer, continued from the last four lines of the ninth sonnet. Thomas prays that the gospel which he has recorded, be held away from falsehood in order that people who see his work will see the blown word of God in it and see the image of Christ's death and resurrection.

In lines seven through ten, he says: Let Peter inquire from Christ, what argument man has devised that has created a promise of eternity out of the cross. This indicates that only Christ can answer for man.

The remainder of the poem is a personal plea that Thomas may soar to an eternity united with Christ. Heaven is not merited, but Thomas prays that the mercy of God will make his nest there:

Green as beginning, let the garden diving
 Scar, with its two bark towers, to that Day
 When the worm builds with the gold straws of
 venom
 My nest of mercies in the rude, red tree.

"There Was a Savior," a poem of much less complex execution, celebrates Christ's love, discussing both its success and failure. The message Christ brought to "children kept from the sun," was not heeded by mankind. Man did not learn to love during Christ's life and did not defend Christ from death on the cross. Mankind "could

not cry / On to the ground when a man died." Neither did man defend Christ's ideas:

we . . . could not stir
One lean sigh when we heard
Greed on man beating near and fire neighbor.

Yet now, sinful man experiences love for Christ:

Exiled in us we arouse the soft,
Unclenched, armless, silk and rough love that
breaks all rocks.

In this poem Thomas embraces the idea of Christian love. This idea is basic in all Thomas' work. Self-absorbed as he is, decadent, doubting, and fearful, he never questions the worth of the Christian ideal of love. Throughout his work, love is the only solution, the only possible answer to the problems of man and to the riddle of his existence. Love is the one Christian precept Thomas never mocks.

The phrase "children kept from the sun" indicates that God kept man from knowledge of the Way before Christ brought them the Word. This is conventional enough theology, but throughout Thomas' work there is a hint of bitterness toward God. Although God and Christ merge in Thomas' view, when seen as separate entities, God is fearful and strong--the Creator of man's unsavory lot. Christ is the lower man, the figure who inspires tenderness and love. It is only in descending to man in the body of Christ that God becomes lovable.

"The Ballad of the Long-legged Bait" is a reli-

gious allegory.⁴¹ This poem's short lines and stanzas in loose ballad form are unique in Thomas' poetry, as is the theme of self-purification. "The Ballad" has been as variously, though not as widely, acclaimed and denounced as the sonnets. Its central idea is that salvation must be won through mortification of the flesh. The process of purification becomes the strange voyage of a lone fisherman. The bait is "A girl alive with his hooks through her lips." The girl is "all the wanting flesh." She is "Sin who had a woman's shape." Her destruction (the destruction of Sin), will restore all that has been lost since Time and Death came into the world. When the girl dies, the sea gives up its dead. The fisherman is returned to his true home at last, as Eden returns. He reclains his heart, purified of all sensual desire. It was his heart that he sacrificed in the shape of a girl. The poem ends:

He stands alone at the door of his home,
With his long-legged heart in his hand.

This poem stands in contrast to other of Thomas' poems in which salvation is to be had only through the mercy of God. In "The Ballad," the emphasis is not on God's mercy, but on the necessity for self-purification. Characteristically, Thomas sees purification as a cleansing of sexual desires. His sexual obsession is

⁴¹See Olson's excellent analysis of this poem, pp. 50-51.

sustained in his religious allegory. Yet, the idea in this poem is also in contrast to the idea expressed in "Unluckily for a Death," another poem concerned with both sex and eternity, in which sex is regarded as the only deterrent to death. The conflict in Thomas' philosophies may be explained by his alternate embracing of Christian and pantheistic philosophies, and by his alternating emphasis on puritan strictness and on man's dependence on God's grace.

"Vision and Prayer" relates a religious experience. The vision in "Vision and Prayer" is markedly different from the vision in "Alarwise by owl-light." Unlike the mocking and fearful nightmare atmosphere found in the "Alarwise" sonnets, "Vision and Prayer" appears as a purely mystic experience, executed with high seriousness.

"Vision and Prayer" is one of Thomas' most successful poems. It is a pattern poem, the varying line lengths forming a picture.⁴² In this poem the poet

⁴²The first part of "Vision and Prayer" is in the form of a diamond. The meter is syllabic, increasing from one to nine syllables, and decreasing to one again. Each stanza opens and closes with a rhymed couplet, and all other line terminations end in nasal sounds. In the second part, the form is that of an hourglass. The lines diminish from nine syllables to one and increase to nine again. For a full discussion of pattern poetry and of "Vision and Prayer," see Modern Poetry, edited by Kison Friar and John Malcolm Brinnin (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1951), p. 540.

experiences a vision and offers a prayer. Part one is the vision, part two, the prayer.

Thomas' vision is of the birth of Christ. Christ, in the womb, seems separated from Thomas' own room by a partition, thin as a "wren's bone," symbolic of the separation of man from God. Christ is not immediately identified in the poem, thus suggesting that He is really unknown or unrevealed to man. The poem begins, "Who / Are you / Who is born / In the next room." The physical aspects of Christ's birth are not forgotten. Thomas lies still and hears "the moan / Of the mother hidden," and imagines her birth pangs as "the shadowed head of pain / Casting to-morrow like a thorn." Yet the spiritual significance of the physical birth is not neglected: "The midwives of miracle sing."

The birth of Christ tears the thin partition of the womb and breaks the partition separating man from God by opening the way to salvation. In Thomas' vision, the birth of Christ merges with the anticipated second coming of Christ. Thomas says that he "shall run lost in sudden / Terror . . . / Crying in vain / In the caldron / Of his / Kiss."

Thomas, who was lost, comes to the haven of Christ's love. He sees himself in the bosom of Christ and witnesses "the world winding home." The dead ascend from the "vultured urn" containing all the dead since

"upright Adam / Sang upon origin." Thomas experiences pain and dies, perhaps suggesting death into eternal life, or perhaps suggesting his overpowering emotional experience: "And the whole pain / Flows open / And I / Die."

In the second section of the poem Thomas prays in the name of all swinish mankind, although he believes himself not wholly one of them because "joy has moved within / The inmost marrow of my heart bone." Yet, in their name, he prays that Christ let the dead lie, even though they mean to be resurrected. Thomas realizes the unworthiness of mankind. Man deserves to be blown like dirt in the forever falling night of his fall from grace. Thomas prays for eternal death because the lost do not truly want salvation. They have come to know "the endless fall" and they themselves pray "never to awake and arise." Rather, they wish to remain in "the known dark of the earth."

Thomas "burns" in the blessing of Christ's love and sacrifice, and though he would run to the land of eternal death, he is "found." His prayer is answered by a blaze of the sun, symbolizing both the Son and the Creator. The "sun" takes the sinner up in a blaze of glory.

"Vision and Prayer" rises to mystical heights. Unlike much of Thomas' poetry, this poem is not gongoristic. There are no heavy-handed puns, no complicated and baroque symbols and syntax. In spite of the mannered

form, the poem appears unlabored, and its execution, inevitable. It is a rendering of a mystic-Christian experience, and is free from tortuous doubts and from sexual implications. The birth of Christ, while recognized as a physical event, is not considered sexually. Thomas' attention is on the significance of Christ's birth.

Salvation is seen to depend, not on the worth of man, but on the love of God. Neither man's faith nor his works are considered. It is interesting that Thomas does not see any of the awakened dead as descending to hell. Hell seems to have no place in Thomas' theology. He imagines eternal death, or eternal life, never eternal punishment. It appears that Thomas sees the problem of man's destiny as the existence or non-existence of a loving God. Thomas can imagine an indifferent Creative Force, or a slightly ridiculous Zeus-like entity, indifferent to man, but if Christ and the Christian God is true, His love saves man. If He does not exist, man faces the nightmare of death. In "Vision and Prayer" Thomas escapes his nightmarish horror of death, and in his vision sees salvation as assured.

One would like to believe that this tortured man found a continuing faith; that his mystic experience in "Vision and Prayer" resulted in peace. Certainly he declares his faith in poems written after "Vision and Prayer" (1944). In "Poem on his Birthday" (1949), Thomas says

that his faith is "more triumphant" the closer he moves to death. Yet the fearful death images in the poem (see page 53) arouse doubt as to the firmness of Thomas' faith, and make his positive statement appear as poetic whistling in the dark.

"This Side of the Truth" (1945), echoes "Vision and Prayer's" belief in the "unjudging love" of some God. That it is a Christian God is questionable. In "Over Sir John's Hill" (about 1949), a parable poem, death is neither just nor unjust. Sir John's Hill is not judging, the birds are not guilty, the heron not holy, and God is not, in a meaningful sense, merciful. The poem expresses the fact of death. It expresses the idea that the intellect cannot handle the fact of death, but reveals no religious faith.⁴³

The notes Thomas left for his projected long poem "In Country Heaven," reveal Thomas' religious philosophy. "In Country Sleep" (1946) and "In the White Giant's Thigh" (1950) were to form separate parts of this poem. Thomas says in the notes:

"The godhead, the author, the milky-way farmer, the first cause, architect, lamp-lighter, quintessence, the beginning Word, the anthropomorphic bowler-out and black-baller, the stuff of all man, scapegoat, martyr, maker, woe-bearer--He, on top of a hill in Heaven, weeps whenever, outside that state of being called his country, one of

⁴³See Maud's detailed explication of the poem, pp. 103-110.

his worlds drops dead, vanishes screaming,
shrivels, explodes, murders itself.⁴⁴

In this projected major work, God is seen as the eternal sympathetic spectator, who weeps, but does nothing to relieve man's absurd situation.

Thomas' religious turmoil is further illustrated in "Elegy" (unfinished at the time of his death in 1953). This poem reveals Thomas' lasting conflict of atheism and faith (see "The Child-Parent Nightmare").

It appears that Dylan Thomas never achieved a firm faith. His work illustrates that his life, because he had no sustaining religious faith, was a nightmare. His sexual preoccupation, his morbid symbols, his tortured and sometimes gongoristic phrasing, relate to his deep suffering, and rise to the tragic. As much because of their authenticity as because of their heights of undeniable artistry, Thomas' poems rank high among modern poetry.

⁴⁴Dylan Thomas, Quite Early One Morning (New York: New Directions, 1954), pp. 178-179.

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