

Song of Innocence to Experience: A Freudian Critique of Dylan Thomas Select Poetry

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Abstract--- This research paper is an attempt to establish relationship between Psychology and Literature with the explication of the text through Freudian terms. Literary criticism is enriched with the psycho-analytic criticism from Sigmund Freud to Jacques Lacan. Psycho-analysis interpretation has enriched literature both in grave way and in creative way. Creative approach to psychoanalysis to literature has enthralled the two disciplines. Some Psychologists regarded dreams to be the result of random brain activity that occurs while sleeping. Psycho-analysts like Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung propagates that “dreams can reveal a person’s deepest unconscious wishes and desires.” The majority of the symbols that occur in dreams are sex symbols as considered by Freud. Dylan Thomas poetry has enormous usage of images and symbols which are essentially to be analysed in Freudian concepts to explicit the layers of meanings. He has concurred that he has read Freud’s theory which is subconsciously exposed in his poetry without direct reference. This paper explicates those images and symbols in Freudian interpretation of dream psychology to be applied in select poems of Dylan Thomas’ poetry with subjective understanding of his biography.

Keywords--- Freudian Concepts - Psycho-Analytic-Conscious and Unconscious Mind - Innocence and Experience – Dream Psychology – Meta Text.

I. INTRODUCTION

Freud’s influence has a major role played in Dylan Thomas’ poetry. His interest in philosophical and metaphysical ideas is induced by his reading of Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* and metaphysical poets. While Thomas’ father moulded his literary career, his mother’s indulgence spoiled him as “pampered and coddled” him throughout his childhood.

In an interview with a research scholar, Dylan Thomas acknowledges that he had read Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He has denied the influence of Freud and said:

My only acquaintance with the theories and discoveries of Dr. Freud has been through the work of novelists who have been excited by his case-book histories, of popular newspaper scientific-potboilers who have, I imagine, vulgarised his work beyond recognition, and of a few modern poets, including Auden, who have attempted to use psycho analytical phraseology and theory in some of their poems, I have read only one book of Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and do not recall having been influenced by it any way.

Dylan’s denial of his influence of Freud can be considered to be a concealing one. Freud’s influence on

Dylan Thomas is evident from his poetic process of evolution from his sensory experience of childhood to the sensual cravings of youth. His innocence is lost in the two crossroads which meet at the stormy adolescence.

Fern Hill recollects the transition in the journey from innocence to experience through the dreamt atmosphere of childhood days stay at the farm to the world of experience in a strange milieu of the urban.

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs

About the lilted house and happy as the grass was green.

The juvenile mood and the carefree life in a pleasant house expressed through “lilted house” and “as the grass was green”. The farm with the house and half-lit orchard where he was the Lord of the apple trees was Thomas’ dreamland in his childhood. The innocence and dream of the solitary farm was short lived and had to budge into Swansea. The conflict of innocence and the new stage of experience are combated through the deep rootedness.

The socio-economic condition of his society is evident in the poem, *I See the Boys of Summer*. He was twenty at the time of its publication.

*I see the summer-children in their mothers
Split up the browned womb’s weathers.*

.....
*Their from their hearts the dogdayed pulse
Of love and light burst in their throats*

Grown in the stultifying and decadent war-torn society, the summer boys, the young men of the society were once healthy and prosperous turn to be ruinous and the poem suggests their total degeneration in the title itself.

Such deep-rooted conflicts can be destructive and stultifying, especially if it leads to mutual hatreds. On the other hand, it can also be highly stimulating to the questioning mind. One of the functions, perhaps the most important function of the artist is to make a pattern out of chaos, to find an imaginative synthesis for the antitheses about him. (Fitzgibbon, 19)

The large scale socio-economic crisis and degeneration had shocked the poet through the miners with Devy’s safety lamp digging the earth for the burial of the dead. The rural and urban atmosphere has influenced Dylan’s poetic instincts in the weirdest level. His yet another trait is his rebellious nature against the authoritarian forces of the church.

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Welsh Puritanism is by no means unique. It was at one time spread throughout the British isles – for Irish Catholicism is ethically far closer in spirit to Welsh, Scottish or the more extreme forms of English non-conformityIt provided an acceptable code of moral values for the working and lower middle classes as those classes became increasingly alienated from the established Church..... Puritanism has always been far more harsh when dealing with the weaknesses of the flesh and particularly with sexual ones, than when castigating the sins of the spirit.

Dylan's has always expressed his revolt against the social taboos and ethics. He unveiled all kinds of hypocrisy through his repulsive attitude. *Lament* recollects the rebellious nature of Dylan in the following lines:

*When I was windy boy and bit
And the black spit of chapel fold
(Sighed the old ram rod dying of Women)
I tiptoed shy in the gooseberry wood
The rude owl cried like a tell tale tit,
I skipped in a blush as the big girls rolled
Ninepin down on the donkey's common*

The above lines recollects Dylan's turbulent boyhood where his childhood was barren. His childhood was not much productive but it was full of violent passions and it is reflected in his behaviour. The transition from innocence to experience made him behave arrogantly and extravagantly added in his weird habits. The poem further reveals his anger over his childhood days where church authorities looked down on him as someone dirty and spoiled. He exhibits his revolt against the hypocrite sanctity of the church. His innocence is revealed through curiosity and fear through the lines, "all his life, Dylan Thomas enjoyed frightening himself as he enjoyed every sensation and experience. He was ready to conjure up ghouls, warlocks and above all vampires." The phrase, "I tiptoed shy.." skilfully exhibits the eagerness and expectation of a tender child who can be startled easily. The impulsiveness of poet's reminiscence of his childhood is disclosed in the phrase, "gooseberry woods". The wild child enjoys the special retreat of forest with adventures. The tiptoeing and skipping represents the physical movements of an innocent and playful child however the innocence of the childhood is corrupted by the sensual pleasures.

Dylan's *Twenty-four Years* reflects the transitional phase of his uncertain journey of life from adolescence to youth. His adolescent days are clouded with turmoil and his struggle to suppress his sexual urge. He expresses his discontent with the forced virginity in his letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson. He blames the medieval laws which induce "forced virginity". This forced virgin creates inhibition in mind against the natural physical expression. This becomes the subject matter for this poem.

Twenty-four Years refers to the melancholic and morbid past of the poet where his thoughts are persuaded by the moral and sacred principles of society and church. The conflict between his passion and his superego often tormented his adolescence. Tears refer to the sufferings and rage of passions that tormented his moral principles. It

reflects the tormented self which invites Freudian interpretation of the poem.

Twenty-four years remind the tears of my eyes.
(Bury the dead for fear that they walk to the grave
in labour)

In the groin of the natural doorway I crouched like
a tailor

Sewing a shroud for a journey

By the light of the meat-eating sun.

Dressed to die, the sensual strut begun,

With my red veins full of money,

In the final direction of the elementary town

I advance for as long as for ever is.

In the context of Freudian insight, the above lines conceal the deeper layers of meaning. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud refers to eye as female genital and tears refer to weeping reminded of past experience or in terms of nostalgic recall. Freud refers to eyes as an invitation to lust and tears refer to the secretion of semen as confirmation of manhood. The next few lines are the replica of this idea through the phrases, "meat-eating sun", "groin of the natural doorway", "sensual strut" and "red veins". The childhood innocence is carefree from the taint of mortality, old age and death and lack of threats.

In Freud's words, "Child's idea of being dead has nothing much in common with out apart from the word. Children know nothing of the horrors of corruption of freezing in the ice-cold grave of the terrors of eternal nothingness which grown-up people find it so hard to tolerate, as is proved by all the myths of future life. The fear of death has no meaning to a child, hence, it is that he will play with the dreadful word and use it as a threat against playmate."

In the accepted context, tears refer to the personal loss and eye refers to the range of vision. The very first line of the poem is a sad reminiscence of the affliction that a man undergoes in his journey from the innocence of childhood to the experience of manhood. In this point, Clark Emery says,

The poem opens with tears - and typical conceit, which branches in three directions s that Time has stolen his three and twentieth years, brings tears to his eyes; his tears are reminded that the function of eyes is to weep; this day of recollection calls to mind the tears shed in the past.

The phrases, "cross-legged like a tailor", "closed door", "groin of the natural door-way" refer to the poet's inhibitions against his lust and yield further to Freudian interpretation. Freud has analysed the dream as, "in translating dreams, the narrow spaces and opening closed doors are the most commonest sexual symbols and are representation of *coitus a tergo*."

The forced morality or forced virginity creates inhibitions in the speaker's mind which is evident from the usage of "shroud" meaning a cover of pretension. The shroud may also refer to something which buries deep i.e., the burial of the expression of his lust with superficial moral reckoning. Shroud also reflects the Freudian death-wish in Dylan Thomas.

Veins refer to the sensual strife towards the creative secretion of vital fluid but are saturated and sedimented due to inhibitions and leads to unhealthy obsession in mind. "Money" in this poem is well defined Freudian term of sexual stimulus of burying a treasure which Freud relates that "a woman with intestinal disorder has often dreamt of someone who was burying the treasure in the neighbourhood."

The poet has the convinced his manhood and induces the power of strength that not to fear to express the creative desire as well as to tread the process.

Fear not the working world, my mortal,
Fear not the flat, synthetic blood,
Nor the heart in the ribbing metal.
Fear not the tread, the seeded milling,
The trigger and scythe, the bridal blade,
Nor the flint in the lovers mauling.

The twenty four years in the poem is not just the twenty four years of his life but his sensual journey from adolescence to maturity. This sensual journey is fulfilled only with the destruction of the mortal body. "Town" (a house which housed the soul or the energy supplied by the cosmos) here symbolises the mortal body in terms of Freud. This twenty four year birthday poem stands as an epitome of his body and fleshly desires. In Dylan's terms, the perfect acquisition of the knowledge of sex and its acceptance is attained only in terms of acceptance of death.

All all and all the dry worlds lever publicizes the triumph of creative power of man through the lever. The theme lies in the transformation of the dry and unfertilized adolescence into a spring of manhood through the sensual experience. Derek Stanford comments that "Sex or a process analogous to it, a process of dynamic attraction is.... the lever of the world without which things would be dry and separated." The poem further visualizes lever to be male reproductive organ which governs the entire cosmic reproduction through the supreme word "all". The totality and entire scheme of universe is ruled by lever which naturally succumbs to Freudian interpretation. In terms of Freud, "any machinery or any weapon or tool that comes in the dream refers to the genitals or the male organ". The lever is frozen ice as the fluid is stagnated for a long time. The lever communicates the creative power to fertilise the virgin soil of the earth for bearing seeds in the womb. The flower in the poem symbolises the female organ in terms of Freud, "Flower which blossoms symbolises the female organ sexually matured enough to bear the seeds." The flower symbolises the totality of females who attained puberty regulated by the rules of nature. The earth which was dry and barren is turned into a city of spring by the warmth of passionate human love. Life force was dominant in the creative desire of flesh. This creative desire is violating the divine order however the poet tries to bring in the vigour of rejuvenation of life.

Synthetic blood refers to the transmission of blood to offspring. Freud refers to the image of copulation with the sexual symbols like "trigger" and "scythe" which stand for male genitals. "Tread" or "travel" in Freud's terms intimates the sexual intercourse. Rib in literal meaning refers to woman. "Hawks" represent the desires preying upon flesh. The severe "jawbone" reveals the animalistic nature of man

in his sexual acts. There is a reference to closed door which according to Freud, "Rooms in dreams are usually women; if the various ways in an out of them are represented, the interpretation is scarcely open to doubt. In this connection interest in whether the room is open or locked is easily intelligible." Vice stands for spiral staircase which in Freudian terms represents, "Steps, ladders or staircases and walking up and down are the representation of sexual act." "Caul" to "suckle" represents the evolution of foetus in the mother's womb to the sucking child at the mother's breast. "Worlds couple", "ghost with her ghost" and "coupled buds" represent the fulfilment of creative desire in man.

When Dylan wrote *I Dreamed my Genesis*, he was just twenty crossed adolescence but he had fear of tuberculosis. The poem projects the dream of his birth which haunted him. He perceives his fear of death through birth. Birth is individual experience but it is compared to the birth of genesis which is a divine experience. Emery remarks, "Matured Thomas asleep and dreaming". In sleep, he dreams that he comes out of his mother's womb breaking the shells of embryo and the dream haunts him. Freud has analysed the psyche of man to be anxious that a man or woman who "undergoes the stage of puberty suffers from cerebral anaemia and it causes character changes and increases anxiety." In this regard, the birth dream of the speaker or the poet is the upshot of anxiety and birth is the first experience of anxiety which the child undergoes in pre-natal stage. The efforts of the muscle in the development and birth of the embryo in the womb vividly reciprocates Freud's "motor muscle" which transmits energy into the nervous system. The poet considers himself to be the valuable matter of his parents inherits. "Gear" represents the instrument or a tool which symbolises the male organ in Freudian terms and "journey", the intercourse. "Night geared man" represents the sexually experienced man. The multiplicity of self occurs in terms of considering his self birth to be genesis of man. Birth and death are connected through the description of birth as "Sharpnel" which is of explosive nature. This dream explosion in terms of Freud is considered to be "accidental physical need can be linked up with the most intense but at the same time the most intensely suppressed mental impulses".

The words in Freudian terms: "hollow box" represents the female uterus, "marching" of sexual acts, "sleep" as death, "hill" stands for the sexual symbol, female organ. According to Freud, "Dreams are frequently a product of wish-fulfilment, for wish-fulfilment consists in nothing else than a replacement of disagreeable things by its opposite." The poet experiences the state of numbness of his muscles in his sleep which exposes his wish fulfilment and in Biblical terms, it is the resurrection to the new life of fullness. "All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flowers of the field." (Isaiah, 40:6). The birth of experience of adolescence takes place at the cost of the death of innocence of his childhood. The rise to new manhood with the vision of Adam is a kind of awakening in the poet.

If I were Ticked by the Rub of Love conveys the irresistible longing of manhood for sex. The opening lines tear off the ruthlessly the decency of sex without inhibitions. The adolescence is completely surrendered to the sexual passion. Ticked by the sensational and enticing girl, he is seduced by her call. Reference to “straw” in Freudian terms is a symbol of female genital. The adolescent speaker’s sexual urges quest for the new kind of physical experience. According to Freud, “Children in dreams often stand for the genitals, and indeed both men and women are in the habit of referring to their genitals affectionately as their ‘little ones’”. “Stick” is considered to be the symbol of male organ and “crossed stick” denotes a crooked or cross-grained person. “Walls” and “fingers” represent the impishness of sexual adventures. The sexual desires are as cold as death and as ease as uneasy sensation of feathery rub. Desires are often associated with death. It is the desire of Adam and Eve which brought them the fruit of knowledge and death.

And what's the rub? Death's feather on the nerve?
Your mouth, my love, the thistle in the kiss?
My jack of Christ born thorny on the tree?
The words of death are dryer than his stiff,
I would be tickled by the rub that is:
Man be my metaphor.

The new sexual experience takes the adolescent to new sphere of manhood at the cost of death of innocence and birth of experience.

I Make this in a Warring Absence presents the poet’s change in his attitude towards sex from the contest of body and ends with consensus of mind. It was written during the time of his wife, Caitlin’s separation when he had warring passions. The poem can be deciphered at two levels: one is his love for his wife, Caitlin and the other, his love for his sea town, Wales. This kind of connection is brought out the words, “anchored”, “quaystone”, “mast”, “sailed and set” and “ocean”. The poet experiences the lustful passions of each minute after his quarrel with his wife. With her, his passions were anchored but his passionate love misses the solid support as the quaystone of harbour. He even expresses that her alluring body is in cold passivity unwilling to respond to his repeated overtures of love. In Freudian terms, “house” represents the whole human body and its parts to be different parts of the body in dream imagination. “Column” is a sexual symbol and “Vault” is an arched construction supporting two pillars which may represent Caitlin’s fleshly thighs. Freud in this context decodes that “a sexual dream in a woman is often represented by a narrow space where thighs come together may be represented by a narrow courtyard surrounded by houses.” The poet frankly admits his weak energy against Caitlin’s unmatched “groyne”, the seat of lust. Her uncontrollable temper and explosive and repulsive behaviour is evoked by the image of Venus emerging out of the tides of the sea and reinforced by the words, “weed”, “tide”, “reefed” and “roped”. He switches often from compulsion to repulsion in his marital relationship. Caitlin’s warring absence and her casual mood of indifference to sex has offended him bodily but as a soulful lover, he is fascinated by her innocence in that indifference. His physical possession of her has made him to admire the sea nymph with enchanting curves. He is engrossed with two

things about Caitlin: the one is her queenly dress which is the fashion of the day and the other is her rhythm of gait which is both passive and violent. The poet’s thin and lifeless body is rejuvenated by Caitlin’s Circean charm. “Bird” in terms of Freud is a sexual image and stands for sexual craving. The cordial reunion with his wife and her warring absence in the past has taken the poet to the new world of experience.

Love in Asylum is a dream vision of the poet and describes the unpredictable mood of Caitlin marked by love and hatred, belief and suspicion and quarrel and reconciliation. In Freud’s terms, the room is significant of woman and if its bed chamber, it signifies the wife. The poem portrays the poet’s dream of a mad girl entering the room in the sleepy night and invades the bed chamber is significant of his wife, Caitlin. “Bolting the door with her arm plume” is suggestive of sexual denial and in Freudian terms, bolting the door or opening the closed door is a sexual symbol and arm plume or fur refers to the pubic hair. The poet’s dream is his wish fulfilment that a woman who entices him entirely in his dream but turns to be repulsive in reality. The wish fulfilment of his innocent craving opens the world of experience for him.

Into her Lying down Head recalls the dream of the poet with Caitlin lying in her sleep with her head in an inclined posture. This fallen posture reflects the evil thoughts. In her sleep, her molested lids of her eyes and rippled drums of ears try to corrupt her innocence arousing the desire for sex. Eye and ear in Freudian terms represents sexual images. The wicked design of passion is interwoven by Noah’s dove instead of message of peace. Rooms in dreams refer women in Freudian analyses. “Basket of snakes” refers to the in store of evil thoughts or wild passions and it may also refer to the illicit relationships of a woman which the poet is aware of. The innocence of Caitlin and Thomas broke out with the awakening of Caitlin from her sleep and with awareness in the poet of a woman’s passionate lovers which builds the stairs of jealousy in him towards the “libidinous betrayal”.

Not from this Anger, an ironically titled poem portrays the feeling of pain and rage after the rejection of proposal for sexual enjoyment by Caitlin. His lust has been crimped by her mood of indifference and rejection. The poet uses “flower” and “flood” where flower in Freudian terms symbolise the human organs of sex by blossoms and flood symbolises the profuse outpouring of water which is interpreted as the emission from sexual organs. He is subjected to extreme bodily suffering. He invites her to embrace him close and lock him with her beautiful and delicate hands. “Mouth” and “eye” refers to the enticing female organs. It also reflects the poet’s Oedipus complex of getting secured feeling provided by his mother from his childhood innocence and craves for the same experience in his wife.

On a Wedding Anniversary is a marriage vow of faith and fidelity.



Freud's emphasis on the conflict between "pleasure-principle" and reality-principle" is evident in the poem through the couple undergoes the agonies of death and fierceness of passions. The psychological insanity is created when a man is "tormented by physical and mental sufferings from dreams and what reality denies him" in terms of pleasure and reality principle. The fire in the house is symbolic of the fire of desire that burns in the minds of the lovers. The fire not only destructed their house but also shattered the passionate desire of the couple. The destruction is grounded on the basis of conflict between their desires to be fulfilled and the present state of reality. The realization of total destruction both physically and mentally is felt through the imagery of "windows pouring into their heart" and "doors burning in their brain". The incident of war and fire at their house has taken the poet and Caitlin from the world of innocence to experience of harsh reality of war in connection to the desires to be fulfilled and what reality offers them.

Dylan Thomas has exhibited to the core, the imagery and symbols of Freud's interpretation of dreams through fetching and exposing all kinds of dark concealments. The influence has to be analysed in his poetry through aesthetic sense. Freud's interpretations of dreams applied to Dylan Thomas' poetry have turned the text into the meta-text revealing the layers of meaning. It also exposes the subconscious mind of the speaker or the poet extending the poetry for subjective interpretation with the poet's biography as a background for the literary text.

II. CONCLUSION

Critics have argued Freud's interpretation of dreams to be sexual interpretation. Wishes that are not fulfilled in reality manifest in dreams through certain images and symbols. It is rather a suppressed wish fulfilment crippled by reality and is fulfilled in dreams. Freud's study has elaborated the use of images and symbols in literary text especially poetry. Dylan Thomas poetry is stacked with metaphysical images and symbols which are to be essentially analysed through the orifice of Freud to render more extended meanings of meta words used by him. It further renders subjective interpretation of the text in connection to the poet. The stack of words leads to branches of meanings through such interpretation and in some cases; there is a shift in context as well as more new contexts are explored in the text through such elaborated interpretation. The aesthetic sense of poetry and its analyses enriches the readers at large and in application of Freud's theory, poetry or any text can be deconstructed in Derridan terms.

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