

Analysis of Dylan Thomas's View of Death

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Abstract: Death is an eternal subject that always has great appeal to writers. Moreover, Dylan Thomas is no exception. In recent years, more and more researchers have begun to pay attention to Thomas and delve deeper into his poetry, exploring the language he uses and the ideas he conveys. However, the existing research on Thomas's poetry is limited, and there is still a gap in understanding his view of death. Therefore, this study aims to explore Dylan Thomas's perspective on death by analyzing specific poems through close reading. Thomas has a unique view of death. This study finds that Thomas acknowledges death as an inevitable reality. However, he believes people should adopt an optimistic attitude toward death instead of succumbing to it. At the same time, he possesses a profound understanding of the nature of death. In Thomas's view, the universe is in an eternal cycle of life and death: life itself breeds death, and death means the arrival of new life. In general, Thomas sees death as a part of nature's eternal cycle, which has a tragic core but people should be optimistic about it.

Keywords: Dylan Thomas, death, inevitability, attitude, cycle, nature

1. Introduction

Dylan Thomas, born in Wales in 1914, is considered one of the most influential English poets after Wystan Hugh Auden and has played an important role in the history of British poetry. In the 1930s, the pure rational poetic style of realism prevailed in the field of English poetry. During this period, the folk culture of Wales deeply influenced Thomas. That is why he was full of sentimental attachment to the pastoral life of Wales and had strong emotions and a fertile imagination. As a result, his poems break the language structure of following rational logic and are full of an amount of emotional catharsis and magnificent images, which is in sharp contrast to realistic poets such as Auden [1]. Thomas's poems have both strong modernity and intense lyricism, mixing surrealism and romanticism.

The studies of Dylan Thomas abroad have reached a relatively mature level, and the studies are divided into three aspects: his personal life, the themes of poetry, and the language and rhyme of poetry. As for the studies in China, the works of Thomas were not introduced until the 1980s [2]. At first, his poems were not widely disseminated, only among some poets. Subsequently, his poems had a great influence on the readers. Although Thomas's poems have received a great response in the field of Chinese poetry, there are still few academic studies on his poems. The famous scholars Wang Zuoliang and Wang Shouren have introduced Dylan Thomas and his poems in their books about the history of English literature and poetry [2]. However, neither has listed him as a separate chapter and only classified him as a Welsh poet. In China, there are two main research areas: poetry's themes and

the language and rhythm of poetry. Most of the studies on the themes of poetry focus on the integration of life, desire, and death. There are not many studies on the view of death expressed by Dylan Thomas in his poems. However, the theme of death ran through almost all his poems, conveying his unique thoughts about death. Therefore, this study aims to explore the view of death involved in the poems of Thomas, hoping to provide some reference for future research. This study will use the method of closing reading to analyze specific poems and thus explore Thomas' view of death. Specifically, the research will be conducted on the inevitability of death, the attitude toward death, and the nature of death.

2. The Inevitability of Death

From a biological perspective, it is impossible for humans to live eternally. In other words, death is a stage of life that everyone must experience. Thomas, as a poet, recognizes this characteristic of death's inevitability. In addition, he also discovers that human life is fragile and brief while death is robust and eternal. Based on the above understandings, he believes death is an inevitable objective existence and incorporates this view into his poetry.

2.1. *Fern Hill*

The existence of death remains unchanged, whether one had a happy past or not. In the poem *Fern Hill*, Thomas portrays the happy memories spent on Fern Hill. Thomas used to live with his aunt in Fern Hill for a while. When he returned to the mountain again, it reminded him of his happy childhood days, so this poem focuses on the inner world of a child returning to nature. For instance, "green" is often associated with immaturity and symbolizes a carefree, innocent childhood. The poet mentions it seven times in the whole poem. Even if this poem is filled with beautiful imagery, it still intertwines with death. Time grants the poet boundless freedom and joy, allowing the youthful poet to shout and climb. However, the gifts of time are twofold: it also brings death. When the poet is immersed in the joy of returning to childhood, time is also leading him to death [3]. Everything, including death, is governed by time. Consequently, death is an inevitable existence as no matter what happens in life, death is the destination.

2.2. *When Like a Running Grave*

Death is a common situation that humankind cannot change and escape. In the poem *When Like a Running Grave*, Thomas uses a simile, describing time as a running tomb. Actually, the running grave is the coffin that holds people's corpses. Time hunts people throughout their lives and captures them when they die [4]. Throughout history, people have attempted to outrun time, hoping to escape its grasp and live longer. However, no matter how hard people try to escape, they have to face death at some point in the future because death is inevitable and cannot be avoided. In the second stanza of the poem, the poet also regards time as a pair of scissors, which manifests how it can sneak up on people and cut their lives short without mercy. As the scissors cut through life, time continues to flow. Once the scissors have cut through everything, death will inevitably follow. Unfortunately, people can never turn back time or regain the parts of their lives that have been cut off. Death, just like time, is a matter that people cannot prevent its arrival.

2.3. *The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower*

Death and new life coexist. In other words, death had quietly appeared from the moment life was born. In the poem *The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower*, Thomas describes a force that has two functions. On the one hand, it draws nutrients from the ground through the green

fuse and then sends life energy to plants, making it possible for flowers to bloom and trees to flourish. On the other hand, this force is also causing damage to plants, making plants gradually wither [5]. It is noticeable that the first two lines of the poem use metaphor. Green age refers to the plant being in the stage of vigorous growth, representing a period of rapid growth of people. From this perspective, like plants, when people grow through this force, this force also drives people to get older and toward death. In the second stanza, the poet also uses metaphor to point out the relationship between humans and nature. The water that flows through the rocks is like the blood in the human blood vessels, which both have a life-sustaining function. This force makes water and blood flow. However, it also causes the water to dry up and the blood to solidify like wax. The force in the poem is the root of both life and death, manifesting death emerges with the birth of life. Any choices and actions of humans cannot change the outcome of individual death. These metaphors demonstrate that there are similarities between nature and human beings. There is no doubt that Nature exists objectively. For example, flowers bloom and fall is a natural law that cannot be changed. Therefore, death is also an objective existence, which means people have no power to resist death.

From the above poems, it is easy to find that Thomas regarded death as inevitable and unstoppable. Compared with some poets who do not mention death directly, his poems do not avoid death but accept the objective existence of death.

3. The Attitude Toward the Death

Thomas acknowledges that death is the objective existence, and it is irresistible, but this does not mean that he succumbs to death. The inevitability of death, to some extent, makes the existence of individual life covered with pessimism. However, Thomas still believes that people should have an optimistic attitude towards death and actively seek the meaning of life. In a word, death is both pessimistic and optimistic as it is pessimistic in nature but can be approached with an optimistic attitude.

3.1. *And Death Shall Have No Dominion*

Many people are pessimistic about death, feeling it is so powerful that nothing can be done to prevent it. Therefore, Thomas hopes to alleviate people's fear of death through his poems. In his poem *And Death Shall Have No Dominion*, Thomas emphasizes repeatedly that death cannot rule over the world. He claims that although death is stronger than the human body, it is not all-powerful. For example, the will of man can contend with death and ultimately transcend it. In the poem's second stanza, Thomas mentions that people will eventually die and may be buried under the sea. However, he insists that if people can struggle with death until their last breath, they will never pass away like the wind. The fifth line of the second stanza describes how it cannot be broken even when the body is strapped to the wheel [6]. This conveys the poet's view that man will never surrender to death, even when experiencing great pain. In the fourth line of the third stanza, the poet uses the personification technique to describe the behavior of a flower that does not fear the storm and dares to raise its head to bloom in the wind. This alludes to the idea that people should also be courageous when facing death.

3.2. *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night*

Thomas always believes fighting against death is the correct attitude rather than compliance with it. *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night* is one of Thomas's well-known poems. As Thomas's father was dying, he wrote this poem to urge his father to fight against death. "Good Night" of the title implies death, while "gentle" means meek, which refers to a passive, cowardly attitude toward death. The title directly reveals that the poet hopes his father actively resists death rather than passively

waiting for it. “Close of day” and “dying of the light” in the first stanza of the poem are metaphors for death. In the face of impending and inevitable death, Tomas suggests that people still should burn, roar, and rage. Only in this way can people embrace the power of life, to live alive and warm. It is worth noting that the bright light because of burning and the night that represents death are in sharp contrast, expressing the desire to fight against death [7]. The poet also believes that the attitude towards death has nothing to do with personality. In four stanzas of the poem, the poet portrays four types of people: wise men, good men, wild men, and grave men. Without exception, they all face death with an optimistic attitude. For instance, wise men know their words have forked no lightning, and the eyes of grave men have been nearly blind, but they still decide to fight death with the strength they have left. It is undeniable that death will come; nobody can escape death. However, the poet believes that fighting death is the optimal choice when death arrives [8]. These four stanzas use parallelism, which is not a simple repetition. On the one hand, the parallelism implies the inevitability of death. On the other hand, it displays countless times of brave struggle with death, strengthening poetry’s force [9]. The reason why people fear death is that death will take away the vitality and strength of life brutally. Therefore, when people fight death like warriors, this move will make them feel the vitality of life again, and that is what Thomas wants to tell his father and people [8].

4. The Nature of Death

One of the most important reasons Tomas is optimistic about death is that he believes that death is not the end of life but the beginning of a new life. Death exists objectively and inevitably, so the birth of life indicates the beginning of death; death will accompany it and become its partner throughout the whole life [10]. When death arrives, death and new life complete the handover ritual; this moment will be a new starting point of life. Therefore, birth breeds death, and death returns to new life. The universal life experiences an eternal cycle, namely birth-death-rebirth. Furthermore, the cycle of life and death is a vital part of nature, so death is also a way to return to nature.

4.1. *And Death Shall Have No Dominion*

In the poem *And Death Shall Have No Dominion*, Tomas argues that life and death are a cycle and death is not the end of life. In the first stanza, the poet describes the scene after death. The bones will be culled clean and ultimately disappear. However, the stars are accompanying them. Although the human being as a living body will disappear, life will stay with the stars and integrate into nature. This is a further leap in life. In other words, not only does death cannot end life, but it also extends it, making it an immortal, eternal being [1]. From this point of view, life is not only not defeated by death but also transcends death. In the last three lines of the first stanza, the poet uses romantic imagination to dissolve the horrors of death. The thing that sinks will rise again, and the lost will reappear with eternal love [10]. Thomas is trying to tell people there is no need to be concerned that death will take everything. Death is only one of the parts of the cycle, so what has gone will reoccur with the birth of new life.

4.2. *A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London*

Thomas considers that death signifies a return to the eternal circle of nature. When facing death, people should expect the arrival of a new life instead of being immersed in sorrow. In *A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London*, Thomas explicitly expresses his attitude toward death: his refusal to mourn. In the poem’s first stanza, he mentions people, animals, and flowers, manifesting that they are all on an equal level. In other words, there is no difference between humans and other creatures in the natural world. They all go through the life-and-death cycle as a part of

nature's biological chain. Therefore, Thomas believes the child as a member of humans is physically dead but not spiritually [11].

Furthermore, the poet employs rich metaphors and detailed images in the second verse. In real life, "Zion" stands in for Jerusalem, the holy site for the three main religions, and "synagogue" is a place of worship or assembly for Jews. The poet uses these religious words to convey the nobility and holiness of the child's passing. This child is suffering greatly due to the war, like many others. Therefore, in the poet's opinion, death helps the child get rid of the burdensome body, undergo reincarnation, and ultimately become a holy soul [11]. In this light, death is no longer horrible but valuable. The poet refuses to mourn because formal mourning is blasphemous to this sacred process [11]. In the fourth stanza, the poet says the child returns to the soil. In other words, she returns to nature and becomes a permanent existence in nature, like soil. In the poem's last line, Thomas expresses his view that there is no more death after the first death, manifesting that the child has entered the endless cycle of the universe by getting rid of suffering. This is a different, more majestic way of being.

5. Conclusion

Through the research, this study finds that Thomas's view of death can be divided into three aspects: the characteristics of death, attitude toward death, and nature. The analysis of Thomas's poetry led to the following conclusions: Firstly, death is the natural part of the human life cycle and an inevitable objective existence. In Thomas's eyes, even if people spare no effort to escape from death, they can never avoid it. The inevitability nature of death makes the end of an individual's life seem tragic. However, although Thomas acknowledges the fact that death is an objective existence, he does not agree that people should succumb to it. He argues that when facing inevitable death, people's best choice is to maintain a positive attitude toward death and fight against it. Unlike others, Thomas's discovery of the nature of death helps him shake off a negative attitude towards it. All life in the universe is in an eternal cycle, and death is only one of them. In other words, death is not the end of life but the beginning of a new one and the return to nature.

In conclusion, Thomas provides many new perspectives on death, enlightening readers to understand the nature of death and to try to fight it. This study contributes to filling the gap in the research on the specific theme of death and complements the existing research on Thomas's poetry. It completes laying the foundation for further study of the language and rhythm of Thomas's poetry. The analysis of Thomas's poetry is helpful for other researchers to study his thoughts and themes and for readers to better understand his poetry. Although the author uses specific poems to support Thomas's view of death, the study is limited to a few selected poems and is not comprehensive enough. Otherwise, this study mainly explains Thomas's view of death from the perspective of the poetry's content but lacks an analysis of his poetic language and rhythm. Future research should involve Thomas's poems as much as possible and add an in-depth analysis of his views on death from the perspective of poetic language.

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