

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH

“THE COUNTRY OF DEATH”:
AN APPLICATION OF FREUD’S THEORY OF “DEATH INSTINCT”
TO DYLAN THOMAS’S POETRY

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To my
Parents

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ABSTRACT

“THE COUNTRY OF DEATH” AN APPLICATION OF FREUD’S THEORY OF “DEATH INSTINCT” TO DYLAN THOMAS’S POETRY

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This study tries to show that there are powerful manifestations of death instinct in Dylan Thomas’s poetry as well as in his life. Dylan Thomas, a poet notorious for his maladjusted, orgiastic life, died as a result of the ailment generated by his drinking addiction. He is a good example of the temperament strong in a component of his psyche termed by Freud as “death instinct”--which in its extreme implies the working of a tendency to reduce life to inanimate matter. In his actual life Thomas demonstrated more than adequately the repetitive and destructive manifestations of this instinct, as

expounded by Freud, specially those destructive drives exploited by the poet's superego.

This study traces motivations of the unconscious mind of Dylan Thomas in his poetry. Manifestations of death instinct are explored and identified. The poet's compulsion to repeat emerges in different levels of language, including the over-repetition of vowels and consonants, words, phrases, and larger fragments, and of certain structure. There is also a conspicuous repetition of only a few themes--birth, sex, and death, specially the third theme--in almost all Thomas's poetry. Another manifestation of death instinct is the poet's destructive instinct, again occurring at the two levels of language and ideas. At the level of language this instinct makes itself evident in the poet's over-use of uncommon forms of language, well-nigh creating a new language erecting great impediments to the understanding of his poetry. At the level of ideas Thomas shows this instinct in forms of his sadomasochistic themes and images, and in his themes of revolt against religion, some conventions and death. In addition to the above mentioned manifestations of the destructive instinct, the poet exhibits different exploitations, by superego, of the instinct against the ego in the forms of sense of guilt, feeling of anxiety, fear of death, melancholia and the theme of the three caskets. The cases amply substantiate that the same psychological mechanisms, springing largely from his death instinct, are at work in the creation of his poetry as those demonstrated in his real life.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

PSYCHOANALYSIS began as a method of therapy concerned with certain forms of sickness and their cure. In the course of the years, it has contributed many insights into human personality, and from it a body of theory has developed. Gradually, it has gone beyond the realm of medicine and has reached out of psychology into art, literature, education and the social sciences. Freud (1856-1939) who is considered as the father of psychoanalysis, devised many theories to explain the causes of human activities and desires. With regard to literature, Freud and other psychoanalytic critics believe that any work of literature is the concealed embodiment of its creator's unconscious desires, a product of the author's psyche. Since the literary work is the

external expression of the author's unconscious mind and on the surface reveals only the manifest content, psychoanalytic theory tries to reveal the unconscious side of the speech (Bressler 91-95). On that account, psychoanalytic critic's task is "the recovery of a latent and true meaning" which is unquestionably related to the author's desires (Wright 36-37). Poetry, for example, on various levels, hidden and censored, contains some latent contents, the poet's desires, which are the real meaning or interpretation of the literary work. Psychoanalysis by revealing the latent contents or desires of the poet, discloses links between the work and its creator.

This study deals with the application of some of Freud's theories to Dylan Thomas's poetry. Dylan Thomas (1914-53), one of the great poets of the twentieth century English poetry, is an excellent choice for this kind of study, a choice preferable to lots of other poets. He is a good choice partly because, as Emery Clark says, Thomas's concerns are similar to those of the Surrealists', what Thomas upon asking his ideas about Freud agrees to, that is "the stripping of the individual darkness" is the job of a poet. Moreover, like the Surrealists, he considers love as "the tremendous cosmic experience in which man participates anonymously through the sublime act of eternal creation" (Emery 10). Because of an importance attached to the unconscious employment of imagery, Thomas's sympathy towards Surrealism is important if one is going to interpret a work according to Freud's ideas. Cox says that Thomas is an example of what Robert

Conquest has in mind when he says of the Surrealist movement that in the 1940's poets "were encouraged to regard their task simply as one of making an arrangement of images of sex and violence tapped straight from the unconscious" (Cox 2). David Gascoyne emphasizes the high resemblance between Surrealism and the principles of psychoanalysis and debates the Surrealists' profiting from the discoveries of this branch of science (Emery 10) which makes them more susceptible to psychoanalytic interpretation. Thomas was influenced by psychoanalysis and he himself acknowledged it (FitzGibbon 371). Among the effects of this branch of knowledge on Thomas are his presenting the inexpressible states of being "after the fashion of the symbolists" (Emery 10) and some of Thomas's kinship of concern with certain Surrealist attitudes. For example, Ackerman mentions Thomas's approval of some attitudes that Surrealists encouraged in literary works, i.e. the break with rational control, and the use of imagery from the unconscious mind. The accepted conflict of images, the obsession with sex, and the release of emotions were attributes of Thomas's poetry which are among the characteristics which his general sympathy with surrealism can account for (Ackerman 75). Therefore, although he did not join the Surrealist movement, he did sympathize with what in general the movement stands for. The importance of the unconscious in this kind of interpretation is emphasized by some critics like Emery who believe that the critic who interprets a poet's work according to

psychoanalysis has to consider whether the poet's choices are on purpose and according to his knowledge of what Freud said or not, because the poet can appropriate his work based on his knowledge of Freud or change it in some way as to contradict Freud's notions. Therefore, there is a need to differentiate among those who do their work consciously, half-consciously, and unconsciously. Yet, Clark says, Thomas's reading of Freud was desultory, and he considers Thomas "at most a lay writer" who is among those who could not use his knowledge of Freud's ideas to transform his poetry and make it fit Freud's ideas (Emery 8-9). This becomes quite clear when one gets informed of Dylan's own words on this topic. In the Summer of 1951 a young man writing a thesis about Dylan Thomas asks him some questions. Among his answers are about the issue of the "dominant influence" on him, i.e. Sigmund Freud, he says:

My only acquaintance with the theories and discoveries of Dr[sic] Freud has been through the works of the novelists who have been excited by his case-book histories, of popular newspaper scientific-potboilers who have, I imagine, vulgarized his work beyond recognition, and of a few modern poets . . . who have attempted to use psychoanalytical phraseology in some of their poems. I have read only one book of Freud's, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (FitzGibbon 370-71).

Hence, a Freudian reading of Thomas's poetry is valid for the reasons of his potentiality as a Surrealist, and for his being a "lay" poet. The first emphasizes the role of the unconscious in Thomas's poetry, the latter rejects the possibility of the adjustment of his poetry so that it conform or oppose Freud's theories. This is more convincing if one's Freudian interpretation is less concerned with the ideas on sexuality cited in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Since Freud's ideas did change notably, writers and critics have often used his work selectively, and there are different Freudian approaches to literary works. A central alteration in his ideas was the revision of sexual drive as the main drive in man's psyche and the introduction of opposing death instincts. The hypothesis of the death instinct is defined as a "group of instincts whose ultimate aim is death" (Hendrick 369). Freud realized that his libido hypothesis is unable to explain all the phenomena of the psyche, such as anxiety dreams found in those suffering from war memories where the dreamer returned over and over to the traumatic experiences, hence he introduced the idea of the death instincts. At first the revision began in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). As the title suggests the concept of the death instinct is concerned with the limits of validity (Beyond. . .) of the pleasure principle. In it Freud modifies viewing sexuality as the main drive in human psyche and identifies Thanatos or a wish for death as another drive and as the ultimate desire. The death instincts, which are here identified with the "ego

instincts” are in contradistinction to the sexual instincts (life instincts), and lead organic life back to inanimate state (Freud, vol. 18, 44). So, the instinct of death is “the instinct to return to the inanimate state” (Freud, vol. 19, 38). The origin of this newly theorized instinct is traced back to a need to reestablish a prior condition of things (Freud, vol. 18, 57). Or put in another way, it is the drive compelling the living things internally towards death (Freud, vol. 18, 44). In other words, it is the expression of the inertia in organic life (Freud, vol. 18, 36). The idea of the compulsion to repeat is at the heart of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and the death instincts were introduced to account for a set of facts which center around this compulsion. The compulsion to repeat is a tendency to reproduce some formerly experienced emotions, regardless of the ability to produce pleasure for the organism (Hendrick 105). Freud came to the conclusion that this tendency, could not be interpreted as sexual wish-fulfillment. The need to find an explanation of such repetition phenomena beyond the pleasure principle (they were painful) led Freud to postulate “death instinct” in opposition to “life instinct”. Repetition provides an image of the inorganic, a goal towards which the death instinct can then guide the organism. On that account, repetition serves the death instincts (Freud, vol. 18, 55-6).

Later on, another idea came into analysis, and it was that aggression was related to sex through sadism/masochism, and it seemed to be a function of self-preservation drive. Eventually, Freud

included it in the theory of instincts, that is in his second instinct theory. Aggression found its place as a major derivative of the death instincts (Thompson 12-13). In some essays on culture and especially in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, there is a switch to metacultural considerations and Freud discusses the factor of destructiveness. He believes the death instincts can take the form of seeking to destroy, and in alliance with the sexual instincts (the life instincts), could lead to a sadistic or masochistic aggression (Freud, vol. 19, 163). The energy of the death instinct is destructiveness or aggression directed primarily towards the self and secondarily turned outwards in aggression toward others (Thompson 51). It is the force within us which is working towards death. Freud now conceived the death instinct as important as the libido in human life, and shifted his emphasis from the compulsion to repeat to the destroying drive.

On various occasions as in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and especially in *The Ego and the Id* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud speaks of the death instinct as a "mute" one in contrast to the "clamor" of life and its expressions (Freud, vol. 19, 46). The death instincts do their function "unobtrusively" (Freud, vol. 19, 63). Eros, the life instinct, as opposed to Thanatos, assumes the role of the factor that opposes death. The true life instincts are the sexual instincts. The other instincts lead, by reason of their function, to death. The life instincts operate against the purpose of the death instincts, and this

fact indicates that there is an opposition between them (Freud, vol. 18, 40).

Freud accounts for the cooperation of the death instinct with sexuality and for its separate functioning by the concepts of fusion and defusion of the two classes of the instincts in *The Ego and the Id*. These concepts expose the disparity between the death instinct and its manifestations, where the manifestations of the death instinct indicate the emergence of the instinct at the level of an object-relation. At the start, the death instinct wants to destroy the sexual partner. But each representative of the death instinct is only one of the death instincts and one cannot say that these are the full manifestation of the death instinct, compared to the representatives of the life-instinct (Freud, vol. 19, 41).

Freud deals in brief with the erotogenic form of masochism, pleasure in pain, in *The Ego and the Id* and at greater length in the paper, *The Economic Problem of Masochism* (Freud, vol. 19, 159-70). The libido is at work both in sadism, and in masochism, which the second, i.e. masochism, appears as the most primitive "coalescence" of love and death.

There are other manifestations of this instinct in addition to the compulsion to repeat, and aggression-destructiveness exhibited in different forms of sadistic and masochistic desires. Among these manifestations of the death instinct one should refer to the subgroups of superego's destructiveness: sense of guilt, the fear of death, and the