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Menufia University
Faculty of Arts
Department of English

Circularity in Dylan Thomas's Self-Contained World:

A Hermeneutic Approach

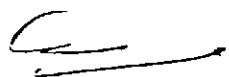
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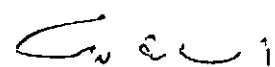
Said Ahmed Ibrahim Gazar

Demonstrator, Dept. of English
Faculty of Education
Tanta University

Under the Supervision of


Prof. Mohammed M. Enani

Professor of English Literature
Dept. of English
Faculty of Arts
Cairo University

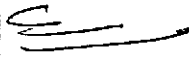
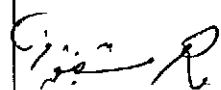
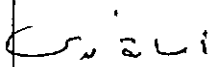
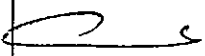

Dr. Osama A.F. Madany

Associate Professor of English Literature
Dept. of English
Faculty of Arts
Menufia University


2006

Committee of Discussion and Attribution

For the M.A. Thesis by: Said Ahmed Ibrahim Gazar

No.	Name	Job	Signature
1	Prof. Mohammed M. Enani	Professor of English Literature- Faculty of Arts- Cairo University	
2	Prof. Maher S. Fareed	Professor of English Literature- Faculty of Arts- Cairo University	
3	Dr. Osama A.F. Madani	Associate Professor of English Literature- Faculty of Arts- Menofia University	
4	Dr. Abd-Elmonem A.M Habeeb	Associate Professor of English Literature- Faculty of Arts- Menofia University	

Abstract

This thesis deals with the concept of circularity in the self-contained world formulated by Dylan Thomas in his poetry. Chapter one highlights the major features of circularity in nature. It investigates how elements of decay are evident in nature, but, at the same time, they are balanced by those of resourcefulness. This reconciliatory view of both elements is achieved via the child's perspective. Life in nature is entwined with death to form mere steps in an endless cycle.

In chapter two, the tracing of circularity in nature is aided by a similar study of circularity in time. Temporal cycles of night and day, darkness and light, seasons and years are evident and inherent in the human mind. They are accepted as parts of everyday life. But they are, for Thomas, a gateway to a new view of eternity.

Chapter three delineates Thomas's novel handling of the concepts of life and death. The removal of the fear of death is necessary. They are not in conflict but in endless circulation. After death, life begins again. Thus, human existence is based not on decay but on eternal life renewal and the firm faith in the ever circularity of everything that comes into being.

The thesis, in this respect, provides a plausible, comprehensive interpretation of Thomas's frankly-stated goal behind his poetry; his poems are for the praise of God and the love of man.

"For the Praise of God and Love of Man"

(Dylan Thomas)

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Introduction

These poems, with all their crudities, doubts, and confusions, are written for the love of man and in Praise of God, and I'd be a damn' fool if they were not. (Thomas *Poetic* 53)

Dylan Marlais Thomas (1914-1953) is seen by many critics as a highly original genius with a unique poetic personality. His poetic career shows him as one of those poets who are worthy to be described as controversial and, to a great extent, difficult to understand. To say the truth, Thomas was a different poet. He mesmerized large audiences through his poetry, his B.B.C. Broadcasts and his recitations of his own poetry during his various lecture tours of the U.S.A. Yet, none has been able to fully reveal the secret of his curious charm. It is enough to say of Thomas's poetic genius what David Daiches reflects on saying: "he wrote some poems that the world will not willingly let die" (24). Such fame has caused a flood of conflicting views.

Critics of Thomas's poetic vision can be classified under three headings: those who are very much fascinated by Thomas's poetry, those who could not understand his poetry but, at the same time, did not deny their infatuation by his sonorous voice reciting his poems and a third party: the anti-Thomas ones. John Wain declares this as a fact:

More than any other notable modern poet, Dylan Thomas lived his life at the focal point of controversy. About Yeats, about Eliot, about Auden, opinions have differed, but the work of none of these poets has been surrounded by such an atmosphere of sustained disagreement as we find in the case of Thomas. (*Druid* 1)

William Empson, viewing the *Collected Poems*, despite his acceptance of Thomas's obscurity, declares that "it was worth carrying the poems of Dylan Thomas . . . because they were equally inexhaustible" (86). A once-

over of Dylan Thomas's poems will prove that they can be described as "inexhaustible". The poems will "hit you before you know how" to use Empson's words.

Over and over again, critics restate Thomas's professionalism as a poet. Some, namely Elder Olson and John Malcolm Brinnin, confirm that no other poet in the thirties of the 20th century had a fame and popularity like Thomas's. A bird's eye view of his life span will show that he died at the age of thirty nine – rather young. Yet, there was something unique in his poetry and even in his life. His poems took English poetry to a new world. This notion is what urges Wynn Thomas in his *Guide to Welsh Literature* to allocate a whole chapter for James A. Davies's article in which Davies points out that:

Despite his early death, . . . he [Thomas] had a literary career in which achievement outweighs limitations or our sense of unfulfilled potential. Significantly, he was the only professional writer: the others wrote in their spare time. (133)

As for the second party who are infatuated by Thomas's poetry and do not understand it, they are influenced by his way of reading poetry or even the musical tools which he mastered. Although Karl Shapiro wrote a bitter article on Dylan Thomas, in which he attacked Thomas's poetic vision, he affirms Thomas's magical achievement on his audience:

Thomas, I think, did the impossible in modern poetry. He made a jump to an audience which doesn't exist. It is an audience that understands him even when they cannot understand his poetry. . . . The audience understands Thomas instinctively. They know he is reaching out to them but cannot quite effect the meeting. (179)

This strange effect is due to the idea that the thirties were the years of instability, war and social change in England. Thomas felt these changes in a way very much different from his contemporaries. Unlike T.S. Eliot, whose *The Waste Land* depicted the world as if it were the exact image of anarchy, chaos and destruction, Thomas took his readers away from destruction to a fresh world full of hope and growth. This is the very achievement of Thomas's poetry. Thus, to find the audience under the "spell" of Thomas's sonorous voice and his perfected images is a natural outcome. When readers find it difficult to get the message of Thomas's poems, they get much interest and even ecstasy from the musical effect, the craftsmanship, and the rhythmical harmony of the lines. This gives way to say, along with T.H. Jones, that Thomas was a sort of "Heaven-sent or White-Goddess-given reply, rejoinder, or antistrophe, to what many poetry-starved people felt to be the desolation and aridity of *The Waste Land*" (1). So, it is logical to think of Dylan Thomas's poetry as a refuge for all poetry-lovers.

The third party who attacked Thomas and refused his poetry are few. Most of them concentrate on the claim that he is obscure and that his poems are difficult to understand. In fact, obscurity is the major feature of Thomas's poetry which gives way to those who cannot grip the meaning of the poems to assess Thomas's great achievement wrongly and consequently refuse his poetry altogether. David Holbrook tends to deal with Thomas's poetry as one of a schizoid. For him, an artist should have some kind of illness to seek meaning in his life. He goes further to say that Thomas "suffers a strange confusion of identity, in the absence of 'Ontological Security' and a lack of a secure sense of 'being' " (*Code of Night* 168). Holbrook stresses the idea that Thomas suffered from being locked in childhood so he cannot form a right vision of himself and of life (*Code of Night* 170). Similarly, Karl Shapiro found the death of Dylan Thomas in 1953 "the cause of the most singular