



## **Analysing Select Poems of Dylan Thomas from the Lens of Memory Studies**

**Dr. Chandrima Sen**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
Bodoland University.

chandrimasn46@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2612-3458>

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### **Abstract:**

Dylan Thomas is well known for delineating his emotional self. His poetic world ascertains the trajectory of life and living, hope and aspiration, time and place, nostalgia and memory and death and dying. The present paper deals with the select poems, namely “A Poem in October” (1944) and “Do not Go Gentle into that Good Night” (1951) to show the spontaneity of time past and time present. Childhood innocence and youthful vigour occupy a special place in Thomas’s poetry. The element of time unites his thoughts with actions. The main objective of this paper is to read memory as one of the dominant aspects of Thomas’s poetry. The poet shows the binary between self and individual, and society and habitat. He associates himself with memory and remembrance. This paper explores memory as a contemplating agent of all human perception.

**Keywords:** individual, memory, recollection, time, self.

The 20<sup>th</sup>-century English poet significantly talks about life and death, memory and recollection, desire and longings and past and present. The element of time works predominantly in his poetry. His “A Poem in October” is structured into seven stanzas of equal length. Each stanza of ten lines elucidates his unconditional association with the different components of Nature. Memory seems to be a dominant aspect in his poetry. Thomas’s recurrent use of time and space confers a precise understanding of memory. The paper attempts to substantiate the importance of memory in probing the poet’s conscious and transfigured self. It reiterates how memory subscribes to the prospect of the poet’s perseverance and endurance. With the spontaneity of memory, he intends to recollect his recent past, relish his present and anticipate the future. As a prolific minstrel, he lives in the present and appears to be optimistic about his future. The paper probes memory as an envisioning component that works as a prime agent of all human perception. The substantial use of memory enlightens on the poet’s understanding of the past and present.

Dylan Thomas’ poetry brings together the concept of memory and understanding. The emerging focus of Memory studies facilitates the growth of one’s mind in capturing the principal aspects of human life and morality. As an interdisciplinary theory, it began to evolve during the 1990s. The discourse of memory studies envisages social, cultural, economic, historical and individual trajectories. The present paper attempts to read memory as an antecedent to the poet’s thoughts, ideas and emotions. Craig considers memory as “the human capacity to remember words and things, information and actions, and then to recall these for contemplation or adjustment, is understood universally to be our memory” (Craig 278). Thomas also seems to relive his thoughts about his past attachments and present innovations. His manner of recollection reflects the culture and traditional practices of Wales.

Astrid Erll, in the Introduction, of *Memory in Culture* writes: “Memories are not objective images or past perceptions, even less of a past reality. They are subjective, highly

selective reconstructions, dependent on the situation in which they are recalled" (8). Memory always gives value to past interests and the present state. She thus says: "Much of poetry, certain forms of drama... can actually be described as the literary representations of individual memory " (Erll 77).

Again, in *Narrative and Cultural Memory*, Erll writes: "... the narratological distinction between an 'experiencing I' and 'narrating I' already rests on a (largely implicit) concept of memory, namely on the idea that there is a difference between pre-narrative on the one hand, and, on the other, Narrative memory which creates meaning retrospectively " (Erll 77). She here insists on the use of first person narration for any kind of literary representation of discrete memory.

In Chapter VII, titled "Afterword: Whither Memory Studies", Erll tries to define the genre of memory studies as: "memory studies is interested in the entire spectrum of possible interrelations between past, present and future as they take shape in socio-cultural contexts" (Erll 173). He further says memory is a "process and movement, rather than as a phenomenon that is fixed in time and space ..." (Erll 173). Memory appears as a framework that 'enables change' (Erll 174). She says: "Memory Studies is therefore not an excuse in nostalgia, but can be a method to discover and reflect the mechanisms and potentiality of cultural change and renewal. It is memory that helps to shape our present and future as well. It particularly maintains a temporal sequence relating to individual justification, collective perspective and social involvement. Whatever form memory adopts, it always links to culturality" (Erll 174).

Moreover, Birgit Neumann writes that texts "are concerned with the mnemonic presence of the past in the present, they re-examine the relationship between the past and the present, and they illuminate the manifold functions that memories fulfil for the constitution of identity" (Neumann 333-334). Thomas' poetry refers to the manifold manifestations of his memory lane. His "Poem in October" refers to the fragrance that the month of October

brings. It provides him a platform to relive his past, to be joyous in his present and to be creative in his future. He receives an extensive mosaic from his nearby ecology. He sets out to explore the town and the woods, the earth and heaven, the farm and the shore, the country and the hill and so on. The poem begins with "thirtieth year to heaven" (Thomas 1) when he hears the musical roar from the priestly shore. His birthday begins with the water. When he says: "And walked abroad in a shower of all my days" (Thomas 16), he reflects the tranquil state of his joyous years. The words 'border' (18), 'gates' (19) and 'closed' (20) specify his present state of oblivion. The clouds and the bushes, the rain and the wind, the blackbirds and the sun- cover his mind with relentless thoughts and emotions. The October sun and 'the rainy autumn' (15) stabilize his mind with hope and enlightenment. He here refers to Laugharne, the town which was still sleeping. In an interview, Thomas exclaims: "strangest town in Wales" with the philosophy of "it will be the same in a hundred years' time" (Interview).

In the Introduction, Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone write: "Memory in common use is tied to the individual..."(Hodgkin and Radstone 8). Further, they say: "memory as concept, rather than as given phenomenon- has been increasingly significant over the last couple of decades" (Hodgkin and Radstone 4). The different entities of nature trigger Thomas's memory of the place. His nostalgic-self drowns in memory of his mother. The references to subtle rain, 'the sea deluged Church', and 'the brown castle' (Thomas 34) commemorate his childhood epoch. The spring and the summer garden transform his psychological self to a rhythmic one. The first four stanzas refer to the cheerful and optimistic country that regulates the mind of the poet. He on his birthday wakes up at the call of the forestland and sets towards the 'still sleeping town' (Thomas 10) that refers to the invariable beauty and wonder of Laugharne. The word 'year' refers to the time frame, and the word 'heaven' suggests his gradual experience as a man of elegance and a poet of expression. The morning marks his hope and satisfaction with which he moves to the town of Laugharne. The

'winged' (12) trees symbolizes spirituality and transcendence and the 'white' (13) horses symbolizes purity and tranquillity. The tides of autumn helps him caters to the past years of his life.

Szpunar, Watson and Dermott claim that memory is all about: “recollecting the past” (Szpunar et al. 642) and ‘envisioning the future’ (Szpunar et al. 642). They also regard memory to be a “mental phenomenon” (Szpunar et al. 642). The apples and pears in “Poem in October” appear to be the parameters of his childhood days. The phrase 'red currants' (Thomas 45) satisfy his quest to discover his infancy anew. Klein says in 'On the Emergence of Memory': "If history is objective in the coldest, hardest sense of the word, memory is subjective in the warmest, most inviting senses of that word" (Klein 130). For Thomas memory helps to reshape the past.

The concluding two stanzas depict him as a man of similar texture during his infancy. His childhood in fact begins with these woods, rivers and the sea. The place announces its generosity that motivates his life. The phrase ‘twice fold’ symbolises his visit to the countryside in the company of his mother. He defines himself then and now, where Nature’s appraisal is a constant phenomenon. This aspect of memory rationalises his spirit as a poet. The place seems to speak his ‘heart’s truth’ (Thomas 68). He sings in praise, wisdom and elegance for the space on his birthdays.

Memory is an absolute experience. To Boyer, memory “serves to organize current behaviour” (Boyer 3) that regulates one’s identity. In the essay “Creating a New Discipline of Memory Studies”, Roediger and Wertsch define memory as “a singular noun, as though memory is one thing or one type, when in actuality, the term is almost always most useful when accompanied by a modifier” (Roediger and Wertsch 10).

William Wordsworth in *The Prelude* writes: “There are in our existence spots of time” (Wordsworth 260). Moreover, in Chapter 8 “A Journey through Memory”, Annette

Kuhn says that memory helps in 'making identities' (Kuhn 179). She caters to personal memory that would talk about "remembered events" (Kuhn 179).

Assman writes that the focus of memory "is less on the recall of knowledge than on the reproducibility of feelings" (Assman 91). Thomas talks about a place that should be revisited. His poetry posits experience and identity. His poem "Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night" talks about the fear that death creates among man. The poem begins with "Do not go gentle into that good night", which refers to the semiotic meaning of death. The poem has been divided into six sections, each of which is dealing with a different tone of memory. The manifestation of varied human potential corresponds to the rhetoric of memory. He categorizes humans into four kinds, viz. wise men, good men, wild men and grave men. The two rhyming words 'night' and 'light' are related to death and life respectively caters to his use of memory. In one such instance the poet remembers his father who was on his deathbed. Here the denotative meaning of old age seems to be powerful and poignant. The rightness of the wise, the brightness of the good, the grievance of the wild and the blindness of the grave mark the accompaniment of his thoughts and their representation. The poem highlights the pragmatic power of memory. Thomas's memory shifts from a statement to an utter expression. The mediation between the two brings in its evocative.

Aristotle writes: "memory relates to the past" (Aristotle 607). He says "Memory is, therefore, neither perception nor conception, but a state or affection of one of these, conditioned by lapse of time" (Aristotle 26). Memory works as an affection. The line: "Rage, rage against the dying of the light" (Thomas 3) is repeated four times, exploring his considerate approach toward death. Death for him is a mere reality. It has a universal configuration in itself.

Memory is a natural phenomenon that overrules the concept of artificiality and credulity. The poet is supplemented by the memories to frame his present and anticipate the future. In Thomas's most of the poems memory is present intrinsically. It is always a purposeful exhibition of values and morals. It is regulatory in nature and form. His poems radiate both the public and the private sphere. The first poem explores the strong bond that he shares with his mother. The moment he ushers his infancy and childhood he epitomizes his mother and her nurture. His reference to Nature and his mother's nurture specify his benevolence and inclination.

"Poem in October" appeared in the 1946 collection *Deaths and Entrances*. The poem abounds in reliability, autonomy and poetic excellence. His mother's presence tremendously affects his configuration with natural resources. He begins to fathom the past twenty-nine birthdays which he had spent as a part of an entity in Nature. He remembers the time he had spent with his mother which he can never forget. Through the memory of his mother he recalls his birth and infancy, childhood and memory and life and belongingness. The poem's setting is Laugharne, where he witnesses his growth and upbringing. He relishes his transformation from innocence to maturity. His survival as a child and his existence as a mature persona fill in the fundamental proximity in the poem.

His last volume of poetry *Country Sleep* contains the poem "Do not go Gentle into that Good Night". Here, 'death' acts as a metaphor that identifies the poet's mental imbalance. His father's physical decay prompts him to write this poem. His father was his guide and tutor. He becomes awestruck by the thought of losing his father. When he talks about the death of his father, he directly refers to the element of 'sleep'. He holds the view that with the death of his father, the whole country will live in sleep. He remembers the good and gentle time that he had spent with his father when he was all well. The emotional

emphasis makes the poem a villanelle. It is sickness and old age that define the reality of human life, and not radiance and skill.

His poetic world deals with absorption and exclusiveness. Both the poems converge to uncover his family life and natural sentiments. His urge for motherly love and his father's advice condition him to grow in nature and intellect, respectively. He cherishes Nature and its abiding force that recalls the aesthetics of realization, suffering and fulfillment. This paper highlights how each word and thought records and preserves the past, holds the present and relies on the future. His self-observation and assessment becomes core in the realm of evocation. In the first poem, he recalls his mother and in the second he recollects the memory of his father. Through both poems, he offers a grand way of regenerating his life's axioms. Urania Milevski and Lena Wetenkamp rightly say: "... literature, are being studied for their potential to represent the past in the present" ( Milevski and Wetenkamp 197).

One of the most noted German philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer renounces the power of writing. He writes: "This is like nothing else that has come down to us from the past" (Gadamer 145). Similarly, Dylan Thomas immortalizes his parent's memory along with the memory of various exigencies of nature. He wishes to sing in praise of the cosmos and announce his awareness of his conscious poetic persona. "Poem in October" categorises time in the form of the morning majesty and midday grandeur. He skilfully compares his childhood with the ideal beauty of Nature and his adulthood with the cosmic greatness of Nature. He dedicates autumn, his birth month to his genitors. He becomes a storyteller being inspired by his mother. She was of amazing personality. He was a delicate child. His birthday helps him restore his mother's unconditional support to lead a pleasant life. It is always in response to the country landscape that he refers to his mother. Moreover, the last lines of his poem "Do not Go Gentle into that Good Night" mark the profundity and the indomitable spirit of death. The poem expresses his lament and grief over his father's aging and

approaching death. His father David John Thomas's love of literature inspires him to learn the English language. He dedicates his poem "Do not Go Gentle into that Good Night" to his father's last day's struggle.

Further, Horace is of the view: "Memory and imagination are so closely linked that imagination can only use what memory has to offer her, ..." (Horace 21). Further, Aristotle holds the view that memory "relates to the past". He also claims: "Memory is, therefore, neither perception nor conception, but a state or affection of one of these, conditioned by lapse of time". Moreover, in one of the Odes, Horace writes that poetry is the best medium for planting memory. Classical writers like Aristotle and Horace opt for a superior range of time in recycling images and objects from the past. Both poems explore the elements of rejuvenation and adjustment.

Michelle Lowrie in "Spleen and the Momentum: Memory in Horace and Baudelaire" argues for a "kind of poetic memory" (Lowrie 42) in Horace's first lyric collection "Odes 3.30". It further offers a triumph of the past events in ushering the present. Moreover, S. Thom calls memory the "very basis for all human development" (Thom 43). Andre Bagoo also writes: "Reading a poem is like reading a poet and, in turn, everything that has touched him Bagoo" (Bagoo). He remarks that "Poem in October" is an "immersive experience, transformed when read in situ at the Dylan Thomas walk which overlooks Laugharne" (Bagoo). Further, the Dylan Thomas Society considers the Swansea-born poet and author, Dylan Thomas, as one of the "most influential figures in literature in Wales and the world" (Dylan Thomas Society). The Chairman of the society Geoff Haden shares "to restore its position as the pre-eminent source of information about Dylan, his life, his work and his family" (Haden). He further describes Thomas as the 'man of words' (Haden).

His love and gratitude situate the enduring beauty and abiding novelty of the town. The clouds and the bushes sing in appreciation of the poet. The poet is greeted by the woods.

The soothing wind illuminates the poet's mind and thoughts. It was a pleasant panorama altogether. The cold wind and the rhythmic rain mark the beauty of the horizon. The wood is the constant companion of the poet. The blue sky persuades him to recollect his childhood provocation. Memory acts as a mechanism to show his association with time, place and action. It is an invocation which locates one's cultural proliferation and individual amalgamation.

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