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Passage of Time and Loss of Childhood in Dylan Thomas's *Fern Hill* and William Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*

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ABSTRACT

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) is one of the greatest twentieth century poets, who composed poetry in English. His passionate emotions and his personal, lyrical writing style make him be alike the Romantic poets than the poets of his era. Much of Thomas's works were influenced by his early experiences and contacts with the natural world, especially his famous poem, *Fern Hill*. This paper aims to compare Thomas's *Fern Hill* with Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* to illustrate the poets' different attitudes towards time and childhood. In *Fern Hill*, Thomas's attitude towards childhood changes from one of happiness and satisfaction to grief and loss of innocence and carefreeness. Thomas believes that Time seems like a hero to a child and allows him to be innocent and carefree; but as the child grows older and loses his childhood, he considers Time as a villain who imprisons him and does not let him enjoy life anymore and robs his childhood's blessings and treasures. Conversely, Wordsworth in his *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* expressed his belief that although Time has taken his childhood creativity and imagination, but matured his thought and reason and given him insight and experience in exchange. Therefore, although Thomas and Wordsworth are both mournful at the loss of the childhood and its blessings, Wordsworth appreciates the adulthood insight, knowledge, experience, and philosophical mind. So, apparently Wordsworth's poem is more inspiring and hopeful than Thomas's in which he accepted being aged regretfully of his childhood, while Wordsworth's poem enlightens the readers on how to feel happy and grateful of the rewards of adulthood.

Keywords: Dylan Thomas; *Fern Hill*; Loss of Childhood; *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*; Passage of Time; Wordsworth

I. INTRODUCTION

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953), a Welsh poet, is considered as one of the most prominent poets of the twentieth century. Unlike his contemporary Modernist poets, he composed personal poems not for the public declaration. Actually, “Thomas’s verse shows little awareness of the social, political and industrial period in which it was written. ... Thomas appeals to the emotions at a primitive and elemental level” (Thorne, 300). This trait made him resemble the eighteenth century Romantic poets not the twentieth century Modernist ones. He filled his poems with different imageries and believed that poetic images “must go through all the rational processes of the intellect” (*Poetic Manifesto*, 159). For Thomas, imagery played an important role in his poetry as he confessed this fact in a letter he wrote to Henry Treece.

About Thomas’s writing style, Selby asserted that: “there is in the Welsh bardic tradition much that is absolutely fundamental to Thomas’ writing: its highly lyrical qualities; its strict formal control and an essentially romantic conception of the poet’s function in society” (98). In the other hand, there were some critics who accused Thomas of composing obscure, unreasonable, and meaningless poetry. For example, Crehan states that ambiguity and the density of myriad and inconsistent meanings exist in Thomas’s poems. But, Thomas defended “himself against the charge of writing” in “an irrational and unintelligible” way and declared that in poetry, “every line is meant to be understood; the reader is meant to understand every poem by thinking and feeling about it...” (Christie, 64). Thomas claimed that his “own obscurity is an unfashionable one, based, as it is, on a preconceived symbolism...” (Fitzgibbon, 97). He disapproved composing simple, completely clear, and unambiguous poems and wanted his readers to think and try harder to find out the underlying meaning of the poems. “This suggests that where the language seems obscure, it is the result of conscious manipulation rather than carelessness” (Thorne, 301). According to Immanuel Kant, the poet constantly tries “to go beyond the limits of experience and to present them to Sense with a completeness of which there is no example in nature” (118). So, Thomas also aimed to explore “a world that existed beneath the surface of everyday life” (Thorne, 300) and by concealing his real intention and the true meaning of the poem beneath its surface, he wanted to challenge his readers and to make them reflect on his poem more.

In 1946, he published a book named *Deaths and Entrances*, a collection of his lyric poems. One of the best poems of this collection is “Fern Hill” in which he recalled his childhood and lamented its loss. Since Thomas pursued “more personal themes that originated in his own experiences,” (Gunton and Harris, 358), *Fern Hill* can be regarded as an autobiographical poem as well in which Thomas portrayed Carmarthen farm, a place where he had spent most of his time as a child. Such a rural environment and beautiful natural world, in contrast to the war-torn city, left a profound impression on Thomas and inspired him to compose his personal, emotional poem. Indeed, in the time of the Second World War, Thomas went to Swansea countryside and his revisit to such a beautiful, natural landscape urged him to write *Fern Hill* in which he, as an adult pondered about the passage of time and loss of innocence and felt nostalgic for the tranquility, purity, and carefreeness of his

childhood. In *Fern Hill*, as an autobiographical poem, Thomas used his childhood memories and there are so many images in *Fern Hill* which are based on Thomas's childhood experiences. Cohen described Thomas as "a naturally unintellectual poet" who "allowed a dream-like association of images, many of them taken from childhood memories, to form the connecting thread on which a poem was to be hung" (167).

Another famous British poet is William Wordsworth (1770-1850) who expressed his views about passage of time and loss of childhood in his poem, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality". Since by reading Thomas's *Fern Hill*, "... one feels ... the influence of the Wordsworth of the 'Intimations' Ode" (Larrissy, 139), the aim of this paper is to discuss the different attitudes of these two poets, Thomas and Wordsworth, towards passage of time and loss of childhood by analyzing their poems, *Fern Hill* and *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*. Both Thomas and Wordsworth lament the fact that as a man ages, he is being deprived of great blessings of his childhood such as creative imagination, purity, and joy. The difference between them is that as Thomas disappointedly regrets the passage of enjoyable time of childhood, he sees no bright future for man's condition, whereas, Wordsworth believes that a man can make up for such a loss by appealing to his childhood memories to feel refreshed and cheerful. In other words, as Davies stated, "Too often Dylan Thomas, like Wordsworth, is celebrated in portraits reflecting a later self..." (*Dylan Thomas*, 1). Both poets tried to portray a "later self", what becomes a man after he left his childhood behind. While Thomas believes this "later self" of man is just full of remorse, sadness, and grief, Wordsworth states that this man still has the chance to feel cheerful and lively by recollecting his childhood memories.

II. DISCUSSION: PASSAGE OF TIME AND LOSS OF CHILDHOOD IN THOMAS'S *FERN HILL* AND WORDSWORTH'S *ODE: INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY*

In *Fern Hill*, there is a mature, adult narrator who remembers the calmness and delight of childhood and its close and intimate relationship with the natural world. When he was a child, he felt exultantly happy and was carefree, and innocent; but as he gradually grew up to adulthood, he realized the mortality of childhood, its blessing and even adulthood. Indeed, "Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill" is best seen as" a portrait of the "relationship of youth, time, and death" (Jenkins, 1180).

In a child's eyes, the world seems to be beautiful, wonderful, and fresh, on the contrary, an adult sees the same world drab, monotonous, unsatisfactory, and disappointing. He regretfully looks back at past and his blissful childhood and waits disappointedly for his fate which is doomed to mortality and death. Actually, in his poem, Thomas intentionally used contradictory words and portrayed opposing imageries in it, since he believed that "the satisfactory moment of peace is to be attained through a balance of warring elements in the images" ("Notes on the imagery of Dylan Thomas", 155). For example, in *Fern Hill*, there are different opposite images like being a "young", "happy", "carefree" "prince" versus, being "dying" "in ... chains". There are also opposite words such as "light" and "dark", "shadow" and "shining" in this poem. There are opposite concepts as well; for instance, ignorance and maturity, childhood and adulthood. Besides what mentioned here, there are "the contrast between the adult and child perceptions of the world" which "is made clear in the frequent references to time throughout the poem. The first line opens with the adverb "Now" in the initial position. This conveys a sense of immediacy that is interestingly juxtaposed with the

past tense verb “was”. The conflict created in this way is central to the theme of the poem- a past time of innocence and joy” has been passed and “an adult now aware of his own mortality” waits for his inevitable death (Thorne, 318).

In line one, the adult speaker of the poem remembers his childhood and the time when he was happy, oblivious, “young and easy”. He was careless about time and enjoyed watching the beautiful scenery while Time with “his eyes” constantly controlled the child and had him under his own watchful gaze. The blithe, happy child identified with the nature and even considered himself as the “prince of the apple towns” (Thomas, *Fern Hill* 6). The speaker, as a child, was so carefree, cheerful, and immersed in his imaginative world that he was not aware of time and temporariness of his blessed childhood. Actually, it was Time which “let” the child do what he wishes freely. Actually, the ignorant boy said innocently: “I ran my heedless ways” (Thomas, *Fern Hill* 640) because he was not still aware of the power of Time which was present in every single moment of his life and wanted to steal away his joy, carefreeness, innocence, and youth. “In his lordly and carefree joy the boy believes that all things are made for him alone. But in reality, time is only tolerating this freedom. The real “lord” of things is time itself, and at last time will be the cause of his losing the farm and all his happiness. The farm stands for the boy’s youth and joy to such an extent that when it vanishes he is grown up and his carefree gladness is gone” (Laurentia C.S.J., 1). Apparently, Time sees how happy the child is and “in the mercy of his means” (Thomas, *Fern Hill* 52), lets the child be free and do whatever he wants, while the naïve child is ignorant of the power of Time. In the seventh line, the disrupted collocation, “once below a time” (Thomas, *Fern Hill*), shows men’s subjection to time and Thomas’s using the word “below” instead of upon, emphasizes the power of time to control men. The innocent child, who was ignorant of time and its power, felt delightful and “carefree” and imagined that such kind of happiness also existed in his surroundings too. For example, “the farm”, “the happy yard”, “the gay house” represent the way the innocent, happy child sees his environment and the way he celebrates his oneness with the beautiful natural world around him and achieved “... an ecstatic epiphany in which the natural world and the child become one” (Thorne, 316). It is perceivable that “green” is the most omnipresent and pervasive color in this poem which has the positive connotation of the freshness, liveliness, and energy of the natural world and even of the child himself as he said: “I was green” (Thomas, *Fern Hill* 10). But, Time is still in power and has the authority and allows the child to have fun, while the child does not know that all this joyful, innocent, and blissful childhood will not last forever. The oblivious, naïve child laughs and enjoys life innocently. Thomas adds emphasis on the child’s innocence and purity by portraying how holy and sacred the child sees the natural scenery. For example, the child said: “...the Sabbath rang slowly in the pebbles of the holy stream” (Thomas, *Fern Hill* 17-18). Even the allusion to “Adam and maiden” reinforces the child’s purity and his innocent view about his Eden-like surroundings. In fact, Thomas utilized religious symbolic imagery to reinforce the central theme of his poem, which is “the transience of youth and joy” and “loss of innocence”. (Laurentia C.S.J., 1, 3).

Gradually, the speaker’s attitude and tone changes from ecstasy and happiness to sadness and lamentation. As the child grew up, Time took childhood’s blessing from him and led him out of his imaginary, peaceful, and elegant Eden. “By the final stanzas, however, the adult’s sense of mortality is beginning to intrude upon the exaltation of the child’s vision” (Thorne, 318). The speaker, as an adult, found out that Time has spoiled his childish, naïve illusion of an eternal joy and happiness and throw him out of his Eden-like world. No more

this adult speaker can see the world bright and beautiful; he sees “shadow” instead. Then, he sighed and regretted his youth “Oh as I was young and easy...” (Thomas, *Fern Hill* 52). He knew that his innocent childhood has been passed during the passage of time and now he expresses his melancholy and nostalgia. He feels that he is not free anymore, but “in chains like the sea” (Thomas, *Fern Hill* 54) and knows that the mortal man is bound by time and his innocence fades by the passage of time.

At first when the child was so blissful and glad, he was not neither worry nor mindful of anything. He said: “nothing I cared” (Thomas, *Fern Hill* 42) which shows his ignorance of the transience of his blissful childhood and inevitable adulthood which leads consequently to death. However, in the final stanza, the adult speaker acknowledged the fact that all his youth has gone away and now he feels “dying” not energetic and lively as he felt before. By “dying”, he meant his youth and innocence were dead and Time has taken all of those sweet, innocent, and pure blessings from him. He realized the temporariness of everything and everybody and as he celebrated “the glory and joy of life” in childhood, he also lamented “the inevitability of eventual death” (Macbeth 226). In this poem, *Fern Hill*, Thomas expressed his belief that as a boy ages and becomes an adult man, he loses not only the freedom, carefreeness, grace, and innocence of childhood, but also the creative imagination which kept his mind green and fresh for making a close, united relationship with nature. Away from the Edenic blessings of childhood, man is aware of his loss of his precious youth and he suffers from agonies of remorse.

Notice the way Thomas ends his poem:

“Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea” (Thomas, *Fern Hill* 53-4).

Obviously, the grown-up speaker finally realized the fact that it was Time that let him feel green and fresh in his childhood and as he aged, Time took his childhood blessings from him and led him to his adulthood and his approaching death.

The speaker is no longer oblivious and ignorant of Time and understood that even in his exuberant childhood, he was controlled and chained by Time. Thomas aimed to “underscore the ironic role played by time, first as benign and bounteous and later as cruel and crafty” (Viswanathan, 286). Indeed, the naïve, ignorant boy thought that Time is gentle and benevolent. But, when he grew up and matured, he found out that Time is a cunning tyrant who stole all of his childhood blessings.

So, Thomas, who started his poem with a sorrowful nostalgia for the happy, carefree, and innocent childhood, finished it with a pessimistic, disappointed view about man’s joyless and hollow adulthood.

Unlike such a pessimistic, disappointed outlook towards passage of time and loss of childhood innocence and blessings, William Wordsworth has a more inspiring and hopeful attitude towards them. He was a great British Romantic poet and in 1807 published *Poem in Two Volumes* in which exists his outstanding poem, “*Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* (also known as *Ode, Immortality Ode* or *Great Ode*). Wordsworth asserted that this poem “rests entirely upon two recollections of childhood, one that of a splendour in the objects of sense which is passed away, and the other an indisposition to bend to the law of death as applying to our particular case.... A reader who has not a vivid

recollection of these feelings having existed in his mind in childhood cannot understand the poem” (Mahoney, 198).

Wordsworth’s *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* starts in a way that an adult speaker remembers his childhood, the time when everything appeared beautiful, fresh, and glorious to him. This mature, grown-up speaker now feels sad that he is no longer able to see the world gorgeous and elegant like before:

“There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
Turn wheresoe’er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more” (Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* 1-9).

As a grown-up man, he sadly admits his inability to perceive the fullness of the glorious nature around him. In the third stanza, as the speaker describes his natural surroundings, he laments the loss of his childhood creative imagination and innocent, pure emotion. He confesses that he cannot experience the same feeling of his childhood anymore:

“Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,
And while the young lambs bound
As to the tabor’s sound,
To me alone there came a thought of grief” (Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* 19-22).

The adult speaker “breaks abruptly into recognition of painful loss” (Meyers, 5) and grieves over the loss of his childhood, over “something that is gone” (Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* 54) and asks himself: “Where is it now, the glory and the dream?” (Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* 58) and obviously, he knows that he has lost his childhood vision and imaginative mind needed for seeing nature like a beautiful dream. In the fifth stanza, the speaker states that people must be awake to their origin, a realm much purer and more glorious than the earth. Eden is their origin from where all human beings have retained some memories. But, unfortunately, as a child grows older, he gradually forgets these beautiful memories and as a result he can no longer see the world by wonder and enjoy its Eden-like beauty:

“At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day” (Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* 76-7).

Finally, the man gets so involved in material world that he forgets his true origin:

“Forget the glories he hath known,

And that imperial palace whence he came” (Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* 84-85).

The speaker wants to alert people that instead of getting immersed in earthly life, pay attention to beautiful, aesthetic aspects of life. Then, he draws our attention to a new-born baby and said: “Behold the Child among his new-born blisses” (Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* 86). He considers a new-born child as the most blissful one who has recently come to this terrestrial earth from a glorious, divine, and celestial realm and who is at the centre of his parent’s attention and “is blessed with his mother’s love and his father’s” (Schneider, 6).

Then, he addresses a little boy:

“Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might
Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height” (Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* 126-7).

The speaker regards a high value for the new-born baby and the little boy and all children in general, because he believes that they still have a fresh, holy vision gained by living in heaven before coming to earth. He believes that a child, who is in harmony with nature and possessed spiritual vision, can feel life and nature intuitively and whole-heartedly.

He considers the boy as a “Mighty prophet! Seer blest! On whom those truths do rest, Which we are toiling all our lives to find, In darkness lost” (Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* 115-8). He rhetorically asks the boy, who has just come from the world of ultimate truth and still has access to his glorious, celestial origin and who has so many blessings and happiness, why he hurries to grow up and enter the adult society filled with “earthly freight” and “custom”. He regrettably states that as a child grows up and matures, he gradually becomes so involved with the materialistic world that he loses his innocent, divine vision which he possessed in his childhood.

In the ninth stanza, the speaker recalls his own childhood memories which revive a sense of freshness in him as if he has a kind of access to his perfect, innocent origin:

“The thought of our past years in me doth breed Perpetual benediction” (Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* 138-9).

This thought created such an excessive happiness in him that he wanted to share his feeling with all creatures in the natural environment around him. Although he knows he is old and not a child any more, he is not upset at all. Because he still has so many recollections of his childhood and his direct contact with the beautiful, inspiring nature that can refresh him and cheer him up like before. Finally, in the last stanza, the speaker says that he has been in love with nature so far and he decides to preserve his close relationship with the lovely nature as long as he is alive. He does not deny his mortality as a man, bound by time and doomed to death, but he is not neither mournful nor depressed. He is happy and thankful that he can still experience the same novel, original feelings by adhering to his childhood memories:

“Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give

Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” (Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* 205-208).

Wordsworth states that although through the passage of time, a man forgets his origin and loses his pure vision, he still can enjoy life and beautiful nature by recollecting his childhood memories. Wordsworth “recognizes memory’s power to evoke an early or original state of completion or grace and thereby replenish the present” (Milne, 225). So, by remembering the pleasant memories of childhood, a man can revive his childhood imagination in order to experience the same sweet feelings of his childhood. He believes that although Time caused him to lose his childhood innocence and creative imagination, his mind has been matured now and he has gained developed reason, knowledge, insight and experiences instead. The adult’s maturing mind gives him the capability to understand nature in a more sophisticated way and to compensate for the loss of his childhood strong imagination in seeing the nature magical and dream-like. In other words, Wordsworth stated his opinion in his poem that since the children have recently come from the “imperial” heaven and the memories of that divine place are still fresh in their minds, they are able to see and perceive the exquisiteness of the terrestrial world with their eyes and hearts happily. An adult man can also enjoy life by remembering his celestial, heavenly abode memories, which are actually “intimations of immortality”. So, such an ode which started with lamentation and grief over a loss, finished with a sense of sensibility and maturity, a sense of love, mercy, and oneness among all God’s creatures, or all human beings. In other words, “The whole poem represents the passage from youth to maturity – from feelings of self-pity to compassion for all mankind” (Cox, 81). So, by reading *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, one can realize Wordsworth’s personal idea about passage of time and loss of childhood and man’s status in his adulthood. He admits the agonizing loss of childhood and expressed his nostalgic grief over the loss of innocence and strong imagination of his childhood. He does not deny the fact that as a child comes to maturity, he loses his sight of the divine and the excess of emotions coming from nature’s magical, awesome beauty. But, he firmly states that a man should not be disappointed and sorrowful over what he lost; instead he can recollect his childhood memories and activate his imagination again to feel nature’s beauty unstintingly and revive his original, divine vision. He believes that he can compensate for the loss of his childhood blessings by means of his mature understanding, which makes him able to see the world anew and elegant again.

Evidently, another difference between these two poets is the way they finish their poems. Thomas ended *Fern Hill* with a gloomy and cynical attitude towards adulthood and the future of mankind. For example, in line 45, the adult speaker of the poem believes that as children grow up, Time mercilessly and indifferently lead them “out of grace”. According to Viswanathan, “Even though the poem is about the speaker’s personal loss of the Edenic world of childhood, in this stanza he generalizes on his experience and uses the plural “children”” (286). Therefore, Thomas attributes such a graceless life to all men and he claims that all children in the world who have grown up and stepped in adults’ world, as mortal creatures, are doomed to lose their blessings and to bear the bleak and dreary tasks of adulthood and finally, to wait for their impending death. In sharp contrast to Thomas’s view, Wordsworth ended his *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* in a more buoyant and sanguine way. He declared that when children grow up and age, they still have the chance to compensate for the loss of their childhood by using the new blessings that they gained in adulthood such as, a developed

mind, a sensible logic, and mature thoughts. So, all human beings must be thankful for possessing adulthood special privileges and they should openly express their sense of gratitude, love, and unity among themselves.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Dylan Thomas is a great twentieth century poet and “the content of his poems tend to be evocative and descriptive rather than narrative” (Thorne, 301). His poems are personal and emotional and in this aspect he is like Romantic poets not the poets of his own era. In this paper, Thomas’s attitude towards passage of time and loss of childhood was compared with William Wordsworth, a great eighteenth century Romantic poet. Although both Thomas and Wordsworth, in *Fern Hill* and *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* expressed their remorse over the temporariness of childhood and its blessings, their views about aging and adulthood are different. According to Davies, Dylan Thomas, like William Wordsworth, was very possessed by time. (*Dylan Thomas: Writers of Wales*, 2014). For Thomas, childhood represents total freedom, joy, carefreeness, purity, and he regards it “as a golden age of creativity and sensitivity, of oneness with the natural world” (Thorne, 306). As a child grows older, Time takes all of these blessings from him one by one until the mature, grown-up man is left with nothing except remorse, sigh, nostalgia, limitation, and sadness. So, Thomas’s *Fern Hill* wants to “combine a celebration of childhood innocence with an unavoidable recognition of mortality” (Thorne, 314). An aging man gradually understands that everything is transient and he, as a mortal man must say farewell to his childhood innocence and happiness and wait for his death sadly. In contrast to Thomas, Wordsworth has a more optimistic view. He regrets loss of childhood innocence, imagination, and many other blessings, but he believes that man can gain more experiences, wisdom, and knowledge in exchange for his youth. He admits that Time has taken his childhood happiness, divine vision, and purity away from him, but it gave him a more mature, sophisticated mind instead; by which he can remember his childhood memories and cheer himself up again.

Matthew Arnold, the well-known English poet and critic, believed that Wordsworth was a significant, talented, and skillful poet and his poems had “healing powers” that teach men how to feel young, fresh, and jubilant again even in adulthood (*Memorial Verses April 1850*). Therefore, by reading Wordsworth’s poem, one feels more happy and thankful of his adulthood, while by reading Thomas’s poem, a person feels sad over loss of childhood. And by Thomas’s mentioning of nothing deserves appreciation in adulthood, one’s sadness is intensified.

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