

To what extent was “love” an important theme in the poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym and should he be remembered primarily as a medieval courtly love poet?

An essay plan by T.J.Conde.

Introduction:

A brief overview of Dafydd ap Gwilym:

- There is no solid date for when he was born and facts about his life are sparse. Possibly born c.1315 and died c.1350 maybe from the plague. (Fulton, *Celtic Culture*, p.551)
- He is thought to have been born at Brogynin, Llanbadarn Fawr, near Aberystwyth. ‘Several poems indicate that the neighbourhood of Aberystwyth and North Ceredigion was more familiar to Dafydd than any other part of Wales’ (Bromwich, *The Poems*, Introduction p.xiii) although he seems to have travelled extensively in Wales. Familiar with Anglesey, Gwynedd and Glamorgan.
- Considered by many to be the greatest Welsh poet of all time and a ‘pioneer in the development of the cywydd meter’ (Johnston, *Pocket Guide*, p.36).
- Over 150 of his authentic poems survive with more of uncertain authorship and many wrongly ascribed to him.

Link from the overview into setting out the essay’s aims in a clear fashion:

- Explore and review the different themes and styles of Dafydd ap Gwilym’s poetry and establish the extent to which love is an important theme in his work.
- Investigate what courtly love consists of and how it can be related to Dafydd ap Gwilym’s work, eg influences, similarities, patterns etc, to determine if he should be primarily remembered as a medieval courtly love poet.

Main Body

Give a brief background to the period he was writing in:

- 1340’s to 1350’s is a likely estimate of the time he was actively writing.
- ‘Born within a generation of the defeat of the last of the independent Welsh princes’ (Edwards, *Literary Context*, p.1).
- A time where there was a transition from poets serving royal dynasties and courts to the newly established landed gentry.
- Poets of the time must adapt with this structural change in society and the loss of their patrons.

Introduce the new style of poetry that developed as a consequence of the societal changes:

- A new technique grew alongside the older traditional forms of poetry.
- Traditional forms of eulogy were still in demand, eg praise.
- Cywydd meter, Dafydd ap Gwilym was one of the forerunners of popularising this metric. Generally credited as the pioneer.
- One of the first poets of the *Cywyddwyr*, the poets using the *Cywydd* metre.

- More survives of Dafydd's work than that of his contemporaries. Shows his probable popularity, written down more than other poets.
- Uses the *Cywydd* as a tool to express his new themes.

Discuss the more traditional themes of his poetry and how the poems of this type tended to be composed in the long-established conventional forms of the time:

- 'Religious, eulogy and elegy, debate poetry and satire' (H. Edwards '*Literary Context*' p.2) referring to the more conventional genres of Dafydd's poetry.
- Tended to use accustomed metres such as *Awdl* / *Englyn*, for traditional subjects.
- The praise poetry shows that he was a master of the royal dynastic court poetry of the past. 'Poets of the Princes'.
- Possibly more of his earlier work undertaken in these styles.
- One of the first to use the new metre for praise.

Identify and label love as a main theme and demonstrate how fundamentally important and integral it is to Dafydd's work. Show that nature is equally as important and how the two are often used together:

- *Cywydd* meter was used for the new themes of love and nature. A fresh innovative form fitting to the new topics.
- 'Roughly four of every five poems which maybe reliably ascribed to Dafydd concern love and the natural world' (H. Edwards - *The Literary Context* p.2). This quote shows the degree to which love is extensive in Dafydd's work.
- Nature and love often used together entwined in a symbiotic fashion.
- Utilises the seasons and champions summer as the season for love.
- Uses nature imagery and symbolism in love poems.
- Often a woodland setting is applied as a backdrop to love, house of leaves ideal for lovers' trysts.
- Nature is regularly the messenger of love.
- Makes himself the centre of his poetry using his love affair with Morfudd, revolutionary in Wales compared to the more objective court poetry of the past.

Present the concept of courtly love and assess to what extent it influences the poems:

- Medieval poetry theme, 'The chief theme expressed in poetry of this kind was that of unfulfilled love for an unattainable person sublimated into poetic expression' (use quote from p.449 *Celtic culture*)
- Provençal court poets, the Troubadours, South Eastern France active late 11th century.
- Some argue the theme was extant in Welsh literature before the Troubadours and the spread of courtly love from Provençal, eg. In the *Mabinogi*.
- Present in the poems about Dyddgu who clearly represents the unattainable lady synonymous with courtly love.
- Dyddgu poems the most obvious display of courtly love but more subtle elements exist throughout.
- Imagery of the spear of love derived from cupid's arrow.
- Lovers imminent death due to a girl's indifference and the jealous husband. (Edwards *literary context* p.11).

Show other European literary influences within the work of Dafydd ap Gwilym:

- Encountered French continental poetry at some point in time and embraced some of the concepts into his own work. Possibly encountered through the church, links to continental Europe.
- Words borrowed from French in the poems, French the language of Anglo-Norman administration at the time.
- The poems about his relationship with Morfudd are more numerous than those of Dyddgu and have similarities with the *Fabliau* literature tradition. Dafydd as the poet chasing the faithless wife Morfudd.
- *Pastourelle* similarities in 'A Stubborn girl' (Edwards literary context p.15).
- *Chansen de malmarié* links to the Morfudd poems 'Unfounded suspicion' (Edwards literary context p.15).

Conclusion

To what extent is love an important theme?

- It is one of his main themes, as discussed, and must be considered as an extremely important and integral theme in his work.
- He was more than just a love poet however, equally important as a theme is nature and his poems about nature are unique in terms of the time.
- The use of love together with nature is a fundamental element of his poetry.
- If we took away love from the poetry as a theme, what would be left?

Should he be remembered primarily as a medieval courtly love poet?

- No, should not be remembered primarily as a courtly love poet.
- Elements of influence from courtly love can clearly be seen, most prominent in Dyddgu poems.
- Continental literature inspirations other than courtly love can be seen in his work.
- Courtly love connections are not prevalent enough throughout the entire collection in their purest form to warrant the label of 'primarily' put forward in the title question.
- Courtly love was a widespread literary trend of the time for most of Western Europe. Most poets of the time will have some degree of courtly love influence.
- To label him primarily a medieval courtly love poet does a great injustice to his creative flair and originality.

Tie the two together for a final concluding summary answering both the questions contained within the essay title:

- Conclude that love is an important central theme in the poetry and should be considered so but equally is that of nature and they are used by Dafydd frequently as one.
- Love is a deep-rooted aspect of the works, to the extent that it must be considered the most important theme along with nature.
- He should not be remembered primarily as a courtly love poet. While significant influence of it exists in the work of Dafydd and he is renowned for it, so does influence from other literary sources and concepts.
- 'More significant than any influence are Dafydd's innate powers of imagination and creative energy, which enable him to transform whatever he may have read or heard in the melting pot of his own unique vision'. (H. Edwards, Literary context p.1).

- He was able to draw on continental concepts as inspiration and use his imaginative genius to craft his own original ideas.
- He would be better remembered as an inventive, creative master who drew on European literary trends, including courtly love as well as native influences and then combined them with his obvious prowess in traditional Welsh poetry to craft a fresh revolutionary entity.
- Both statements, to what extent is love an important theme? / should he be remembered primarily as a courtly love poet? to a certain degree overlook his skills in the old traditional courtly poetry, which were considerable.

Sample Paragraph

Dafydd ap Gwilym 'is regarded by many as the greatest Welsh poet of any period.'¹ Intriguingly, for someone held in such esteem, facts surrounding his life are sparse and most of what we know about the man himself comes from his own work. He is thought to have been born in Brogynin, Llanbadarn Fawr, near Aberystwyth, possibly c.1315 and probably died c.1350, perhaps from the plague.² A number of poems in the surviving collection point to him having been a native of this area. Dafydd seems to have travelled extensively throughout Wales with areas of Gwynedd and Anglesey also appearing to be familiar to the poet.³ He was an innovative pioneer of the cywydd metre and around 150 existing poems can be safely accredited to him, with many more of dubious or false authorship incorrectly ascribed over the centuries.⁴ The sheer volume of surviving work by Dafydd ap Gwilym in comparison to his contemporaries, despite his comparatively short life time pays testament to his popularity throughout the ages.

¹ D. Johnston, *A Pocket Guide: The Literature Of Wales*, (Cardiff: University Of Wales Press, 1994) pp.36-39.

² H. Fulton, 'Dafydd ap Gwilym' in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed By John T. Koch, (Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: ABC-CLIO 2006) pp.551-552.

³ R. Bromwich, *Dafydd Ap Gwilym: A Selection Of Poems*, (Llandysul: Gomer press, 1982) p.xiii.

⁴ Johnston, *A Pocket Guide*, pp.36-39.

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