

Dylan Thomas in the Welsh Countryside:  
An Analysis of “The Peaches” and “A Visit to Grandpa’s”

Zelei Lian    2306368

Word Count: 4187

The Background: *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*

Dylan Thomas is known foremost as a prodigious poet who has left an indelible literary legacy (and literally so in Swansea, his birthplace, with numerous tangible and intangible honors bestowed on him)<sup>1</sup>, but he is no less brilliant as a master of the short story genre. The two short stories surveyed in this little essay, “The Peaches” and “A Visit to Grandpa’s”, are the two opening chapters of his most famous volume of short fiction, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, which was first put to print by the publisher Dent in 1940 at the suggestion of his editor-cum-friend Richard Bishop. Bishop suggested autobiographical fiction, and Thomas gladly obliged to dwell on his Welsh childhood.

The title immediately conjures an indebtedness to the literary giant and pioneer of short stories James Joyce and his similarly titled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. It is no wonder that many comparisons are pursued along this line of inquiry, but often offering no obvious enlightenment on either book. A recent example I came across was from an anthology on reading Dylan Thomas, with bold assertions throwing about:

---

<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, I wrote the bulk of this assignment essay in the Dylan Thomas Center, Swansea, which proves very helpful to trace the steps through his Welsh childhood.

...Dylan Thomas's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940). Thomas's title borrows its shape from Joyce's earlier novel, precisely because the Joycean protagonist undergoes the evolution of a sensibility that ends up rejecting, and literally departing from, the available forms of socialisation. By exchanging dog for man, Thomas's own title offers to portray a different degree, indeed a different order, of departure from the norm. <sup>2</sup>

In examples such as this one, it often amazes me how an analysis of Dylan Thomas' supposed indebtedness and adaption of James Joyce can meander on without a single quote from the stories themselves. The true link between these two titles may be less noteworthy. Dylan Thomas downplayed the title simply as "flippant... for moneymaking reasons". In 1951 he went on to directly address the Joyce association:

Joyce used the painting title for the first time as the title of a literary work. I myself made a bit of doggish fun of the painting-title and, of course, intended no possible reference to Joyce. I do not think Joyce has had any hand at all in my writing; certainly his *Ulysses* has not. On the other hand, I cannot deny the shaping of some of my *Portrait* stories might owe something to Joyce's stories in the volume, *Dubliners*. But then *Dubliners* was a pioneering work in the world of the short stories, and no good storywriter since can have failed, in some way, however little, to have benefited by it. <sup>3</sup>

The author may not have the final authority in having his work explained or interpreted in a certain way,<sup>4</sup> but in this issue of title I think it is fair to follow what Thomas has suggested, and not overstretch the literary indebtedness and inflate the *Young Man - Young Dog* counterparts.

---

<sup>2</sup> Rod Mengham, "Nosing Around: *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*", in *Reading Dylan Thomas*, ed. Edward Allen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Dylan Thomas, "Poetic Manifesto", in *Early Prose Writings*, ed. by Walford Davies (London: Dent, 1971), 157.

<sup>4</sup> Dylan Thomas in several occasions downplayed the seriousness of his *Portrait* stories, saying they are no more than "illuminated reporting", and "the writing of them means the writing of a number of poems less". These quip, I believe, should not be taken at face value and mask the seriousness in his stories. See Letter to Vernon Watkin, postmarked 30 January, 1940.

If there is indeed a common thread, besides that both are bildungsroman in some way, and both shift expertly in first-person and third-person perspectives, it may mostly be that while Joyce ponders on the issue of Irishness, Thomas is engaged in nostalgic reflection on his Anglo-Welsh background. This is especially true of his first two stories, “The Peaches” and “A Visit to Grandpa’s”, which not only correspond to the earliest stage in his bildungsroman with the remaining eight stories about later stages of life in Swansea, but are also written first, both in 1938, and published first in periodicals, then included in the *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* with only slight variation. Together, the two evidently autobiographical stories offer glimpses of his observations and thoughts on his Welsh upbringing and his encounter with Welshness.

### The Two Sides of the Welsh Countryside

Dylan Thomas was brought up in an English-speaking suburban enclave in Swansea, South Wales, where he has apparently led a comfortable and doted life. On an Anglo-Welsh scale, his upbringing seems to tilt towards the former. For example, his daughter Aeronwy Thomas recollects in an introduction essay to *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* that her grandmother would ask her Welsh-speaking aunties in the kitchen to “Speak English... Dad doesn’t like Welsh in front of Aeron”, and her schoolmaster grandfather D. J. Thomas “forbade Welsh being spoken to me as he had forbidden it in my father’s presence”.<sup>5</sup>

As a result, it is as an outsider that the young Dylan Thomas enters the world of the Welsh countryside with the two visits he made to his maternal side of relative (Annie Jones’ Fernhill farm in Llangain) and paternal side of family (grandpa) in Johnstown, Carmarthen. These two

---

<sup>5</sup> Aeronwy Thomas, “Introduction”, in Dylan Thomas, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (London: Orion Publishing, 2014), 3.

visits, more importantly, expose the two diametrically opposed sides of the Welsh countryside or Welshness.

On one hand, the Welsh countryside is inferior, poor, hollow, scary, and derelict. “The Peaches”, recounting a holiday in auntie Jones’ Fernhill farm (Gorsehill farm in the story), is littered with references to the plights in the countryside, mostly notably its dire economic plight. The Jones are certainly poor, which could partly explain their eagerness in welcoming to farm Dylan’s Swansea friend Jack, the thirty shillings fee-paying holiday maker. Uncle Jim is a drunkard, who would not hesitate to sell a pig to have drinks. “Last Christmas he took a sheep over his shoulder, and he was pissed for ten days.” His son Gwilym revealed. The timid Auntie complained only to be scowled at:

‘There’s one pig gone,’ she said. ‘Oh, why do you have to do it, Jim?

There’s nothing left now. We’ll never be able to carry on.’

‘Money! money! money!’ he said.

The drunkenness is only but a manifestation of the general decline in the Welsh rural areas. The sorry state of the farm is apparent:

The ramshackle outhouses had tumbling, rotten roofs, jagged holes in their sides, broken shutters, and peeling whitewash; rusty screws ripped out from the dangling, crooked boards; the lean cat of the night before sat snugly between the splintered jaws of bottles, cleaning its face, on the tip of the rubbish pile that rose triangular and smelling sweet and strong to the level of the riddled cart-house roof. There was nowhere like that farm-yard in all the slapdash county, nowhere so poor and grand and dirty as that square of mud and rubbish and bad wood and falling stone, where a bucketful of old and bedraggled hens scratched and laid small eggs.

The rural farm is a hollow place, giving the young Dylan the chills. In one sentence the author uses four ‘hollow’s:

We drove into the farm-yard of Gorsehill, where the cobbles rang and the black, empty stables took up the ringing and hollowed it so that we drew up in a hollow circle of darkness and the mare was a hollow animal and nothing lived in the hollow house at the end of the yard but two sticks with faces scooped out of turnips.

When Mrs Williams came to the rescue of Jack, they left in a chauffeured car and stared at “the ruin of Gorsehill”. And of course there is the large tin of peaches, which Auntie saves only for specially occasions. The underused parlour, where the meeting between the countryside host and the suburban guests takes place, has apparently seen better days:

The best room smelt of moth balls and fur and damp and dead plants and stale, sour air. Two glass cases on wooden coffin-boxes lined the window wall. You looked at the weed-grown vegetable garden through a stuffed fox’s legs, over a partridge’s head, along the red-paint-stained breast of a stiff wild duck. A case of china and pewter, trinkets, teeth, family brooches, stood beyond the bandy table; there was a large oil lamp on the patchwork table-cloth, a Bible with a clasp, a tall vase with a draped woman about to bathe on it, and a framed photograph of Annie, Uncle Jim, and Gwilym smiling in front of a fern-pot.

The mothballed parlour, the best room, is pathetic in that the Jones family takes pains to preserve what is left of its pretense—with framed family photo, glass cases, a Bible with a clasp, and a harmonium—only to find it unused with “stale, sour air”. When the snobbish Mrs Williams, from a superior social class, descends onto the scene and “dusted the seat of a chair with a lace handkerchief from her bag before sitting down”, she is dusting away the rural inferiority. Moreover, by rejecting the offered peach tin, here as a symbol of the decadent Welsh rural hospitality, against the insistence of the timid host, Mrs Williams is crushing what is left of the self-esteem of Annie Jones.

The rural plight manifests itself in the moral world as well. Uncle Jim as a drunkard is an example, who descends into eccentric behavior with his wife and the young guests, terrifying Jack with the overheard threat to “whip the hell out of them”. Cousin Gwilym is an even better example. He is training to be a minister, with his chapel in an old barn, and his pulpit in a dusty wagon. His vocation as a to-be-minister is betrayed by his eccentric behavior. He is a likely sexual pervert, who fantasises sexually with actresses and find “roaring temptation” on a religious South Wales tour. He terrorizes Dylan and Jack by insisting on taking their confessions in the barn. He exploits the young Dylan by taking his collection of two pennies. He is seen by Dylan and Jack, who are playing high up in a tree, to be “reading a book and moving his hands” at the open field lavatory, clearly an indication of masturbation. He is the hypocrite and even a blasphemer who ends his sermon with “O God... You are like a bloody cat”.

An interesting question to ask is where does the young Dylan Thomas fit in the rural decline? He is in the stories more as an outsider and observer, rather than a Welsh rural protagonist. In the opening scene of “The Peaches”, Dylan was away from his “warm, safe island” of his home in Swansea, kept waiting in the dark while Uncle Jim went for a drink, “staring timidly there in the dark passage in a strange town”. He is scared partly because he does not fit in. And the cobblestone passage, a symbol of confinement and restriction, can be hostile and “grew dark too suddenly, the walls crowded in, and the roofs crouched down”. This sense of confinement of the Welsh rural countryside can also be found in the story “A Visit to Grandpa’s”, where the author uses the words ‘cactus’ and ‘bison’, both native to the Americas and alien in Wales. In “The Peaches”, Dylan and Jack play games of Indians. It seems to be a game of hide and seek, but the choice of suburban children’s game of ‘Indians’ may indicate influence from American movies popular at that time. Taken together, these ‘Americanism’ may subconsciously convey a wish to break the oppressing confinement and restriction in a Freudian sense.

When the social classes clash, his sympathies seem to have lied in the town rather than the countryside. When he is finally back in the farm, he is welcome by rural auntie as a “royal nephew”:

One minute I was small and cold, skulking dead-scared down a black passage in my stiff, best suit, with my hollow belly thumping and my heart like a time bomb, clutching my grammar school cap, unfamiliar to myself, a snubnosed story-teller lost in his own adventures and longing to be home; the next I was a royal nephew in smart town clothes, embraced and welcomed, standing in the snug centre of my stories and listening to the clock announcing me.

The “royal nephew” is spoiled with privileges, to be served by the poorer relatives, who would take off his shoes and prepare food for him. He apparently even gets away with cutting his knee with a penknife “so that I could pretend I was ill and frighten my mother”. He needs reassurances of carefree comfort provided by the security in a suburban enclave. And indeed spoiled he is.

He is only truly at home with his surroundings after Jack, his rich Swansea friend arrives: “all my young body like an excited animal”. When they play games, the socially superior Jack can dictate and distort the rules at will:

Jack cried: ‘I see you! I see you!’ He scampered after me. ‘Bang! bang! you’re dead!’ But I was young and loud and alive, though I lay down obediently. ‘Now you try and kill me,’ said Jack. ‘Count a hundred.’

I closed one eye, saw him rush and stamp towards the upper field, then tiptoe back and begin to climb a tree, and I counted fifty and ran to the foot of the tree and killed him as he climbed. ‘You fall down,’ I said. He refused to fall, so I climbed too.

When Jack is upset by his treatment by the eccentric Cousin Gwilym and Uncle Jim and asks his mother to take him home, Dylan does not think too much of his relatives being treated unfairly and “made small”, and wants to retain friendship with Jack, evident in the closing scene of the story:

The chauffeur came back. The car drove off, scattering the hens. I ran out of the stable to wave to Jack. He sat still and stiff by his mother's side. I waved my handkerchief.

If there is a clear social hierarchy, with the Fernhill farm at the bottom and the Williamses at the top, Dylan Thomas, who sits uncomfortably in the middle, seems to be looking up the social ladder rather than down. Where his sympathies lie strongly indicate as well where his affinities would point on an Anglo-Welsh scale.

However, it would be unfair to regard Dylan Thomas as a Welsh despiser because this assertion would be equally absurd given his warming up to the other side of the Welsh countryside, with its charming twang, eccentric but interesting personalities and a strong community spirit. This is most evident in the second story, “A Visit to Grandpa's”. Here we are witnessing the Welshness at a profound level.

One aspect that immediately draws our attention is how Grandpa with his senile dementia is obsessed with death and the burial place. Grandpa is eccentric to the core, riding horses in his bed at night with his waistcoat on. When he disappears one morning, he is found at the Towy bridge in Carmarthen Town, en route to Llandadock, where he wishes to be buried. In the following exchange, Grandpa is no longer a mere deranged and comical old man, but a prophet who thinks death and its arrangement is a fundamental life issue.

Mr Griff pointed his coloured stick at him.

‘And what do you think you are doing on Carmarthen bridge in the middle of the afternoon,’ he said sternly, ‘with your best waistcoat and your old hat?’ ...

Mr Griff raised his stunted barber’s pole. ‘And where do you think you are going,’ he said, ‘with your old black bag?’

Grandpa said: ‘I am going to Llangadock to be buried.’ And he watched the coracle shells slip into the water lightly, and the gulls complain over the fish-filled water as bitterly as Mr Price complained:

‘But you aren’t dead yet, Dai Thomas.’

For a moment grandpa reflected, then: ‘There’s no sense in lying dead in Llanstephan,’ he said. ‘The ground is comfy in Llangadock; you can twitch your legs without putting them in the sea.’

...

But grandpa stood firmly on the bridge, and clutched his bag to his side, and stared at the flowing river and the sky, like a prophet who has no doubt.

While the author makes no further comment and observation and ends the scene right there by the Towy bridge, we could safely assume the profound obsession with death fascinates him.

When Dylan and grandpa go out for a walk, everywhere they go “all the men who leant on the gates congratulated grandpa on the fine morning”. The Welsh rural community spirit is in full play when Grandpa is first reported missing by Dylan and neighbours all come to his rescue. They know what is going on, after Dylan reports that grandpa is missing with his best clothes on. They must have looked after him before when his bouts of death wish go out of control. One by one, Griff the barber, Dan the Tailor, Price the Butcher, and Morgan the Carpenter, passes on the message and they form an ad hoc rescue team. They are “as solemn as old men with black hats and jacket on the outskirts of a fair”. With the tailor

leading the way, “ringing his bell as though there were a fire or a robbery”, the rescue procession trots on towards Carmarthen town, it almost feels like it is the Welsh community spirit is at parade. Here people look out for one another. When grandpa is found and refuses to come back with them, neighbours offer kind persuasion:

They said: ‘You aren’t dead, Mr Thomas.’

‘How can you be buried, then?’

‘Nobody’s going to bury you in Llanstephan.’

‘Come on home, Mr Thomas.’

‘There’s strong beer for tea.’

‘And cake.’

The charming side of Welshness, while not manifest at first, can also be found in its references to the use of the Welsh language. In “The Peaches”, references to the Welsh language are found in the most sacred and most vulgar: hymns and cursing. When Gwilym preaches, they can hear “his voice rise and crack and sink to a whisper and break into singing and Welsh and ring triumphantly and be wild and meek”, a traditional Welsh *hwyl*. And between hymns Uncle Jim “cursed the mare in Welsh”. In “A Visit to Grandpa’s”, the author dreams of the heavenly choirs singing “in a strange Welsh”. When Mr Griff is informed of grandpa’s disappearance, he “hurried indoors and I heard him talking in Welsh”. Put together, we can see that the use of Welsh is sacred, vulgar, urgent and intimate. Dylan Thomas, while having Welsh speaking parents, is raised in a strictly English-speaking environment, all the more reason for him to regard the charming language to be the forbidden fruit imparting mysterious knowledge he is not privy to.

The genial tone is also felt when he describes light-hearted comic sketches of rural Wales. Here is a quintessential Welsh rural pub scene:

They all drank out of brown-pint tankards and never spoke, laying the cards down with a smack, scraping at their match-boxes, puffing at their pipes, swallowing unhappily, ringing the brass bell, ordering more, by a sign of the fingers, from a sour woman with a flowered blouse and a man's cap.

There is the lean man stalking into the wood catching rabbits, and comes back with "a rabbit held as gently over his arm as a girl's arm in a warm sleeve". More fun can be found in the parson's orchard:

Once, grandpa told me, the parson had bought three ducks at Carmarthen Fair and made a pond for them in the centre of the garden, but they waddled to the gutter under the crumbling doorsteps of the house, and swam and quacked there. When I reached the end of the orchard path, I looked through a hole in the hedge and saw that the parson had made a tunnel through the rockery that was between the gutter and the pond and had set up a notice in plain writing: 'This way to the pond.'

The ducks were still swimming under the steps.

Equally quintessential is the Welsh coracles slipping "into the water lightly, and the gulls complain over the fish-filled water as bitterly as Mr Price complained". In scenes like these, the Welsh countryside and its people provide Dylan Thomas with endless and rich inspiration, nurturing his literary imagination and talents.

Together, the two sides of the Welsh countryside have presented an important background against which we can find traces of inevitable influence of a particular community with its traditions speaking its language. Caught in the middle of the two sides, his sympathies flow fluidly, taking advantage of both. Dylan Thomas once remarked:

I hold a beast, an angel, and a madman in me, and my enquiry is as to their working, and my problem is their subjugation and victory, downthrow and upheaval, and my effort is their self-expression.<sup>6</sup>

The beast, the angel, and the madman are all present in the two short stories surveyed. The beast we witness in his vivid imagination when he is waiting for Uncle Jim finishing his drink, when he thinks of the “demon in the story, with his wings and hooks, who clung like a bat to my hair”. The angel is in his dream as heavenly choirs “dressed in bards’ robes and brass-buttoned waistcoats, sang in a strange Welsh to the departing sailors.” The madman is Uncle Jim with his bouts of anger and alcoholism, and is also the Grandpa who rides horses in his own bed at night with waistcoat on, and wishes to be buried in Llangadock where “the ground is comfy” rather than in Llanstephan because “there is no sense in lying dead” there.

When Dylan Thomas believes that there is a beast, an angel and a madman in him at a much later stage of life, we can at least trace part of this composition back to his Welsh childhood, where he is exposed to the plights and delights of the Welsh rural life.

It is in many ways shaping his imagination, vividly present in both the two stories surveyed. A clear example is in “A Visit to Grandpa’s” where the young Dylan is woken up three times from his dreams, each a response to the immediate surroundings.

1, I woke from a dream full of whips and lariats as long as serpents, and runaway coaches on mountain passes, and wide, windy gallops over cactus fields,

2, In the morning I woke from a dream of fiery horses on a plain that was littered with furniture, and of large, cloudy men who rode six horses at a time and whipped them with burning bed-clothes.

---

<sup>6</sup> Dylan Thomas: quoted by Geoffrey Moore in “Dylan Thomas”, *Kenyon Review*, vol. xvii (1955), 261.

3, I woke late on my last morning, out of dreams where the Llanstephan sea carried bright sailing-boats as long as liners.

What these dreams show is a pliable mind. When Dylan is thrown into the wild, he absorbs its fantastical and absurd elements quickly, often without judgment. In “The Peache” as well, on hearing there is one pig gone because of Uncle Jim, Dylan quickly conjures up an image of Uncle Jim “tall and sly and red, holding the writhing pig in his two hairy hands, sinking his teeth in its thing, crunching its trotters up”, and when Uncle Jim goes out for a drink, Dylan would imagine him “sitting in a public house with a heifer over his shoulders and two pigs nosing out of his pocket, and his lips wet with bull’s blood”.

Dylan Thomas’s prodigious literary talent, as this little essay suggests, does not come out of nowhere. At least an important part of it, as he later comes to recall and put to print in poems and short fiction, comes from his special Anglo-Welsh upbringing in South Wales, with a formal education in a Swansea grammar school, and holidays and visits to the Welsh side of rural areas. But it is not to say his Welshness in his writing is a birthright because that would be an unfair oversimplification. Rather, he negotiates his own version of Welshness, and finds his own uncomfortable place in the Welsh countryside. Dylan Thomas famously calls Swansea an “ugly, lovely town”. The two adjectives, like the two sides of his Welsh countryside in this essay, can exist hand in hand in his childhood memories as well.