

The “Welshness” of Dylan Thomas in a Glance of

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog

1. Introduction

Dylan Thomas, the Swansea-born Welsh poet, known as one of the most talented poets of Great Britain in the 20th century, has also composed a series of short stories and some became quite popular, if not competitive with his lyrical and emotional poetry. Among them, ten of his short prose stories were collected in a volume entitled *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, which was written in 1938 and 1939, before World War II. Though short in size, this collection is regarded by some critics, such as Mambrol, N. (2022), as the ones that “signaled the emergence of Welsh writer Dylan Thomas (1914–53) as a master of autobiographical prose as well as poetry.” In my rough understanding, these stories constitute, though separately, a self-image of the poet’s early in Wales from childhood to the youth, which unavoidably reveals the Welsh social norms, customs, tradition as well as the natural scenery through his point of view and Welsh identity. It is true that Dylan Thomas has never been a writer in Welsh language, but the living environment he was born and grew up in is believed to have the impact to shape his creative inspiration, mind, and imagination. As the very beginner to Anglo-Welsh literature and Dylan Thomas, I therefore focus my attention to the exploration of the “Welshness” of Dylan Thomas in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, based on a glance, or a close reading of several stories in the collection. As an outsider from Asian culture and language but with eagerness to know more about the author and Wales, I may be incompetent to fulfill this job well enough due to my insensitivity to Welsh identity, but I will try my best.

2. Conceptual Framework and Background Information

First, it is necessary to construct the basic conceptual framework and explain the key terms for further analysis.

2.1 Defining Welsh Identity or “Welshness”

As learned from the module, short stories from Wales could be regarded as a vehicle of cultural expression in minority culture in the UK, and this is a result of the writers' Welsh identity. Welsh identity is regarded as a culture and social related term, and it is hard to define due to its diversity and complexity (Williams, 2015). To my knowledge, for one thing, Wales is a part of Great Britain, a “sub-state region or ‘principality’ within the British state,” as said by Williams (2015, p. 5), so it should be influenced by main-stream British cultural assimilation, all together with its own national culture. One the other hand, the contrastive landscape of Wales is showed: in coastal cities, such as Cardiff, the capital of southern Wales are known as being bustling, multicultural, industrialized, more developed as the coal, steel and copper producing bases, while a large number of inland counties and rural areas such as Carmarthenshire, are more natural, conservative, traditional and less economically developed.

As for the present essay, Welsh identity is what are revealed from the lines of Dylan, from the coastal and rural sights, from the way story characters of Welsh speaking

communities speak and behave, and even from the linguistic and rhetorical form to present all of all of these.

2.2 Dylan Thomas's "Welshness"

As an English language writer and poet, the "Welshness" of Dylan is not unarguable. Partly influenced by his father, an excellent English teacher in a grammar school in Swansea and refused to teach Dylan Welsh language, Dylan Thomas was well educated in English language and literature and always kept his writing in English. Although Dylan Thomas put his Welshness first in a statement six years before his death, he avoids his Welsh identity in his work. Some critics doubted his Welshness. As Geoffrey Moore (2014) writes of Thomas: "He was never a professional Welshman. The Swansea or Cardiff boy, living in a city that is as much English as Welsh, is apt to feel that the 'true' Wales, not merely the Wales of coracles and Eisteddfodan, but the Wales of the Rhondda and the pitted valleys might be real for other Welshmen, but not for him." Similarly, in his *Dylan Thomas and Wales: the Love—Hate Relationship*, Linden Peach (1988) found that it is difficult to call Dylan Thomas's work Welsh.

However, the identity of Welsh is revealed implicitly and unconsciously from its notion, if not deliberately. As Davies W. (2014, p.10) argued, "Thomas spoke next to no Welsh, and could read none, but the language was daily all around him, part of the immediate world that shaped him. Even if only on the choice of subject matter, let alone of strenuous poetic structures, as a poet he felt himself a relatively free spirit as regards English linguistic expectations." I understand that Welshness is the gene of Dylan and reflected from his intellectual works, more specifically the short stories in the present essay and it is possible and significant to explore and that is the justification of the present essay.

2.3 Introduction to Short Story Collection: *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*

The above-mentioned ten-story short story collection was written in Laugharne, a Welsh place during 1938 and 1939 (though not in the order in which they appear in the volume). The title of the collection is believed to be an imitation of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) by famous Irish writer James Joyce. However, He denied the influence of James Joyce, saying, "I made a bit of doggish fun of the painting-title and . . . intended no possible reference to Joyce." He continued, however, that "the shaping of some of my Portrait stories might owe something to Joyce's stories into the volume *Dubliners*" (Ackerman, 1979, p.185).

Different from his early stories, which were introspective, obscure, and surreal, Dylan Thomas now turned to the world about himself and his own life, drawing extensively on his experiences as a journalist and releasing a spring of humor and nostalgia. The stories give a coherent picture of the growth of a poet's mind, with each dealing with a state of his childhood, youth, or early manhood as well as giving a reliable depiction of Swansea, Carmarthenshire during the 1930s, highlighting the poverty and unemployment, the uneven development and decadence of Welsh culture as well as beautiful scenery of Wales.

In the next part, two stories will be selected to analyze its Welshness.

3. Welshness in Two Stories of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*

3.1 Welshness in *The Peaches*

The Peaches is the first story in the collection and is regarded as one of the most successful stories in terms of its quality of literariness and of its success among the critics (Leiti K., 2003, p.58). Narrated as the first-person point of view, the story is about what happened when I, “Dylan” in the story, as a child aged less than ten, visits his aunt and uncle, Annie, and Jim Jones at their farm in rural South Wales. Beginning by Uncle Jim selling a piglet (judging from ‘a squeal from the basket and saw the tip of a pink tail curling out’) to get drunk at a bar called “The Pure Drop.” The next day, Dylan’s older cousin, Gwilym, preaches to an empty barn-turned chapel to a rapturous answer from young Dylan. Finally, Mrs. Williams, the considerably richer mother of Jack, Dylan’s friend, visits Uncle Jim and Annie’s farm to have Jack stay for a fortnight’s holiday. Mrs. Williams politely declines the “hospitality” of a tin of peaches, which seems to hurt Aunt Annie’s heart and angers Uncle Jim. The story features detailed descriptions of the rural settings of the pub, the chapel, the farm, etc. and the lively conversations, especially the talks during Mrs. Williams’ visit, all of which were vividly recorded by “I”, Dylan in the story.

The Welshness in this story can be first exposed by the physical and natural landscape in Wales. The shakily-painted grass-green cart, the names of the pubs (“The Hare’s Foot” and “The Pure Drop”), the dressings of Uncle Jim (“in his black market suit with a stiff white shirt and no collar, loud new boots, and a plaid cap”) in the first paragraph and the vivid descriptions of the pigsties (“ 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.”) Later they all reveal a true, simple, plain, and underdeveloped state of Welsh rural social and household life.

The Welshness in this story can also be exposed from its social and cultural life: Firstly, the way Uncle Jim socializes with women in the bar and the sentence “There are too many drunken gipsies” said by Uncle Jim can tell the multicultural side of Welsh society.

Secondly, the relationship between Uncle Jim and Aunt Annie could reveal the essence of patriarchal society in Welsh rural community by looking at the details: “‘You shouldn’t have kept him out so long,’ she said, angry and timid.”, and “He sat down in his special chair, which was the broken throne of a bankrupt bard, and lit his pipe and stretched his legs and puffed clouds at the ceiling.”

Thirdly, I venture to mention the sense of hospitality, hypocrisy, and yet existing dissatisfaction between the rich and poor in Welsh rural life. These, of course, are not Welsh only, but they do exist with their own characteristics. A large tin of peaches, which was said to have been stored since last Christmas, is regarded by Aunt Annie as “lovely” to treat the guests. Before meeting Mrs. Williams, Aunt Annie prepared, including changing to her most formal dress, and stood in the doorway to welcome. Annie did expect to look decent to the guests, but she failed to completely disguise

her poor life, and had “forgotten to change her gym-shoes, which were caked with mud and all holes,” she did try to behave in an enthusiastic and hospitable way. What is more amusing is how Annie reacted to the embarrassing moments by rattled the teacups towards Gwilym repeatedly when the poor boy said something wrong. During the entire process, Mrs. Williams reserved her decent status, talking less and politely, but refusing the kindly-intended peaches from Annie, which incurs a keen sense of dissatisfaction from Uncle Jim. ““Who does she think she is? Are not peaches good enough for her? To hell with her bloody motor car and her bloody son! Making us small.”” These complaints do show that Uncle Jim values his dignity so much that he is unsatisfied with both the rich people, such as Mrs. Williams, and his own social status. However, as a rural laborer who is indulged in smoking and drinking, he is possibly incapable of changing the cruel reality.

Lastly, what is also salient in the story is the reflection of the religious or spiritual life, which can be found several times. When Dylan got to Uncle Jim and Annie’s farm, the sentence “I saw the plates on the shelves, the lighted lamp on the long, oil-clothed table, ‘Prepare to Meet Thy God’ knitted over the fire-place, the smiling china dogs, the brown-stained settle, the grandmother clock” tells us the physical existing of religious instruments. The most impressive part is what Dylan saw at the chapel with the invitation of Gwilym. Contrast to the dirty and shabby living environment, Gwilym’s humble life was lightened by his religious zeal: “He forgot the lost pig at once and began to talk about the towns he had visited on a religious tour, Neath and Bridgend and Bristol and Newport, with their lakes and luxury gardens, their bright, colored streets roaring with temptation.” In the later paragraph, Gwilym’s pious long preaching with mixed Welsh language and singing is the climax part of the story and the best way to show Welshness, more specifically, how Welsh people, even the young, lead a spiritual life with conviction and personality, which break the haze and stereotype of physical poverty.

As argued by Ackerman (1979), many Anglo-Welsh writers feature rich similes and metaphors, and Dylan Thomas is most famous for his acutely lyrical and emotional language in poems and prose. Many metaphors in *The Peaches* show the genius of Dylan: “the swarthy man appeared like a giant in a cage surrounded by clouds, and the bald old man withered into a black hump with a white top; two white hands darted out of the corner with invisible cards.” “The color of her hair and eyes faded and vanished like the grass-green of the cart that was a dark, gray mountain now standing between the passage walls.” “Then Uncle Jim came in like the devil with a red face and a wet nose and trembling, hairy hands.” “Annie wore a black, shining dress that smelt of mothballs, like the chair covers in the best room” To name just a few.

3.2 Welshness in *A Visit to Grandpa’s*

A Visit to Grandpa’s first appeared in the *New English Weekly* in March 1939. It was the second of ten stories. According to his mother Florence, in an interview with Colin Edwards in 1958, the tale was based on a story Dylan’s father D. J. Thomas told Dylan when he was a small boy. It is believed ‘Grandpa’ was D. J.’s grandfather,

William Thomas. (Williams, 2021). The story read by Dylan Thomas was also recorded for the BBC in January 1947 and broadcast in the evening of the Home Service on 8th of January.

The plot of the story is relatively simple. It tells of a boy's waking up on a summer night because of the loud sound of "gee-up and whoa" from the room of his grandpa, who was dressed in his red waistcoat with brass buttons and was riding an imaginative horse. The next day, the boy was led by his grandpa to have a walk to Llanstephan, during which the grandpa wished not to be buried in the nearby churchyard by saying "There's no sense in lying there." The morning after, the boy found his grandpa was lost, so he searched for him with the help of all the neighbors, and finally found him in his best waistcoat at Carmarthen Bridge on the way to "comfy" Llangadock to be buried. And they all persuaded him to go home. Without saying anything, grandpa "stared at the flowing river and the sky" and the whole story ends all sudden.

In about 2,600 words, several marvelous scenes and lively and localized characters with Welsh characteristics are created. In the first-person narrator again, the story depicts an image of an eccentric old man (the grandpa of a boy, "I") through three scenes: 1) the weird night at grandpa's home, 2) the trip to Llanstephan the day after and 3) the group searching process when grandpa is getting disappeared. The sudden ending leaves the readers space to question what would happen next and what behind the act of grandpa. The story shows the rural Welsh speaking community as a place of imagination and love where people fantasize in their bedroom and people are friendly and caring in a neighborhood. As indicated by Ackerman, J (1979), this story presented the rural life of West Wales imaginatively and realistically and created with that blend of humor and pathos that could be considered as the hallmark of Thomas's most successful prose. Back to this essay, how can Welshness be found from the story?

First, Welshness is best reflected through the theme of death and burial. According to Ackerman, J (1979), the story "describes a situation that could only be found in Wales, where by tradition, much emphasis and concern is given to a person's place of burial. (p.70)." The aged grandpa cared about the place to be buried after death so much and led "I" to "look at the churchyard and the sea," seeing "iron gate at the angelic headstones and the poor wooden crosses" of the churchyard and made the decision. He was so worried about being buried in Llanstephan that he forced himself to be brave to die and be buried in Llangadock. It seems that grandpa is insane in such a state. What seems weird to us reflects that how elder Welsh people face death and burial: on the one side, death should be accepted bravely and optimistically; on the other side, people should be brave to free themselves from the confines and chains of religious rituals, especially when death comes. Such a sense of brevity, optimism and freedom does make Welsh people and culture stand out and shine.

Second, a friendly, loving, and caring Welsh rural community is constructed from the story. Based in the small places in Carmarthenshire, the local people of West Wales treat neighbors lovingly and friendly. When having a walk with his grandpa, the boy found that "all the men who leant on the gates congratulated grandpa on the fine

morning,” showing that the elderly are respected; When they ordered the drinks at a pub called “Edwinsford Arms,” the owner, Mrs. Edwinsford “inquired after his health.” What touched me most is the last scene of the story when “I” asked the neighbors about the whereabouts of grandpa, all the folks from all walks of life of the neighborhood, the gardener, the barber, the tailor, the carpenter, butcher and women included, were summoned one after one, in a spontaneous and hurried way to gather and search the missing grandpa. The searching crowd “trotted on” and “crept up Constitution Hill” and “rattled down” with bells and dogs. When grandpa was finally found, the dialogue was simple, but with an intense sense of community and care in the way of severity. With both English and Welsh languages spoken, the community features the strong power of kindness and love, constructing a picture of peace, harmony, and intimacy of the Welsh rural community.

Third, it seems that the rural life in Wales is closely related to household animals. In the dreams of the boy, six horses were ridden by large, cloudy men on a plain; They passed through the wood full of pigeons, and the wings broke the branches as they rushed to the tops of the trees; The little, weak pony was ridden like a bison, to carry grandpa and the boy to Llanstephan, only to be fed with candy; three ducks were bought by the local parson at Carmarthen Fair and a pond was made for them in the center of the garden; but the ducks waddled to the gutter under the crumbling doorsteps of the house, and swam and quacked there. Funnily and humorously, an English notice of “This way to the pond” from the parson was set up, though useless, indicating the humanistic way of treating the animals.

Fourth, it is impossible to separate the capability of Dylan Thomas’ language use from its Welsh influence. As what presented in the story of *The Peaches*, this story can please the readers by the beauty of poetic, rhythmic and ingenious use of words and intense sense of imagery, which can be seen from the use of its creative use of rhetorical devices, such as simile, metaphor, personification, and alliteration. It is true that the emphasis of rhythm and imagery is not Welsh only, but the Welsh language and the growing environment do equip Dylan Thomas, the Anglo-Welsh writer with the weapons of imagination and wording. The followed are the some of the examples: a. “Wide, windy gallops” (alliteration, rhythmic); b. “The floorboards had squeaked like mice as I climbed into bed, and the mice between the walls had creaked like wood as though another visitor was walking on them.” (simile, imagery); c. “His voice sounded very young and loud, and his tongue had powerful hooves, and he made his bedroom into a great meadow.” (metaphor, imagery); d. “His face in the candlelight looked like a ragged quilt pinned upright on the black air and patched all over with goat-beards. (simile, imagery);” e. “In the mist and the wind my pebbles flew lightly up like hailstones in a world on its head. The morning passed without a bird falling.”(simile, imagery) ”; f. “ Grandpa might have been driving a bison, so tightly he held the reins, so ferociously cracked the long whip, so blasphemously shouted warning to boys who played in the road, so stoutly stood with his gaitered legs apart and cursed the demon strength and willfulness of his tottering pony.” (metaphor, parallelism, alliteration, rhythmic and imagery); g. “... his beard was set

dancing and wagging as though he talked, and watched the coracle men move, like turtles, on the shore.” (simile, imagery).”

4. Conclusion

The essay aims to have a glance at what is behind the short stories collection of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* written by *Anglo-Welsh writer and poet*, Dylan Thomas. Two stories are carefully selected and evaluated. In *The Peaches*, Welshness would found from physical and natural landscape in rural Wales, from patriarchal family structure, from rural folks’ hospitality, hypocrisy and dissatisfaction between the rural rich and pool, from the pious religious life and from rhetorical language use. In the *A Visit to Grandpa’s*, the attitude towards death and burial, the love and kindness among the neighbors in rural community, the animal-reliant life, and the vivid language use are all analyzed. A more profound understanding of Welsh rural life is achieved, both physically and mentally. Due to the limited knowledge of the present author, more stories will be further analyzed to explore more aspects of Welshness and a more theoretical-based analysis is expected to undertake.

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