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## "As-Yet-Still-Forgiven Past": Dylan Thomas and Nostalgia

David Bradley Bailey

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“THE AS-THEN-STILL-FORGIVEN PAST”

DYLAN THOMAS AND NOSTALGIA

by

DAVID BRADLEY BAILEY JR.

(Under the Direction of Howard Keeley)

ABSTRACT

Dylan Thomas exhibited a variety of nostalgic influences within his poetry. A careful study of his life will reveal a nostalgia that evolved from adolescent musings upon an ideal past, to a self-destructive urge to return to innocence through death. Thomas incorporates a variety of historical influences within this nostalgia, but his primary influence is ultimately his own tormented past. This study not only focuses on the personal nostalgia of one man, but the variety of ways nostalgia can affect people, history and society as sociological force.

INEX WORDS: Dylan Thomas, Poetry, Nostalgia, Paul Klee, Arts and Craftsism, World War I, World War II, John Malcom Brinnin, Vernon Watkins, Psychology, Sociology, Wales, Great Britain, Alcoholism, Garden of Eden

“THE AS YET STILL FORGIVEN PAST”  
DYLAN THOMAS AND NOSTALGIA

by

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B.A., Armstrong Atlantic State University, 2006

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

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DYLAN THOMAS AND NOSTALGIA

by

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## DEDICATION

To Whitney, my Amora, the only light I ever saw.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first and foremost like to thank my committee. Howard Keeley provided more guidance with writing than four years of college education. Rebecca Ziegler provided infinite advice on research, and her knowledge of Arts and Craftsism was invaluable. Gautam Kundu helped me believe in myself as a teacher and writer. I could not have accomplished any of this without you. Thank you all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	6
<i>Introduction Painful Memories of Eden</i> Nostalgia, Disease, and Diagnosis in the Life and Works of Dylan Thomas .....	9
CHAPTER	
1 Angelic Decay: Dylan Thomas’s Nostalgic Foundation .....	16
2 Edenic Labor: Dylan Thomas and the Influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement.....	44
3 Death in the Garden of Eden: Lost Innocence in the Last Days of Dylan Thomas .....	69
4 “Time Shall Belong to Man:” Nostalgia as the Creative Act in the Letters and Poems of Dylan Thomas .....	89
<i>Epilogue</i> Creating Eden: The Future of Nostalgia and Literature .....	110
Works Cited.....	114



LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: In Angel's Keeping.....40

*Introduction*  
Painful Memories of Eden:  
Nostalgia, Disease, and Diagnosis in the Life and Works of Dylan Thomas

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“Now in a hundred ways I wish I hadn’t come away; I’m full of nostalgia and a frightful cold.”—Dylan Thomas, The Collected Letters (222)

Postmarked 20 April 1936, the above passage is from Dylan Thomas’s letter to his close friend and fellow Welshman, the poet and painter Vernon Watkins. An intriguing—perhaps the most intriguing—aspect of the statement is the ready connection it makes between nostalgia and bodily disease. One wonders if Thomas’s physical ailment induces his nostalgia or if the nostalgia causes the “frightful” illness.

Whether consciously or no, Thomas here penetrates to the fascinating roots of the word nostalgia. In her recent book Nostalgia in Transition, 1780-1917, Linda M. Austin discusses this etymology, building on the Greek terms nostos (“homecoming”) and algos (“pain”). According to Austin, army physicians originally recognized nostalgia among mercenary Swiss troops serving on Italian and other foreign plains during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At first, diagnosis centered mainly on physical symptoms like pain in the internal organs and lethargy, although a few medical reports also noted patients’ mental or emotional preoccupation with returning to their mountainous homes. As medical science advanced, nostalgia—homesickness, mal du pays, or das Heimweh—became increasingly identified with the psychological, perhaps for practical reasons. Lacking means to treat the affliction and needing men-at-arms, Enlightenment-era doctors and military personnel took to describing nostalgia as a non-critical, acceptable condition of the mind, perhaps beginning the relatively casual relationship humanity maintains with it to this day.

Austin develops her analysis of how the establishment characterized nostalgia, writing,

Authorities, physicians, and scholars had to focus...on making a perverse, pre-occupied, and delusional imagination coexist within immediate moral and political imperatives. If the victims themselves could not be expelled [from active military deployment], their potentially mutinous and contagious melancholia had to be represented as functional. This representation would enlist literary tradition, associationism, and aesthetics; together, they helped establish a theory and practice of nostalgia that eventually would underwrite much popular production

and consumption of the past and its artifacts and become an accepted *affect* of normal and everyday remembrance. (4-5)

In other words, literature, philosophy, and the study and practice of beauty were rendered peaceful “homes” for martial homesickness, permitting nostalgia to be seen as a tolerable, even beneficial, behavior.

As we begin this study, it is worth remarking that traces of malady—psychical, but also physical—are present in nostalgia, however aestheticized the phenomenon becomes. While we lack hard evidence that Dylan Thomas was aware of nostalgia as a complex, partially bodily illness, his bitter epistle to Vernon Watkins perhaps justifies our teasing out possible connections between his frequent poetic and dramatic longings for lost places—the “dingle starry” of “Fern Hill,” for example—and his various sicknesses, especially his legendary capacity for self-destruction through alcohol abuse. Some critics might flag as ill-advised attempts to read Thomas’s biography into his literary opus; however, Thomas’s letters and other non-literary writings highlight nostalgia almost as much as do poems like “Fern Hill,” extended narratives like A Child’s Christmas in Wales, and short stories like “Adventures in the Skin Trade.”

My thesis takes a chronological, multi-generic approach to works by Dylan Thomas, who died in November 1953, shortly after his thirty-ninth birthday. As the biographer Ralph Maud shows, Thomas began writing poems in notebooks as early as age 15, and he selected lyrics from notebooks composed between then and his nineteenth year for his first full published volume, Eighteen Poems (1934). Details from Thomas’s life become remarkably useful for deepening interpretations of themes, images, symbols, narratives, and even form within individual poems.

While exploring Thomas’s nostalgia is a complicated endeavor, one can identify a tripartite developmental trajectory. Many of Thomas’s teenage writings experiment with nostalgia, although the budding poet lacks the life experiences necessary to yield highly developed nostalgic poetry. As if aware of this lack, he often resorts to vague, amorphous imagery. As he matures, Thomas begins to focus his nostalgia on more concrete images. In particular, he deploys metaphors of the poet as craftsman, connecting with the Arts and Crafts movement, which criticized the modern industrialization of Britain by privileging a medieval peasant aesthetic. Towards his end, Thomas often invokes an idyllic

childhood, extolling the building up of moral foundations in youth. However, he constantly betrays his own suffering and self-destructiveness by imposing images of death and decay upon his platonic child subjects. In other words, the nostalgia of Thomas's latter years is at once idealistic and an irrefutable symptom of despair. The above three phases are the stuff of my first three chapters.

My fourth and final chapter explores how, throughout his writing life, Thomas saw and used nostalgia as a powerful poetic tool. It argues that nostalgia persists within Thomas's opus less as a primary subject than as a productive means of exploring great matters: religious faith, mortality, and, most of all, the power of the human mind to create art by imagining the past. Nostalgia provides a way for humanity to take the distant past and reconstruct it to provide new insights into the troubles and anxieties of the present.

Given that Thomas's nostalgia evolves and changes, it is important to consider the various theories about nostalgia that physicians, psychologists, sociologists, and others have advanced over the centuries. My study deems four theories or accounts especially pertinent. With respect to the teenage Thomas, Chapter I reflects on the idea that one's adolescence is the crucial foundation for one's later nostalgic patterns—a theory articulated by Nancy Davis in her book Yearning for Yesterday (1979). Chapter II explores Thomas's midlife nostalgia for medieval labor by making reference to the analysis of present-day antique-collecting advanced in Janelle L. Wilson's book Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning (2005). Ralph Harper's Nostalgia: An Existential Exploration of Longing and Fulfillment in the Modern Age (1966) appears in Chapter III, its notions about nostalgia as a response to decadence being germane to Thomas's late-life obsession with the remembrance of things past as a means to—or even guarantor of—moral stability. Finally, Chapter IV interrogates arguments in Linda Hutcheon's essay “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern” (1998) about nostalgia's tendency to reshape or alter the past into an artistic ideal: a matter evident throughout Thomas's writings.

A problem emerges. If Thomas could experience nostalgia and disease (“a frightful cold”) as coexistent, why did he build so many of his creative endeavors, so many acts of poetic making, upon nostalgia? As we have seen, the earliest diagnoses of nostalgia, while emphasizing physical ailments—“constipation, stomach pains, and

insomnia” (Austin 5)—also recognized a psychological or quasi-spiritual desire on the part of the soldier-sufferer to go home. One can even speak of a type of melancholy in which memories of a lost, perfect place or mode of existence—an Eden—plague the sufferer. Should the sufferer be unable to return to his Eden (a Swiss alp or a Welsh valley, say) due to external demands, changed circumstances or, simply, the passage of time, might he not begin to consider death as the gateway to another, more elemental Eden?

Ralph Maud’s essay “Dylan Thomas First Published Poem”—which concerns the May 1933 appearance of “And Death Shall Have No Dominion” in the New English Weekly—provides evidence that Thomas saw death as offering tormented man something idyllic: oneness with the universe.<sup>1</sup> Maud discusses various drafts of “And Death Shall Have No Dominion.” He points out that Thomas ultimately crossed out the following four lines, although they constitute the poem’s genesis:

Man’s wants remain unsatisfied till death.  
Then, when his soul is naked, is he one  
With the man in the wind, and the west moon,  
With the harmonious thunder of the sun. (118)

In its final version, the poem recycles one of the lines—“with the man in the wind, and the west moon”—but in a fairly different context. However, as a sense unit, the four original lines assert that death is the sole means to satisfy “man’s wants.” Death renders the soul “naked,” bringing it into harmony with powerful cosmic phenomena. The speaker recognizes man’s post-death condition as nakedness, precisely the state that Adam and Eve enjoyed early in creation, prior to the fall: “And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:25). In other words, man’s want-filled life on earth may be a species of nostalgia for our original nakedness—as much an innocence of soul as a bareness of body. There may be a kind of cultural nostalgia at work here, too. The “west moon” rather suggests the after-worlds of the ancient Welsh Celts, lands far off across the western ocean. According to these readings, nostalgia is a condition directly associated with death and what follows it. One can imagine Thomas, around 19, anticipating death as destroying the painful dominion of hidden memories of a lost Eden.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare the title of this poem with Romans 6:9: “Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him.”

In youth and age, Thomas was conscious of distance from Eden, of paradise lost. Thomas's mother came from a strong chapel-going tradition, and Thomas has often been described as fundamentally puritan as well. Puritanism regularly emphasizes the fall of man; and as he emerged into adult sexuality and grappled with his artistic identity, Thomas developed what at times seems an obsession with his own fallen state. When an adolescent, he desired to supplant innocence with experience; however, he also contemplated the tormenting consequences of such lapses from grace as alcohol-abuse and sexual carelessness. As we shall discover, the two matters coincided in an affair he conducted at age 20, when already engaged in a relationship with the budding poet Pamela Hansford Johnson.

When, later, Thomas became invested in concrete images and developed an Arts and Crafts-like interest in the model of the creative individual worker, he perhaps approached a state of grace: at least more nearly than at any other time in his short life. However, the real possibility of death soon loomed, pushing Thomas to pine for images of a childhood unaffected by adult excesses and sin. Thomas began his poetic career with a desire for the experience, even the sin, of adulthood and, paradoxically, died longing for the child-like innocence he abandoned to attain adult knowledge. Perhaps it is this tension that makes his literary opus so difficult to interpret.

Thomas attempted to embrace two sides of a complicated issue, and his desire for both innocence and sin required some aesthetic abstraction: the flavor of the day in the art world of the 1930s. Thomas grew up as the painter Paul Klee experimented with various media and schools like Cubism and Surrealism. In the world of letters, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and other modernists juggled with different voices and generally tried to make poetry new. While Thomas may not use mythology or foreign languages as Pound and Eliot do, he builds great complexity through his personal symbolism. One of his favorite constellations of symbols derives from the natural beauty of rural Wales. While the apple boughs in "Fern Hill" may mirror the peace and tranquility associated with some strains of Romanticism, the rain-destroyed flower in "And Death Shall Have No Dominion" suggests perhaps an encroaching apocalypse.

When approaching Thomas's complicated verse, the critic may find historicist, psychological, formalist, and other ways of reading to be revelatory. But whatever one's

critical approach or approaches, a particularly powerful door into this poet is consideration of his creative use of nostalgia. As it offers its thesis, each chapter pays attention to ways in which nostalgia affects Thomas's poetic forms, but I conclude this introduction by highlighting some key factors behind the poet's nostalgia.

If, as Nancy Davis argues, nostalgic patterns form around memories of teenage stress and trauma, one must consider what may be the seminal upset in Thomas's adolescence: the failure of his romance with Pamela Hansford Johnson (later, Baroness Snow), a poet two years his senior. Of theatrical stock on her mother's side, Johnson initiated the relationship by sending Thomas a letter of praise for "That Sanity Be Kept," a poem published in the Sunday Referee in September 1933. Their break-up—caused by his infidelity, as well as what she called his attachment to "Comrade Bottle"—would haunt Thomas. Especially as he descended into terminal alcoholism, Johnson could stand for him as a symbol of prelapsarian possibility.

The Garden of Eden myth may also be read into Thomas's fascination with Arts and Craftsism. A movement especially associated with William Morris, but with roots in the aesthetic and social philosophies of John Ruskin, Arts and Craftsism saw the forces of industry as dehumanizing. The skilled craftsman suffers as mass production replaces individual creativity with assembly lines. In addition, factories pollute the environment, yield city ghettos, and blight the landscape. Born three months after the start of World War I, Thomas seems especially mindful of a further industrial product: mechanized weapons, such as the machine gun, that brought new devastation to warfare. Thomas encountered this devastation first-hand when Nazi Germany bombed his home town of Swansea in World War II. Thomas wrote a play based upon this event titled Return Journey. One of its pre-blitz characters, Young Thomas, seems congruent with the artistic individualism that Arts and Craftsism cherishes: a "bombastic adolescent provincial bohemian with a thigh-knitted artist's tie." Thomas's attraction to Arts and Craftsism as a solution to the many ills of industrialism continues his impulse, begun in adolescence, to connect to lost innocence.

Garden of Eden imagery arises again later in Thomas's life. The grace and hope contained within Arts and Craftsism falls in the face of deep alcoholism. Facing mounting debts, Thomas took the death of his father hard; indeed, it precipitated irreversible

despair. Thomas, in his thirties, developed acute nostalgia for childhood, but the children he depicts can never enjoy more than temporary grace: they exist under the dark shadow of sin and death. John Brinnin's study Dylan Thomas in America: An Intimate Journal (1955) underscores just how acutely the dying Thomas craved release into lost innocence. Speaking to a friend, he asked to "go to the Garden of Eden...to die" (qtd. in Brinnin 271). At this juncture, consumed with nostalgia for the innocence he lost in adolescence, Thomas saw death either as the portal to Eden or as Eden itself.

As my fourth chapter details, Thomas's awareness of nostalgia was such that he sometimes worried about over-emphasizing that sensibility, or presenting it in a clichéd manner. Writing in 1938, he expressed reservations about the conventionality of some of Vernon Watkins's images, criticizing them for "com[ing] out of the nostalgia of literature" instead of exhibiting "creative destruction, destructive creation" (qtd. in Ackerman 56). Thomas views poems as dynamic, probing entities, and thus he wishes to use nostalgia not for its own sake—not as a topic—but rather as an exploratory instrument: sharp and precise, like a surgeon's knife. Most often, Thomas's engagements with nostalgia highlight man's desire to connect to lost innocence—and man's inability to do so via any method but death. Deaths and Entrances, the title of Thomas's best-known and most nostalgia-driven collection of poems, published in 1946, constitutes an apt way to think about this writer's understanding of death in a world that precludes return to holistic states of being.

This study contends that Thomas's obsession with his adolescent past induced in him a lifelong desire to return to Edenic innocence. It further argues that this preoccupation is a defining attribute of his literary efforts, especially his poetry. The study deploys several critical approaches, but it relies most on the close reading of poems and analysis of historical and biographical data within personal letters. I use psychological theories and insights to identify Thomas's key traumas, which affected his creative work; and I also use sociological studies of nostalgia as a cultural force. Perhaps like many humans, Dylan Marlais Thomas saw nostalgia as a way to shape or re-shape his past. In his case, the great work of nostalgia yields some of the most resonant poetry and drama of the twentieth century.



*A Young Nostalgia.*

Consider the following four lines, which open an untitled poem by Dylan Thomas:

Although through my bewildered way  
Of crying off this unshaped evil,  
Death to the magical when all is done,  
Age come to you—you're bright and useless. (The Poems of Dylan Thomas 21)<sup>2</sup>

Very likely, many would conclude that Thomas wrote these anxious, even morbid, words in his desperate final months, when his body was breaking down after years of alcoholism. Certainly, the poem would fit with Thomas's last tour of America, the conclusion of which was his painful death, separated from family and close friends. However, the lyric is no end-of life lament. Thomas was only 17 when he composed "Although through my bewildered way," entering it into a notebook he kept while living with his schoolmaster father and seamstress mother in Uplands, a middle-class district of Swansea, Wales. At 17, Thomas was obsessed with his "bewildered way," viewing "life" and "youth" as "bright and useless." Nostalgia seems apparent here in that the speaker is aware of the inevitability of "age," of "all [being] done," and of the demise of "the magical." Arguably, only nostalgic age can appreciate "the magical" that inheres during youth, "bright and useless" youth itself being unable to value it. The adolescent Dylan Thomas was a growing poet, thirsty for experience and a voice that would live forever. Why, then, would his early poetry wax nostalgic?

A psycho-biological study of the connection between nostalgia and adolescence may provide an answer to this question. Perhaps partially due to religious indoctrination, Thomas began to mourn the loss of his youthful innocence before he became an adult. The adolescent Thomas suffered from an inward struggle: while he longed for the supposed freedom of mature adulthood, he also sensed that that state would bring unique sins and pain to darken innocence. His teenage verse manifests a strong fascination with

adult desire, placing hunger for ill-defined life experiences in tension with fears about the consequences of such experiences. In analyzing Thomas's early works, one identifies detached, vague description. Once actual adult experiences occur, especially in pursuit of heterosexual love, this ambiguity changes into a powerful use of concrete objects.

In 1934, his twentieth year, Thomas moved out of his parents' home and began living in Chelsea, London, where he made ends meet reviewing novels. There, he developed his first serious erotic relationship, with Pamela Hansford Johnson. It is not clear whether Thomas slept with Johnson, but he did have intercourse with another woman and writes of his guilt in a letter to Johnson. This infidelity eventually ended the Thomas-Johnson relationship. Thomas's transition into adulthood brought anguish due to the negative memories he would associate with sexuality, but he translated that experience into more effective, solid verse. Writing could have been a kind of therapy for Thomas, guiding him out of the pitfalls of adolescence.

Thomas was likely aware of nostalgia as a consistent theme of his era. Often longingly, the British looked back at their nation and empire before World War I as they attempted to absorb the cataclysm of "the war to end all wars." The British psyche struggled to absorb the huge number of military deaths and casualties that resulted from trench warfare, the machine gun, and poison gas. In his poem "MCMXIV," Philip Larkin recalls the summer leading up to the start of hostilities:

Never such innocence,  
Never before or since,  
As changed itself to past  
Without a word—the men  
Leaving the gardens tidy,  
The thousands of marriages,  
Lasting a little while longer:  
Never such innocence again.

Larkin (born just seven years after Thomas) emphasizes racial, unprecedented loss—the ruin of an entire generation. His speaker reflects on pastoral, fertile images associated with the pre-war era: "gardens"; "thousands of marriages." The line "[n]ever such innocence again" implies that major trauma has taken place, afflicting not only poets and thinkers (men of the "word"), but also the moral consciousness of the entire nation.

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<sup>2</sup> Hereafter, the abbreviation PDT indicates this volume.

It was not just World War I that fostered a language of lost innocence. Rapid industrialization changed the Welsh landscape, with factories spewing black smoke across pristine beaches and green fields. Wales experienced industrialization years before many other Western countries did. As early as 1851, two-thirds of Welsh families made their livings outside agriculture. Minerals and other natural resources present in the Swansea region caused an industrial boom. In The Days of Dylan Thomas, Bill Read describes the multiple factories and facilities that marked Thomas's childhood locales:

Swansea [during Thomas's time] is...an ugly town, often gray and black with smoke from the iron, steel, coal, and tinplate factories that spread along the east side of the River Tawe. Most of the copper works have closed down, but the biggest zinc works in Great Britain is at nearby Llansamlet and the largest oil refinery in Europe is at Llandarcy. The 160,000 natives...are aware that they live in a town of industrial blight. (21)

Thomas, in fact, witnessed the closure of some Welsh factories in response to the depletion of resources. In the wake of this destruction, many Welsh citizens looked to the past a source of strength. From the late nineteenth century onwards, a self-reliant, Non-Conformist, Welsh-speaking country dweller was advanced as ideal by the likes of Thomas Edward Ellis and Owen Morgan Edwards. Ellis advocated Welsh home rule (legislative independence), and Edwards advanced education through Welsh. Industrialization and its ugly aftermath were seen as antithetical to indigenous Welsh culture.

Wales was not the only Celtic region of the United Kingdom that looked nostalgically back upon its past to counter forces of industrialization. The Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) criticized England, the colonial "mother country," as materialistic. As a young poet, Yeats exhibited nostalgia and a premature focus on death, rather as Thomas would at the equivalent stage of his career. One of Yeats's earliest poems, used to open each edition of his Collected Poems, expresses disillusionment with modernity. "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" begins by asserting, "The woods of Arcady are dead, / And over is their antique joy." Frequently, Yeats retreats from the modern by using Irish mythological characters. Such figures as Cuchulain, Fergus, and Aengus appear throughout his opus: a nationalist solution to the political, social, and moral problems of his age. Oddly, Thomas's poetry abstains from the mythologies of Wales. Thomas likely did not pursue mythology because of a persistent rebellion against

Welsh figures in adolescence. Welshness in Thomas stems more from landscape than myth, with the words and phrases used to describe topographical features often constituting wonderful soundscapes.

If Yeats produces a nostalgia centered on his nation, Thomas takes a much more personal approach to nostalgia. His early poems map his troubled adolescent psyche, highlighting struggles in the shift from boyhood to manhood and, more remarkably, manifesting awareness of the inevitability of death. Nostalgia is present in the very titles of such poems as “We Who Are Young Are Old” and “Youth Calls to Age.” Both titles reflect Thomas’s fascination with how age encroaches upon youth—and perhaps, too, the wisdom that age, however problematic, can impart about life’s challenges. The critically neglected poetry of Thomas’s youth privileges inward struggle. While longing for adulthood, its speakers also mourn innocence that has not yet been destroyed.

Thomas experiments with nostalgia in poetry, but while in some ways peculiar, his attention to nostalgia remains readable vis-à-vis a documented psychological inclination or practice. The development of nostalgic consciousness is a primary subject of Nancy Davis’s work Yearning for Yesterday. Davis’s text discusses the sociology of nostalgia across various eras and cultures, but its chief focus is European and American thought after World War I. Davis gives a firm psychological rationale for focusing on adolescence as the foundation of a nostalgic turn-of-mind—a habit—that persists throughout adulthood. She claims that the initial experience of a trauma during one’s adolescent transition forms images to which one’s adult self returns when confronted with stress.

Davis suggests a kind of gestalt effect. Gestalt refers to the tendency to perceive organizing structures and coherent forms amid complex situations. When faced with adult stress and complexity, an individual may use an image or experience from his or her adolescence as a “structure” through which to understand, react to, or walk away from the immediate crisis. Consider the example of an adult who, having experienced an episode of severe teasing in a high school cafeteria, may ever thereafter react negatively to cafeterias or even group meals. According to Davis, adolescence is the period when “nostalgic identity” solidifies. Adult stress can push the individual’s mind and emotions back to a key teenage moment, a kind of epiphany, where that individual formed a “big

picture” or gestalt view of a given circumstance. The moment of epiphany may be negative (as in the cafeteria example), but it may also be positive: a blueprint for what should be. Davis goes on to explain that the image of the past may not be congruent with reality:

[I]t seems that for Western man the transition from adolescence serves, at the mythic level at least, as the prototypical frame for nostalgia for the remainder of life. It is almost as if the depth and drama of the transition were such as to institutionalize adolescence in the personality as a more or less permanent and infinitely recoverable subject for nostalgic exercise....Thus, the fifty-year-old confronting life situations that seem more than normally problematic is as likely to reminisce nostalgically on scenes from adolescence as ones closer in time, which are perhaps as satisfying and certainly much fresher in memory. (59)

If what Davis says is true, we should not assume that Dylan Thomas’s nostalgic impulses and images spring from memories of childhood, even though a largely idealized childhood seems dominant in Thomas’s best known poem, “Fern Hill,” written when he was 31. Instead, the reader should seek the stuff of nostalgia in the key transition period that was Thomas’s adolescence. Teenage transition plants the seeds for nostalgic thought; and Davis’s description of adolescence as a period of “depth and drama” certainly characterizes the shift and flux of Dylan Thomas’s teenage years. This period is of paramount importance for understanding the poet’s nostalgia; it is, in fact, the foundation of that nostalgia. Again and again, the images and themes in Thomas’s opus highlight conflicts in his adolescence between youth and age, life and death, and—perhaps most importantly—innocence and experience. For Thomas, the tension between embracing adult experience and fearing the abandonment of idyllic youth forms an “infinitely recoverable subject for nostalgic exercise.”

As we have seen, Thomas at age 20 had his first serious encounter with sexuality: a relationship with the poet Pamela Hansford Johnson, who was then supporting herself by bank work in London. Johnson later concentrated on producing novels and literary criticism; and, unlike Thomas, she would enjoy professional success and financial stability. In 1933, Victor Neuburg published poems by Johnson and Thomas in “The Poet’s Corner,” a section he edited within the Sunday Referee. Initiated by Johnson, written correspondence between the two burgeoning poets resulted in their meeting in 1934, when Thomas traveled to London, ostensibly to visit his sister Nancy (eight years his senior). Their face-to-face encounter saw Thomas and Johnson develop what had

been an extensive written flirtation to the level of a physical relationship. Johnson seems to have represented many things to Thomas: a fellow hard-working poet; an intellectual partner ready to debate art and ethics; even perhaps a distillation of London as a center of power. Primarily, however, she came to preoccupy him as his first love—a promise of commitment, engagement, and stability, but a promise that he all too quickly sacrificed in favor of the supposed freedoms of bohemianism.

Distance proved a problem: Johnson lived in London, but Thomas still resided in Swansea. Both his residence with his parents and his Welsh identity caused Thomas some embarrassment. The relationship was very important to him, and he lied about his age to impress Johnson. He poured careful thought and effort into his letters to her; indeed, some read like prose-poems. Andrew Sinclair describes this devotion in his biography of Thomas, No Man More Magical:

His method of composing them is careful enough, as if he meant them to be preserved as a record of the young dog in his Swansea days. He would jot down random ideas on pieces of paper, hoard them, arrange them, then copy them out in long letters under paragraph headings. (51)

Thomas approaches the letters with the care and attention of a craftsman, a way of working that, a few years later, he would apply to the composition of poems. His relationship with Johnson is profoundly adolescent, betraying the anxious, obsessive romance associated with inexperience. However, his behavior seems oddly nostalgic as well. Thomas's "hoard[ing]" of the ideas he wrote for inclusion in his love letters suggests hopefulness about preserving his youth through physical artifacts. Many would expect an adolescent to preserve evidence of a first love in a very similar manner, but what makes Thomas unique in this regard is the fact that he retained this habit throughout his life, saving bits of paper, collecting news paper clippings, and even building poems from an almost infinite amount of drafts. Thomas took these habits to the extreme as an adolescent and this preservation of memories, despite how fresh they may be, would echo throughout the rest of his life.

The Thomas-Johnson relationship developed to provide drama and transition, which, according to Davis, are precisely the circumstances necessary for the "gestalt inversion of an adorned past." In other words, the complications and challenges of the relationship fueled Thomas's nostalgia for the rest of his life. Communication between

the two persisted for a couple of months after Thomas revealed the short-lived affair, but they drifted apart rather quickly and stopped communicating all together when they broke up. When the relationship dissolved in 1935, Thomas ceased to be an innocent boy, writing poems with nostalgic imagery of a vague stripe. Instead, he became a suffering man, deploying specific images closely related to the drama of his personal life.

The relationship ended after Thomas's wild lifestyle began to accelerate. Thomas's first serious encounter with bar culture occurred during 1931 and 1932, when, having quit Swansea Grammar School, he worked as a reporter on the South Wales Daily Post. In the biography The Days of Dylan Thomas, Bill Read offers Thomas's reflections concerning that time:

I liked the taste of beer, its live, white lather, its brass-bright depths, the sudden world through the wet-brown walls of the glass, the tilted rush to the lips and the slow swallowing down to the lapping belly, the salt on the tongue, the foam at the corners. (40)

This passage illustrates just how early Thomas's alcoholism surfaced. Clearly, Thomas associated drinking with his Welsh adolescence. Drinking also makes a striking appearance in his later work A Child's Christmas in Wales, where the child narrator's uncles drink profusely.

In 1934, Thomas's love for beer changed his life. He got drunk and slept with another woman for three days in a row. As if to ensure the death of innocence, Thomas confessed his infidelity to Johnson. Johnson forgave the transgression; however, the relationship suffered, and the two separated. After this severe romantic disappointment, Thomas fled his childhood surroundings. In what seems to be an embrace of his new, fallen adult life, he moved to London, which he had visited on prior occasions. In the imperial capital, Thomas retained significantly Welsh surroundings by living with two Swansea friends, art students Mervyn Levy and Fred Janes. However, as the trio knew, Swansea was no Eden, despite that Thomas's family lived in a distinctly middle-class part of Swansea. According to Read,

The frequent trips to London had made for his dissatisfaction with depression-haunted Swansea; he was depressed by the looks of hunger and despair on the faces about him. Wales was as hard hit in the twenties and thirties as any part of England: there were dole-queues, bankrupt villages, children searching for coal on the slagheaps, unused quarries, still pit-wheels, hewers squatting in the cut, sag roofed factories, plumeless stacks, knots of idle men outside the grim Employment Exchange. (69)

Thomas's relocation began a series of hardships that resulted in him honing and building his verse. He expanded his themes, solidified his formal structures, and most importantly began to use more specific images within poems. For the most part, Thomas's move to London was a miserable experience. His biographers point out that, for the rest of his life, he would characterize the city as a place of stagnation and waste. He penned an incomplete coming-of-age about the degradation and failure he experienced in London. Adventures in the Skin Trade introduces a young, idealistic hero who succumbs to sin in the city. This novel tells of a young, idealistic hero, who succumbs to the sin of the city and begins to lose layers of his skin with each act of moral transgression. This story, with its principle theme of fallen youth, falls amid Thomas' earliest poetic compositions, not including his juvenilia<sup>3</sup>. As the thirties progressed, Thomas encountered more dramatic personal challenges, and his poetry began to take an even more nostalgic tone. As this chapter progresses, the intricate details of Thomas's dramatic experiences will provide a backdrop to his developing poetry. Thomas's letters signal personal traumas that can be detected within his verse, and true to Davis's theory, Thomas responds to these hardships with profound nostalgia.

Thomas's adolescent nostalgia focuses primarily on the loss of innocence. Thomas begins his poetic career longing for a loosely defined life-experience, writing poems with very vague imagery. A shift occurs with his failed relationship with Johnson, signaling a kind of personal fall, and Thomas begins to focus on that pain for poetic inspiration. This chapter shows the foundation for Thomas's poetry of Eden, as the young poet sins and suffers for the first time. Thomas will let this pain play out in many poems throughout his life. Later poems such as "Fern Hill" and "Ceremony after a Fire Raid" will show continued use of a Garden of Eden metaphor, likely inspired by his youthful sins.

Yet throughout all of Thomas's development, his poetry retains the vagueness so predominate within his adolescent works. As Thomas's poetry progresses beyond his young adulthood, a pattern of blurry facial descriptions and unclear character identities

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas began publishing in the grade school publication, Swansea Grammar School Magazine. These poems have received little critical attention. "I Know this Vicious Minute's Hour", dated 1930, starts the Buffalo Notebook, which Thomas used to build most of his poems.



persists. Even though Thomas's poems began to exhibit more concrete images, many of the most powerful sections of his work stand out for their lack of description and detail. Considering Thomas's lived during a period with many artistic movements that valued vague imagery and blurry subjects. These included impressionism, expressionism, and surrealism. Thomas may have been influenced by these movements and continued to use vague imagery because of them. Within the sea of possible artistic influences that may have shaped Thomas's approach to verse, the most useful for an analysis of Thomas's developing nostalgia would be the German-Swiss painter Paul Klee. Klee painted with a blurred and vague style that uses indefinite subjects, boundaries, and shapes to create an image that appears to change shape with each viewing. As Thomas lived in a world of changing technologies and values, the world of flux depicted in Klee's paintings would have enormous appeal, and considering Thomas knew Klee during his foundational adolescence, Klee likely had a great impact upon his nostalgia as well.

Dylan Thomas's adolescent nostalgia is paramount in understanding not only the early period of his life, but to decoding the more complicated poems of his adulthood. Any study of Thomas's works must begin within his adolescence, combining his body of work, his biographical history and correspondence, and knowledge of nostalgia.

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***Voiceless Words, Lightless Eyes, and Loverless Oblivion.***

Written on August 12, 1931, the poem "Since on a Quiet Night" comes from the same period as "Although Through My Bewildered Way". The poem is a single stanza, consisting of twenty-two lines. It has no apparent rhyme scheme and follows no traditional format. This poem is one of Thomas's most vague works, invoking detached voices and faceless children with no specific identities or descriptive details. This lack of detail is powerful in itself, but Thomas will begin to move away from poetry this dependent upon incomplete imagery. As Thomas grows, it is important to return to this poem frequently and measure his skill with invoking concrete detail. Concrete details mainly constitute writing that appeals to the senses. Some examples include eye or hair color, direct quotations, textures, and any other description that enables the reader to experience the text. Also of importance are the particular devices Thomas uses in the midst of his lack of concrete images, namely an elegant use of rhyming repetition.

This poem, though one of Thomas's earliest, is a powerful piece in its early nostalgia. It establishes the trope of the young adult both anticipating and dreading adulthood. It consists of two sections. The first explores the impact upon the speaker when he hears the mysterious, voiceless words talking of death and life. The second describes an unknown child with no light in his eyes and soul. An analysis of this poem must move sequentially between these two sections, trying to link the two. This can prove difficult due to the amount of vague imagery within the poem, yet by analyzing the few concrete images, a pattern of youthful innocence corrupted by knowledge of mortality emerges. Thomas seems to anticipate the trials that await him within the next five years. "Since On a Quiet Night" provides an image of Thomas before the "depth and drama" of adolescent development sets in, and we will return to this poem to draw comparisons as the chapter progresses.

"Since On a Quiet Night" falls slightly outside of the more traumatic experiences of Thomas' late adolescence, having been written in 1931; yet the seeds for nostalgic thought and development have already begun to manifest themselves. The poem gives clear indication that a dramatic shift in Thomas's conception of death has begun to occur.

Since, on a quiet night, I heard them talk  
Who have no voices but the winds'  
Of all the mystery there is in life  
And all the mastery there is in death,  
I have not lain an hour asleep  
But troubled by their curious speech  
Stealing so softly into the ears. (PDT 23)

The prophetic, Yeatsian<sup>4</sup> aspect of this verse will stand out for most readers. The speaker is haunted by the presence of undefined specters. The mystery of this poem is magnified by the ambivalent language. The poem begins with an unusual emphasis on the word "Since." Readers are forced to pause over this word due to the comma placed directly after it. The emphasis can easily focus on the quiet night following "since." But "quiet night" is simply a description of the physical atmosphere in which the speech occurred. Without this subordinate clause, the first sentence of the poem would read "Since I

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<sup>4</sup> Consider Yeats's prophetic poem, "The Second Coming" (1920). Its speaker invokes "a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi* / ... / A shape with lion body and the head of a man." Although no mythical monster appears in "Since on a Quiet Night" the mystical notion of closeness to another world seems present in both lyrics.

heard them talk.” “Since” can hold two meanings here. It can indicate the passage of time, or it can mean “because,” suggesting a causal relationship between hearing the voices and the speaker’s inability to sleep. Thomas is using an eloquent language here that divides the attention of the reader quite easily, pulling focus away from the actual events in lieu of the environment of the night itself. “Since” seems to be operating both chronologically and causally, illustrating both passage of time and a consequence of hearing the voiceless words.

All of these details suggest nostalgia. Thomas is looking back to a world of ornamental language and decorative vocabulary that bombards his reader with the presence of antiquity at the very start of the poem. Words can have multiple definitions and grammatical influence upon the verse. It seems Thomas wants to write in the style of Shakespeare, using puns and elegant language. This trend will also appear in Thomas’s later works as well. He combines modern formless verse with the elegant and controlled language of the past to produce a hybrid form of poetry. The words without voice speak within a modern verse ripe with nostalgic effect.

Beyond the simple nostalgic atmosphere of the poem exists a clear pattern of growth and development, but the speaker does not understand the growth that has begun. The word “troubled” signals this new pattern of growth within “Since on a Quiet Night.” Oddly enough, this word seems to be downplayed within the poem and can slip past the inattentive reader. The speaker elaborates on the abstract concepts of “mystery” in life, and “mastery” in death, forcing the reader to pause over the process that changes mystery into mastery. Thomas attempts to show that death converts mystery into mastery, but neglects to discuss the process in detail. These concepts disturb his sleep, yet the speaker hides his emotional state behind the word “but” in the sixth line. The line can clearly function, and also have great power, if read without “but”, yet Thomas insists on pushing this word into the line and detracting from the raw power of the emotional word “troubled”. Thomas includes this word to show that the emotional distress caused by the voiceless words is still growing. The speaker’s earlier sleepless state was not one of distress or fear, but has been recently disturbed, possibly by the

speaker's constant thought upon what he has heard. This is a poem of transition, indicating a sudden shift has begun but is not yet understood by the speaker.

Thomas is setting the stage for a deeper probe into his nostalgic identity. He is writing as an adolescent, yet clearly looking back to a more youthful time when he confronted the imminence and finality of death.<sup>5</sup> Davis's predictions are proving accurate in this passage. Although Thomas is writing this poem at the late adolescent age of seventeen, his early nostalgia focuses on the transition to a more mature mental conception of death and a more realistic attitude towards it.

Thomas shows his reader a concrete adolescent crisis, and exploring how subtle the beginning of a transition can be. We can predict however, that this poem will ultimately prove abstract and incomplete due to the actual stage of life in which Thomas attempts to present this concept. He may be writing during his late adolescence, but Thomas has yet to experience the most dramatic transitions usually associated with early adulthood. He has not moved out of his parent's home, and he will not have his first disastrous affair for another three years.

The effects of Thomas's lack of adolescent trauma leave the last portion of the poem vague and incomplete. The text of "Since On a Quiet Night" becomes littered with abstract images of disappearance, and repetition becomes the most notable poetic device:

Oblivion is as loverless;  
Oblivion is as loverless.  
And then again: there was a child  
Upon the earth who knew no joy,  
For there was no light in his eyes,  
And there was no light in his soul.  
Oblivion is as blind.  
Oblivion is as blind,  
I hear them say out of the darkness  
Who have no talk but that of death.

There is no rhyme in this passage except the exact rhyme of repetition. The reader must crawl over the "loverless" oblivion, and cannot simply ignore the vague declaration of death's inherent threat. The first reading of this line is uncomfortable in its loneliness; the second is somber, inescapable as death itself. Yet within this passage Thomas indicates

subtle transition through the varying punctuation. The first line ends with a semicolon, promising supplemental information and delivering only a slight pause. The second line ends with a hard period that forces the reader to halt and face silence with nothing but the line's inevitable echo. The repetition forces the reader to experience the changing attitude toward death concretely within two lines. The reader must contemplate why Thomas would use repetition, and as one reads these lines, the meaning changes even though the words stay the same. The phrase becomes more powerful the second time it is read. The poetry represents the desire for repetition inherent in nostalgia, as one who longs for the past obviously desires to return and repeat events which have already transpired.

Yet Thomas is ill-equipped to maintain this poetic power, and falls into a confusing description of an almost soulless child. Thomas arouses the emotion of despair and loathing as he describes a child devoid of joy and light. But this emotion creates an unfortunate distance for the reader. Rather than experience the transition of mortal knowledge within the line repetitions, Thomas attempts to render the image concretely within the child. Thomas attempts to describe the child in a very unorthodox way, omitting any sensory details such as hair or skin color, height, or even the sound of his voice. Instead Thomas describes the boy with what is absent. There is no "light in his eyes" or soul, but this description leaves the reader with little visual cues to imagine the child the speaker describes. It is an effort to show a human ruined by the intensity of transition and hollowed out by a revelation of impending mortality, but Thomas lacks the imagery to give this idea the power and drive of oblivion's absolute loneliness. It is easy to imagine a "loverless" eternity when it is echoed and repeated, but the absence of light in the eyes and soul is not easily comprehended by most readers.

While the reliance upon the absence of light may be confusing, it is also quite effective in illustrating the limits of Thomas's poetic ability, and that lack of ability does contain a degree of poetic power. Thomas, armed with little to no experience with death, invokes ignorance within the poem to illustrate his lack of knowledge. The reader is left with a sense of emptiness and stagnate development, as if the poet is attempting to understand a concept beyond his reach. We know that Thomas was attempting to

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas's correspondence yields no concrete connection to this sudden shift. It is likely Thomas's musing is an attempt to create poetry, not a reaction to a concrete event.

understand the intimidating reality of death, so the confusion and ineffectiveness of the device seems somehow appropriate for the subject of the poem.

This poem is the perfect subject for analyzing Thomas's earliest poetry. It illustrates Thomas's desire for knowledge, tempered with the looming fear of the unknown, all while anticipating the certain pain life experience will bring. As Thomas progresses through these adolescent years, these motifs and images will form his nostalgia. As his poetry undergoes radical shifts it will also map his nostalgic progress, leaving a clear outline of the gestalt image that shapes his perception of the past.

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### ***Soldiers, Lovers, and Men Locked in Flesh.***

Thomas's lack of concrete imagery is inundated with a single, dominant detail: flesh. This section explores the relationship between the poem "We Who are Young are Old" and the letters written to Thomas's lover, Pamela Hansford Johnson. Both center on the body, jumping from themes of sexual desire to the decay of disease and war. This step is monumental for Thomas as he begins to master description in ways more effective than in "Since on a Quiet Night", but Thomas pays dearly for his increasing abilities. Thomas was a man locked in the prison of flesh, and this era demonstrates the early onset of alcoholism and sexual promiscuity. The fall from innocence of this period will likely form the voice of the more mature Dylan Thomas and mark the reference point in which his nostalgia constantly returns. It is the innocence of the years before the dissolution of his relationship with Johnson that Thomas will desire in his nostalgic sentiments, considering the amount of "depth and drama" that will take place at this point in his life.

The clear flaws of "Since on a Quiet Night" suggest Thomas's need and desire for transition and "drama" to define his works. With Thomas's early manifestation of nostalgia, there is a clear lack of poetic experience and voice to drive his ideas and give them power. Thomas continues this trend, and through several poems the concept of death and suffering maintains an odd distance from the reader. In "We Who are Young are Old", he attempts to compensate for his own lack of personal experience with grotesque imagery. The effect is remarkably similar to the inadequacies of "Since on a Quiet Night":

There is but one message for the earth,  
Young men with fallen chests and old men's breath,

Women with cancer at their sides  
And cancerous speaking dripping from their mouths,  
and lovers turning on the gas,  
Ex soldiers with horrors for a face,  
A pig's snout for a nose,  
The lost in doubt, the nearly mad, the young, (26)

This passage begins a large block of surreal description that stretches an epic twenty seven lines. This stanza stands out remarkably from the rest of the poem due to its length- it is more than twice as long as the other stanzas. Thomas draws the reader's attention to this section of the text; its size emphasizes its importance. Yet the description is oddly vague. The reader is bombarded with depersonalized imagery of women, soldiers and young men, but no specific names or features suggest that this material relates to Thomas's personal life. Thomas describes multitudes with the same loose description with which he characterizes the soulless child in "Since on a Quiet Night". The only difference is now the imagery expands to cover a large group and has become rife with decay and physical suffering. This verse is nostalgic in the same way that "Since on a Quiet Night" anticipates the coming destructive knowledge of mortality. Only now, later in life, Thomas utilizes some personal experience of the flesh to concentrate on the physical decay of death. The very act of painting this hopeless portrait implies a longing for the innocent period before "Since on a Quiet Night," before the "mastery of death" that now runs rampant in "'We Who are Young are Old'."

The nature of the physical suffering in "'We Who are Young are Old'" forms the most powerful aspect of the verse. Images leap off the page and accost the reader's senses. Thomas evokes the sense of sight very well with the "fallen chest" and the pig noses. One can almost smell the leaking gas, and taste the "cancerous dripping". Thomas has clearly evolved in his visual techniques and the poem maintains a great deal of power through this morbid, disturbing section. Thomas has begun to fixate on the flesh and its potential for suffering and decay, and this concept strikes the reader much more forcefully than the spiritual emptiness and suffering of "Since on a Quiet night." One may infer that "'We Who are Young are Old'" signals a new phase of Thomas's adolescence, and if Davis is right, this phase will "institutionalize" Thomas's adolescence as the era Thomas would return to nostalgically (Davis 59).

Luckily, Thomas's letters and biographies help identify which experiences facilitate this hallmark of poetic development. This poem was written in 1933 during Thomas's relationship with Pamela Hansford Johnson, and considering the relationship is likely his first encounter with sexuality and love, it is no coincidence that his poetry begins to focus on the flesh. I did not encounter any evidence that Thomas slept with Johnson during their relationship; however, the two did discuss sexuality in their correspondence. Thomas writes to Johnson in December of 1933 and describes his ideas concerning sexuality in the western tradition. He concludes that the repression of sexual urges from an early age can cause a kind of decay of the spirit:

The body must be kept intact for marriage, which is rarely possible before the age of twenty; the physical expression of sex must be caged up for six or more years until, for the price of a ring, a license, and a few hampering words, opportunity is presented with all the ceremony of a phallic religion. But so often the opportunity comes too late; the seed has soured; love has turned to lust, and lust to sadism; the mind has become covered and choked by the weeds of inhibition; and the union of two starved creatures, suddenly allowed the latitude of their sexes, is doomed from the start. (59)

The language of this letter bears a striking resemblance to the decaying flesh imagery of "We Who are Young are Old", providing even more evidence of Thomas's burgeoning obsession with the body. Sexuality, when repressed, causes a very literal decay characterized by "soured seeds" and choking weeds. One may even assume that the pain of doomed love is the reason why Thomas's lovers activate poisonous gas, especially considering the presence of the word "choking" in the letter. Once again, Davis's theories of nostalgic development ring true as Dylan Thomas outlines his personal development in both his poems and now a poignant letter which provides insight into his personal transitions. Thomas focuses on the seemingly inevitable decay of the flesh due to time and the "phallic religion" of the West, and his poetry mourns this decay, implying the loss of the innocence of childhood.

Thomas's exploration of innocent childhood sexuality offers some interesting insight into his conception of original sin. Society ruins the perfect innocence of children by bestowing unhealthy inhibitions, and Thomas describes a kind of ideal society where children are free to experiment with each other sexually. This reflects a kind of desire for Edenic innocence. When this letter was written Thomas had yet to experience the painful separation from these impossible ideals. For the moment, Thomas still exists within some



form of innocence and idealism, hoping to see these desires realized within a future idealistic society.

That state would not last long. One final shift occurs in Thomas's poetry due to his connection with Pamela Hansford Johnson. The relationship was very serious. Johnson and Thomas visited each other frequently and even met each other's parents. The two discussed marriage, and their detailed correspondence also shows a strong romance. The relationship began to collapse after Thomas confessed to an affair with another woman. Thomas wrote to Pamela in May of 1934:

I slept with her that night & for the next three nights. We were terribly drunk day & night. Now I can see all sorts of things. I think I've got them.  
(140)

The language of this letter is incredibly blunt compared to the exhaustive descriptions within his letter about stunted sexuality, yet it remains emotional. Thomas knows he cannot argue drunkenness as the primary cause of his infidelity due to the three nights he slept with this other woman. He almost seems to lose his grip on reality and claims to see "things." Notice the final words are just as mysterious: "I think I've got them." Thomas may be speaking of a venereal disease, furthering accentuating the "depth and drama" highlighted by Davis. This event was traumatic for Thomas in many ways, and he seems to know this infidelity has condemned his love for Johnson.

This is clearly a moment defined by struggle and transition as Thomas knowingly destroys his relationship. Even within this obviously emotional moment, Thomas relies upon vague description, implying his venereal disease and failing to describe the "things" he claims to see. Thomas maintains a kind of distance with his details in an attempt to mitigate his own guilt. Just as the soldiers and multitudes of "We Who are Young are Old" lack faces and identity, the details and specific objects Thomas sees, and the "things" he now has remain mysterious within the text. Pamela forgave Thomas for this infraction, yet this signals the end of their relationship and the ideal Edenic innocence of Thomas's adolescence.

For the rest of his life, Thomas would remain locked in a prison of flesh, drinking wildly, having multiple affairs, and writing with a focused nostalgia for the innocence lost before the fall in 1934. He built for himself a world of decay, longing for life experience and the abandonment of his ideal existence. This is the period of "depth and

drama” for which we have searched, and it will clearly affect the continuing development of his nostalgia, both personally and poetically.

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*The “Lock and Vice” Close.*

A single poem culminates the development and growth of Dylan Thomas’s adolescent nostalgia. “All All and All the Dry World’s Lever” shows an astute control over concrete description while still maintaining the odd power of vague description that we find within the poems “Since On a Quiet Night” and “We Who are Young are Old”. Although the poem attempts to embrace the future and praise the painful knowledge gained through life experience, the nostalgia for the lost ideal still exists in the verse, and will stay with Thomas forever.

Several months after Thomas wrote the confessional letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson, he completed “All All and All the Dry World’s Lever” which shows substantial development in imagery, poetic devices, conception of death, and a pointed nostalgia for a lost innocence. “All All and All the Dry Worlds Lever” was written in December of 1934, and the poem bears a striking resemblance to the devices used within the confessional letter to his lost lover:

Man of my flesh, the jawbone riven,  
Know now the flesh’s lock and vice,  
And the cage for the scythe-eyed raven,  
Know, O my bone, the jointed lever,  
Fear not the screws that turn the voice,  
And the face to the driven lover.

Finally Thomas begins to write with a voice of experience and knowledge. Notice the strong verbs that begin three of the lines, “Know” and “Fear”. Thomas poems are no longer simple lists of what is absent, or what is horrifying. He has moved from a passive voice and now writes actively and with confidence. He makes it plain that he is now a man of real suffering and knowledge, knowing “the flesh’s lock and vice.” The mix of alliteration and assonance of the raven imagery shows that Thomas’s failed relationship with Johnson has literally transformed his verse into a more elegant and powerful entity.

The nostalgia of this piece is undeniable as Thomas paints a world infested with experience and death imagery. Though Thomas’s text mourns what is lost in the light of fearful mortality with the carrion bird image, there is exuberance for the future as the

speaker demands the reader “fear not”. Thomas’s nostalgia is no longer direct, but rather implied (much like “We Who are Young are Old”) behind an attempt to reconcile the painful past with a future of possibility. The important thing about this passage is the possibility that Thomas wrote it with the failed relationship with Johnson in mind. Thomas is attempting to reconcile his past by projecting possibilities upon the future. Nostalgia has become a complicated force in this poem, as ideals are no longer confined to the past, as shown in poems such as “Since on a Quiet Night.” The idealism of Thomas’s youthful nostalgia has now shifted upon the future, but at the same time, Thomas relegates this idealism with the face of a “driven lover,” most likely Johnson. It is an odd piece, but the influence of Thomas’s adolescent nostalgia is undeniable.

The image of the “jointed lever” is also worth exploring. The idea of the “lever” suggests a kind of switch or handle, but the adjective “jointed” implies that this “lever” will continuously swing and return to itself upon an axis. This is a repetitive motion locked into an elegant concrete image. Instead of simply using direct repetition, such as the line “oblivion is as loverless” in the poem “Since on a Quiet Night,” Thomas now hides repetition within a useful concrete image. The idea of swinging and returning according to a set pattern is nostalgic, as nostalgia is the desire to repeat and return. Thomas characterizes time, and the world itself, as a series of repetition on the set motions of a “jointed lever,” a poetic claim that would never have appeared in any of his early poems.

The text of the poem even mirrors the blunt, but vague nature of the confessional letter to Johnson, with its limited, yet powerful images. The text of “All All and All The Dry World’s Lever” shows a control over images unseen in Thomas’s poems until this point. There are no expansive lists, and the stanzas stay uniform. The poem contain very poignant images, but they have little development or explanation. A good example of this is the image of the “flesh’s lock and vice,” which is interrupted by “the cage for the scythe-eyed raven” rather than explored more fully. Compare this control with the almost horrifying simplicity of his confessional letter: “I slept with her that night and for the next three nights.” Thomas does not focus on the first night, but immediately follows up the fact that his affair lasted three more nights. Thomas creates a new dimension to vague description, not by avoiding concrete details, but by over using them/ Thomas uses many

facts, descriptions, and images, and they interrupt and conflict in the text, competing for the reader's attention. This creates gaps in the readers mind as he/she progresses through the poem. Thomas masters the art of concrete description while remaining loyal to his vague and shifting atmosphere.

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***Paul Klee and the Faceless Angels.***

The development of Thomas's nostalgia through adolescent drama and transition is paramount in understanding his verse. He begins with the paralyzed verse of "Since on a Quiet Night", flawed due to his lack of personal life experience. As he begins his relationship with Pamela Hansford Johnson, his images become more associated with mortality and the flesh strengthening the text of "We Who are Young are Old." Finally, when the relationship falls apart, Thomas produces a poem of seemingly flawless nostalgic verse, mirroring the very language and literary devices he used in his confessional letter. Thomas essentially provided his readers with a map of his nostalgic development, substantiating Nancy Davis's theories in ways even she never imagined.<sup>6</sup>

Yet despite all of this development and transition within Thomas's nostalgic verse, one facet remains the same. When Thomas waxes nostalgic upon his developing attitude toward death, romance, or childhood, he often uses vague descriptions, creating an almost faceless world. Even though I have highlighted the possible connections between Thomas's personal life and his poems, he never writes with names or an indication that his speaker delivers the writer's own experiences. The primary characters of the poems are almost always a "child" or a "soldier", or even more vaguely, a "man". "All All and All the Dry World's Lever" includes a specific "man of my flesh", but this character could stand for a specific person or for humanity as a whole. Considering Thomas's constant desire for life experience and transition in his poems, the question remains, why would he not concretely indicate his identity as speaker or include some pointed description that would allow critics to ascertain the context of these poems? The vague, faceless nature of Thomas's poetry remains constant throughout his entire career. We can only maintain that this device would be a defining aspect of not only Thomas's

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<sup>6</sup> Davis offers case studies that link nostalgic behaviors on the part of middle-aged men to their memories of adolescence. However, she lacks the detailed map of personal development

poetry, but his nostalgia as well, and considering the reliability of Nancy Davis's theory of adolescent nostalgic development, the source of this poetic device likely lies within Thomas's adolescence.

Faceless worlds and shifting realities are a hallmark of modernity<sup>7</sup>. And any number of surrealist or expressionist thinkers could have influenced Thomas's verse. Yet for one painter, we can document a connection to Thomas. An interview with Thomas's friend and sometime roommate William Scott reveals not only a name, but an actual movement in which Thomas expressed profound interest. The following statement appears in the book William Scott: Paintings and Drawings:

These painters had more meaning for me than the whimsy of Paul Klee which was making a strong appeal to the literary world at the time. At least this was the impression I had from my close friendship with Dylan Thomas who in the thirties was very keen on Klee. (32)

Scott gives incredible insight into the artistic taste of Thomas, indicating the "whimsy" of the painter Paul Klee. The most important thing about this passage is that Scott discusses the time period Thomas expressed interest in these figures: the exact same period of adolescent development and his failing relationship with Pamela Hansford Johnson. Although there is no actual mention of Klee or the whimsical movement in Thomas's correspondence, Scott's testimony proves that Thomas would have known the goals and characteristics of both the movement and the painter representing it, thereby justifying a study of its possible influences. Considering that Thomas shows heavy experimentation during this period it is possible that he integrated facets of Paul Klee's personal aesthetic within his poetry, and although this aesthetic will be a modified version of Klee's style, we can directly trace the specific paintings and patterns from which Thomas drew inspiration.

Paul Klee was a Swiss/German painter born in 1879. He spent most of his life traveling Europe to see a variety of artistic styles and view many exhibitions, including one of Van Gogh's works. Klee developed a friendship with the poet and novelist Rilke<sup>8</sup>

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Thomas constructs within both his letters and poems. In many ways, Thomas was his own biographer and psychologist.

<sup>7</sup> Impressionist works by the likes of Vincent van Gogh and surrealist experiments by Salvador Dali and others purposely obscure reality.

<sup>8</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) was a gifted German-language author especially associated with mythological and religious themes and imagery.

and Wassily Kandinsky who aided his final rise to fame in the 1890's. In the nineteen twenties, he helped form a new school of art with particular focus on form dubbed "the Bauhaus." This group included Walter Gropius, George Muche, and Wassily Kandinsky. Klee passed away in 1940 after a long bout with the debilitating disease sclerodermia. The struggle between health, illness, life, and death became one of the primary motifs of Klee's later works. The period of the nineteen thirties is characterized by the presence of the encroaching reality of death, as Klee began to focus upon angelic forms and images of organic decay. He often abandons conventional form, and creates paintings with little detail.

Klee's lack of detail was a defining attribute of his art. Many of his works feature no color, and seem to only be a few lines upon the canvas. This simplicity often gives Klee's paintings an appearance of transformation and flux. The poet Rilke describes this effect quite well in a passage quoted in Di San Lazzaro's biography Klee; His Life and Work. Rilke characterizes this simplicity as a sign of developing modernity. Rilke also highlights Klee's tendency to imply an object's apparent disappearance within its own depiction.

They attracted me and held my attention all the more because one could still feel the influence of Kairouan<sup>9</sup>, which I know...During these war years I have often had exactly the same feeling that reality was disappearing; for it is a question of faith to know to what degree we accept reality and then attempt to express ourselves through it. Broken and mutilated creatures are best rendered by their own debris. What is astonishing—apart from the disappearance of the subject proper—is that at present music and graphic art take each other for subject. This short circuit in the arts, of which nature and even the imagination know nothing, is—as far as I am concerned—the most disturbing phenomenon of the present day; yet it is a phenomenon which liberates, since farther than that one cannot go. (93)

For Rilke, Klee embodies a growing phenomenon of artistic focus on a disappearing subject, characterized by fragmentation and a visual effect of fading. He also mentions that this movement has its roots in the background of the world wars, giving the movement a dark, depressing weight. Rilke then describes the depiction of broken and mutilated creatures, and the focus on their wreckage as art, which should immediately remind the reader of Thomas's depiction of the scarred soldiers in "We Who are Young

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<sup>9</sup> Located in Tunisia, Kairouan is a Muslim holy city and pilgrimage site. Its inclusion here emphasizes Klee's knowledge of world culture.

are Old““. Rilke’s description of this phenomenon as a “short circuit of the arts” seems to imply that modernity’s use of these devices is a mistake, or even a dangerous miss-step in the development of aesthetic creation, yet he leaves the reader with an overwhelming sense of freedom, stating that the artistic destruction of reality is in fact the furthest free step one can take.

The depiction of the disappearing object is the first concrete connection between Dylan Thomas and Paul Klee. Thomas’s habit of defining objects with disappearance has already been explored in “Since on a Quiet Night” as a child’s most outstanding feature is the lack of light in his eyes, yet Thomas uses this device much more extensively within “And Death Shall Have No Dominion”. Written in April of 1933, and first published in The New English Weekly, this poem falls between the curious innocence of Thomas’s flawed poems, and the maturity of the 1934 poem “All All and All the Dry World’s Lever”. The final stanza will remind the reader of Rilke’s description of Klee:

And death shall have no dominion.  
No more may gulls cry at their ears  
Or waves break loud on the seashores;  
Where blew a flower may a flower no more  
Lift its head to the blows of the rain;  
Though they be mad and dead as nails,  
Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;  
Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,  
And death shall have no dominion. (55)

Notice that the power of this poem flows from the description of objects in the process of extinction. The repetition of “No more” within the poem negates the existence of all the objects described, infusing an odd sense of irony through the whole piece. The gulls no longer cry, waves cease to break, and flowers no longer lift their heads. Even the sun begins to die in the almost violent description of breaking down. All of this is framed within the almost biblical phrase “And death shall have no dominion”. This poem is a perfect example of the same aesthetic view defined in Rilke’s examination of Klee. Thomas literally depicts the broken and destroyed through their own debris as he describes objects disappearing from the world. Thomas also plays with the idea of total freedom as a dangerous, disturbing art form as he depicts a perfect world where death holds no control by erasing all of existence itself. Death no longer has any “dominion” because there are no living objects or environments where it can reign. Thomas is

elegantly showing the only possible way death can ever truly be outdone, and that is in the death of all living things.

Knowing that Klee engineered the motif of the disappearing subject before Thomas, we can begin to understand the way Klee may have influenced Thomas's nostalgic verse and characteristic use of this aesthetic pattern within poetry. Klee's most striking use of these characteristics is evident in his series of angels. Klee produced many angel paintings, especially later in his life. These paintings all share a few common elements. They are black and white, the shapes are primarily lines similar to stick figures, they have little to no detail, angelic elements (usually wings) are mostly present, and often human faces can be seen somewhere within the painting. The titles include the word "angel" with some variation, including the works "Angel: Still Ugly", "Forgetful Angel", and "In Angel's Keeping". It is important to note that these paintings do not necessarily depict Klee's conception of an angelic being, but rather the human spirit suffering from shifts in form, theoretically after death. This process is summarized in Mark Luprecht's book Angels, Things, and Death, a catalog of Klee's late works.

Paul Tillich describes angels as "concrete-poetic symbols of the structure or powers of being. They are not beings but participate in everything that is." Klee's representations seem to fit this description quite closely: his angels are mostly flat, insubstantial, and incongruous. Often, seemingly human features are merged with abstract shapes. These appear as creatures in the process of becoming something other. In his 1994 study of the visibility of angles in Romanticism as well as in the works of Klee, Rilke, and Benjamin, Friedmar Apel notes that particularly among the artist's last creations, Klee's angels elude an object-oriented way of seeing....Apel continues: "precisely with this subject, Klee appears to return to earlier experiments with form. So, precisely the angels appeared to refuse a final form, they appeared not really to know just what form they should assume." (65)

Just as Rilke describes artistic forms in flux and the depiction of the destroyed through debris, Klee's angels become studies of the art of the transition, even going as far as to refuse form itself. These angels are creatures, probably human, which in their spiritual transformation force the viewer to confront the spiritual in terms of the object. The human elements of these pieces are downplayed as the humanoid objects within the paintings are merged with abstract shapes. Again, consider Thomas's poetry in connection with this flux of the human form. The flesh in "All All and All the Dry World's Lever" changes shape and becomes a lock and prison. Just as the angels



experience flux and form transition, Thomas destabilizes the human body for the sake of the metaphor, mixing the concrete substance of the flesh with the abstract image of the lock, and even a cage for a raven. While not dealing with the image of the angel, Thomas embraces the same patterns Klee develops within the angels series.

Even more similarities between the aesthetic of Dylan Thomas and that of Paul Klee appear upon a closer examination of Klee's angel paintings. The most chronologically appropriate painting in this series for an analysis of Klee's possible influence upon Dylan Thomas would be In Angel's Keeping, which utilizes a very similar style of purposefully vague detail. Klee composed this painting in 1931, a few years before his health began to take a turn for the worst. The viewer can deduce that Klee has begun to enter the final years of his life and has begun to wrestle with the looming "mastery of death" described in "Since On a Quiet Night." The following image is taken from page 103 of Of Angels, Things, and Death, by Mark Luprecht.

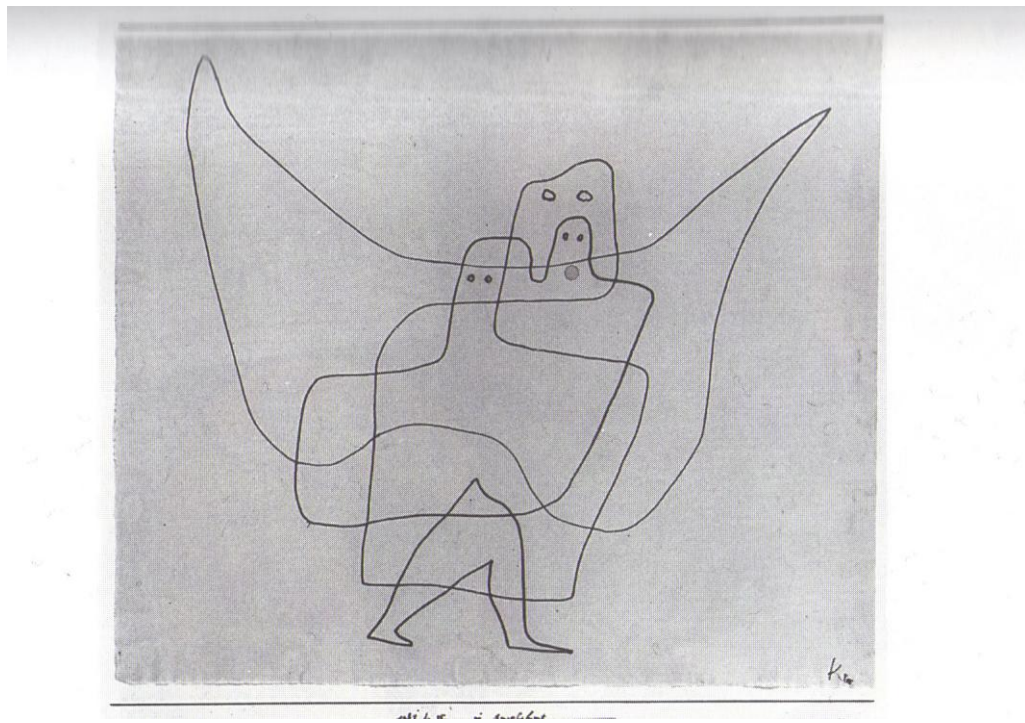


Figure 1: In Angel's Keeping

Klee's depiction of the angel emphasizes the mystery of the afterlife. Notice that the painting only hints at a series of faces; the most obvious evidence of a human presence within the picture is the three apparent pairs of eyes towards the top and center,

suggesting three humanoid figures within the work itself. Notice also the winged structure that encompasses the painting. It is drawn in a way that makes identifying the true owner of the wings difficult, but the wings seem to settle very close to the center figure. The same effect extends to the bottom of the page with the walking feet. The feet seem to belong to the center figure, but considering they high amount of intersection between the three it can be difficult to argue that point definitively. The painting's title, In Angel's keeping, suggests the protecting enclosure of a higher being and, while surreal, does give the impression of protection. Yet it is odd that Klee would withhold and obscure ownership of the wings and feet, denying the viewer the ability to identify the angel in the picture. The faces also give no insight, being defined solely by simple eyes with no personality or emotion.

The vague nature of these spirit faces mirror Thomas's verse quite well. Klee avoids intricate details in the faces producing a shifting, ghostly effect just as Thomas denies his reader any specific details about the actual identity of the people within his poems. Consider the soulless child within "Since On a Quiet Night." The reader is allowed no actual description of the child's appearance, only the absence of light and joy within the child's face. Thomas seems to emulate the vague nature of Klee's angelic faces when he describes words with no voices, and eyes with no light. Just like Klee's paintings, objects are defined not by their appearance or substance, rather by their lack of detail.

"We Who Are Young Are Old" depicts specific people, but relegates their description to a single facet of the face. The pig nose belonging to the soldier stands out from the rest of the text in the same way the detached eyes of In Angel's Keeping glare from Klee's painting. Furthermore, the eyes on Klee's painting resemble a pig nose. The eyes of the most distant figure could very well be the nose of the largest head. Klee paintings lend themselves to interpretation, and while it is difficult to surmise that Thomas based "We Who Are Young Are Old" upon this image, the organic and shifting nature of this painting could very well have created similar imagery in Thomas's poetry. This improves a bit from "Since on a Quiet Night" because the reader now has a specific detail with which to focus. As Thomas develops his nostalgic verse, he begins to rely on

the aesthetic of Klee's paintings, utilizing specific physical details to bring the characters of his poems to a ghostly life.

The trend of physical description undergoes a radical shift in "All All and All the Dry World's Lever" Thomas begins to engage in even more vague word play, but his vagueness is accentuated by a new fascination with boundaries. Flesh becomes "A lock and vice", creating a prison of mortality. This suggests that confinement within the body is a primary source of misery in the world. Thomas emphasizes boundary even more when the speaker commands the reader to know "the cage for the scythe-eyed raven". The image of the cage combined with the presence of the carrion bird suggests a relationship between boundaries with the inevitability of death. Thomas's implied nostalgia is dependent upon the inevitability of innocence lost within the experience of mortality, thus the flesh forms an apt metaphor for the unavoidable experience of death. What makes Klee's painting important for this piece is the final poetic marriage of vague description and encroaching, yet indefinable boundary. Just as the wings of "In Angel's Keeping" form an unstable boundary, death becomes defined as a shapeless lock of flesh and a cage for a raven with scythe shaped eyes. The combination of the cage and scythe imagery is Thomas's moment of pure poetic power, combining a myriad of shapes and vague details with an overarching feeling of enclosure, suggesting entrapment. Thomas has no need to explain this relationship directly, relying instead on the symbols of locks and cages, just as Klee has no need to suggest the human presence within "In Angel's Keeping" by using the multiple eyes.

Whether Klee directly influenced Dylan Thomas, or Thomas simply delivers the same emotions or patterns within a kind of zeitgeist of destabilized reality, Thomas became interested in Klee at the same point Nancy Davis identifies as the key era of nostalgic development: adolescence. Thomas experienced and expressed interest in Klee during his adolescent struggles. Klee provides a destabilized world within his paintings, and as Thomas develops his more nostalgic verse, he experiments with vague, broken images. As Thomas begins to mature, he synthesizes this vague imagery with the same undefined boundary showcased within "In Angel's Keeping" to construct "All All and All the Dry World's Lever", the strongest poem discussed within this chapter. Thomas, suffering from a lack of personal experience to construct a truly nostalgic poem, uses the

same destabilizing patterns within Paul Klee's paintings to supplement his own lack of traumatic adolescent experience, creating a confusing, surreal atmosphere within his earlier poems. After the dramatic end of his relationship with Pamela Hansford Johnson, he continues to use the patterns introduced in Klee's paintings, only now he is armed with the artistic and personal life knowledge to use those images effectively.

On a final nostalgic note, the subject matter of Klee's angel paintings may connect with Thomas's nostalgia on a more basic level. Thomas clearly centers his nostalgia on the loss of his innocence, producing a sentiment within his poems very similar to a longing for the lost Garden of Eden. He hints at this desire even more within "And Death Shall Have No Dominion," suggesting that the only way to overcome death's rule is to succumb to it. It is odd that Mark Luprecht would subsequently describe Paul Klee's Angel's as humans in transition and becoming something else. To become "Angelic" in a Klee painting is to become less human, throwing off the characteristics and appearance of the flesh to become more spiritual. It appears that Thomas and Klee both evince a desire to return to some lost idyllic existence, but the only way to return to that long forgotten state, is through destruction. The nostalgia of Paul Klee and Dylan Thomas may not focus on some other time period, but a memory of some higher existence which can only be reclaimed through death.

Metaphysics aside, utilizing Nancy Davis's sociological study of nostalgia has helped identify specific areas of Thomas's life that almost certainly influenced the development of his poetry. Whether by analyzing his letters to understand how the chronology of his failed relationship coincides with a revolutionary change in his verse, or by identifying the possible artistic source of one of Thomas's primary poetic devices, nostalgia forms the primary vein of Dylan Thomas's creative process. As Thomas grows into a truly nostalgic adult, the possibilities for in depth analysis of his longing for the past will surely multiply, and new readings of his poems wait to be unlocked. Clearly, the trope of lost innocence and the unattainable desire for Eden will again resurface. Thomas longs not for some lost childhood but for the ideals and innocence he has abandoned. That guilt will follow him through all of his art and life.

*Chapter 2*  
Edenic Labor:  
Dylan Thomas and the Influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement

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“Few writers have shown the meticulous care for craftsmanship that marked Dylan Thomas’ practice. Working slowly and with infinite pains, he would experiment with a single phrase, writing it a hundred different ways before he was content. Often he used a separate worksheet for each line of a poem, sometimes pages of trials for a single line as the poem was gradually built up. One line might occupy him for days.”—Bill Read, The Days of Dylan Thomas (113)

Bill Read’s 1962 biography of Dylan Thomas describes the poet in a way vastly different from how popular culture sees him. For many, Thomas stands out less as a literary figure, but for relentless partying, chronic drunken behavior and a tendency to self-destruction. The attention most give to the tragic aspects of Thomas’s life vastly undermines the devoted and hardworking poet he was. Thomas was a complex man, capable of seedy and irresponsible exploits, but he also practiced the care, skill, patience, and self-discipline needed to craft each line of his poems from “pages of trials.” He worked “slowly and with infinite pains,” and focused upon single lines of verse for days at a time. To fully understand Thomas, a reader must interrogate the work habits and ideals that fuel such remarkable devotion and transcend the image of Thomas’s self destructive-lifestyle.

Dylan Thomas was just as Bill Read describes him: a craftsman. Thomas’s meticulous approach, and the large number of drafts he produced tempt the reader to imagine Thomas moving to and fro among piles of papers like a woodcarver stirring piles of sawdust while performing his work. Historically, this method of poetic composition characterizes other writers as well. Bill Read points out that few poets have ever reached the level of care Thomas displayed, and his devotion is indeed rare, but the autobiographical writings of William Butler Yeats show a similar approach. Helen Vendler quotes Yeats at length in her book, Our Secret Discipline, and highlights Yeats’s craftsman conception of poetic composition:

Metrical composition is always very difficult to me, nothing is done upon the first day, not a rhyme is in its place; and when at last the rhymes begin to come, the first rough draft of a six-line stanza takes the whole day. (xvii)

Yeats was a masterful poet, but even he produces a six-line draft in a day, while Read claims that Thomas spends several days on a single line. Nevertheless, both poets approach writing as a process, gradually building and shaping a poem among many layers and attempts. Poems are literal works of the hand that must form over countless hours of labor.

Yeats and Thomas were contemporaries, though Yeats was forty nine years older. Despite the slight age difference, Yeats provides a fruitful insight into Thomas's similar work habits. Yeats is very well known for his adherence to Arts and Craftsism: a philosophical, historical movement that gained wide popularity in the western world during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Yeats lived during the heyday of the Arts and Crafts movement proclaiming one of its primary figures, William Morris, as his "chief among men." Yeats even demonstrated the lasting power of Arts and Crafts language and ideals in a letter to Morgot Collis in April of 1936, when Thomas was twenty two years old. Yeats wrote this letter in a time when Thomas was creating many of his most famous poems:

You do not work at your technique. You take the easiest course—leave out the rhymes or choose the most hackneyed rhymes, because damn you—you are lazy...When your technique is sloppy your matter grows second-hand; there is no difficulty to force you down under the surface. Difficulty is our plough. (Vendler xviv)

Yeats seems obsessed with literary technique as a necessary difficulty. He values hard work as a facet of quality poetry and even berates a fellow poet for not working with her verse meticulously enough. Yeats even equates poetry with the physical work of the farm, referring to "[d]ifficulty" as the "plough" of the writer. This suggests a very craftsman conception of the poet as well as the devoted care showcased by Dylan Thomas. This letter, even in 1936 when Yeats turned 71, showcases the remarkable devotion to Arts and Crafts ideals Yeats maintained into the poetically productive period for Thomas as well. Considering the similarities between the two poets' method of composition, it seems worth while to explore the concept of Arts and Craftsism and how Thomas may have utilized its ideals within his own work.

Arts and Craftsism attempted to shape the public view on many cultural concepts, including mass production, economics, and aesthetics. The movement was revolutionary, rejecting the sprawling factories, shoddy workmanship, and the ever worsening living

conditions of city dwellers so characteristic of the modern era in favor of craftsman creativity more characteristic of the medieval period. This rejection of the Industrial Revolution appealed to artists, poets, and thinkers during and beyond the Victorian Era. Thomas expressed interest in nostalgia in adolescence, constructing poems such as “We Who Are Young are Old,” and “Youth Calls to Age.” Considering Thomas’s early experimentation with nostalgia as a poetic subject, Arts and Craftsism would likely have appealed to the poet as a potentially productive means of exploring nostalgia. This chapter will explore the possible images and themes of Arts and Craftsism in Thomas’s work. Analyzing Thomas’s personal workspace and the poems “Oh No Work or Words,” and “In My Craft or Sullen Art” will reveal a constant desire for a return to the ethics of Arts and Craftsism. Thomas channels the nostalgia at the heart of Arts Craftsism, examining the relationship between poetry, physical craft, and the joy manual work of the hand and mind can bestow. For Thomas, Arts and Craftsism creates poetry that reflects upon its own construction, debates the hardships and rewards of writing as a profession, and even discusses labor free from the influence of mass production.

It is important to note Thomas’s chronological distance from the most active period of Arts and Craftsism. Thomas was born in 1914, well after the careers of John Ruskin and William Morris, two principle figures of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Ruskin and Morris died in 1900 and 1896 respectively. It is difficult to concretely claim that Thomas adhered to the tenants of Arts and Craftsism outside the realm of speculation, but Arts and Craftsism formed a major cornerstone in the minds of many poets even after it faded from the spotlight, as highlighted by Yeats. Arts and Craftsism was a resonating force in Thomas’s world, and was still heavily discussed by one of his most famous contemporaries.

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### ***Arts and Craftsism.***

To get a better understanding of Arts and Craftsism, it is important to understand some of its principle thinkers. John Ruskin who was a major figure in the Gothic Revival, laid the foundation for Arts and Craftsism with his book The Stones of Venice. He idealized the figure of the medieval or Gothic stone-mason, who would, for example,

carve a stone panel on the face of a cathedral. The stone-masons enjoyed a great deal of freedom in their work, and Ruskin desired a similar freedom for the workers of his era:

I believe there are many peasants on every estate, and laborers in every town of Europe, who have imaginative powers of a high order, which nevertheless cannot be used for our good, because we do not choose to look at anything but what is expressed in a legal and scientific way. I believe there is many a village mason who, set to carve a series of Scripture or any other histories, would find many a strange and noble fancy in his head, and set it down, roughly enough indeed, but in a way well worth our having. But we are too grand to let him do this, or to set up his clumsy work when it is done; and accordingly the poor stone-mason is kept hewing stones smooth at the corners, and we build our church of the smooth square stones, and consider ourselves wise.

The free stone-carver cannot experiment with his form or art due to the industrial need for uniform stones to build the cathedral to a mathematically precise plan. Ruskin realized that this system precluded many creative talents and expressed the need to reform the oppressive aspects of Victorian architecture. Ruskin admits that the work of the stone-mason will be different and rough compared to the uniformity of the Cathedral stones, but the work will also be valuable as creative art, and society is foolish to reject it for that purpose. Society is enhanced by the presence of such art.

Ruskin's writings influenced another Polymath, William Morris, who was one of the founding figures of the Arts and Crafts movement. Morris opposed modernism in many ways, rejecting the mechanical technology of mass production and the rigorous precision of art and architecture. The idea of a painting canvas as a grid is a good example of one of the many concepts Morris would reject. Morris, like Ruskin, emphasized the creative genius of the individual worker, hoping to salvage the artists repressed by industrial conformity. He hoped that placing value on the artistic creativity of individual workers would combat a modern era that alienated individuals from their own, personal potential as producers of art and architecture.<sup>10</sup>

The idea of alienation within the Industrial Revolution influenced many similar movements outside of, but closely related to, Arts and Craftsism. Thomas H. Evans describes John Ruskin and William Morris's impact upon the English Medievalists in his essay "Folklore as Utopia: English Medievalists and the Ideology of Revivalism." Ruskin

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<sup>10</sup> Alienation from one's labor is also one of the founding points of Karl Marx's theories. Morris considered himself a socialist.



and Morris were primary figures in the Medievalist movement, and their characteristic distrust of the industrial revolution is remarkably present. Evans explains:

England was the first industrialized nation, and also produced the first reaction against industrialism. From the late eighteenth century to the twentieth, England [sic] romantics consistently contrasted the ugliness, repetitiveness, and alienation that they perceived in city, factory and popular culture with the beautiful, secure, and natural life of the pre-industrial peasant...Their focus was on what modern scholars would call “folklife”—on the peasant community as a society and a whole way of life, with an emphasis on material culture. For a movement that was a reaction to the mechanization of labor, material folk culture was a natural focus.” (248)

This movement is obviously nostalgic, demonizing the present while simultaneously idealizing the Middle Ages. Evans describes the Medievalist conception of modern England as ugly, repetitive, and alienating, while the life of the peasant is “beautiful,” “secure,” and “natural.” Arts and Craftsism and Medievalism alike adopted an unrealistic view of the medieval past, painting the peasant worker as a Utopian figure. Work, in the rural and material sense, is a virtuous and ideal mode of existence, providing a solution to the dark, advancing dominance of the industrial machine. Moreover, Evans emphasizes the role of physical labor and its products as an alternative to industrial culture.

Thomas would have likely found these ideas intriguing, considering his social themes in his late-adolescent poetry. The poem “We Who Are Young Are Old” shows Thomas’s own discontent with the oppression of the working tradesmen in the modern era. “We Who are Young are Old” reveals a source for nostalgia beyond the historical mark of World War I by exploring the problem of class oppression in the growing cities. Life in heavily populated areas became transformed by industry, and the speaker is troubled by the change. The speaker identifies the modern city as a source of pain and discomfort: “From Harlem, Bedlam, Babel, and the Ghetto, / The Piccadilly men, the back street drunks, / The grafters of cats’ heads on chickens’ trunks” (45). Just like the Arts and Crafts thinkers described by Evans, Thomas shows disgust with the reality of city life. The problems Thomas describes in this passage are a consequence of the gathering masses into city life for jobs in industrial factories. These were low paying jobs, worsened by horrible working conditions and poor living quarters, known to many as ghettos. The world of the free tradesmen described by Ruskin has been replaced by an unrewarding labor that allows no creativity and no rewards beyond the bare necessities of

life itself. Although the poem is not itself nostalgic, the description of the modern world in such desperate terms implies an idealized longing for a world free from the grip of modern industry. The factory and the city are faceless places of suffering and oppression.

The horror of the city culminates in the faces of its people. The factory, which creates weapons in a mechanized manner, is responsible for the wounds of the people sent to war. The faceless factory produces a faceless worker, as the speaker describes a soldier “with horrors for a face.” Soldiers fighting in World War I and II would have been primarily working class men, not the aristocratic. Thomas describes the face of the injured soldier without giving much detail about his identity. This lack of detail adds to the terror of the soldier’s misshapen face, as he is one in a vast number of faceless poor permanently mangled by war. The lower class tradesmen would have vast numbers among this mass of poor soldiers.

Thomas longs for a lost world of ideal labor, and Arts and Craftsism may have provided Thomas with a connection to that period of lost innocence. Thomas often seems to search for some lost good, and he tends to gravitate to Edenic themes. He experienced his first romantic failures when his infidelity caused a separation between him and Pamela Hansford Johnson. As an adult, he may have searched for some way to return to the idyllic state he abandoned with his first steps into sensuality. Arts and Craftsism provides an Edenic world where artists have the power to solve the moral dilemmas of the age by performing their own creative labor to undermine the evil of the modern machine. Thomas uses Arts and Craftsism for its ethics, supplementing his own loss of innocence with a concrete poetry of labor. As Thomas’s poems begin to focus on physical objects and the labor of creating verse itself, a general feeling of well-being and contentedness arises that is absent in his darker adolescent works. Thomas seems to find a momentary connection with the innocence he abandoned as a Welsh adolescent. Thomas connects with this social innocence despite the very sexual nature of his adolescent fall with Pamela Hansford Johnson.

Thomas also found a nationalistic connection to Arts and Craftsism. Arts and Craftsism encourages the cultural arts of indigenous colonized peoples, influencing the Irish, Welsh, and even Native American nationalist movements. The industrialism of the British Empire undermined many of the creative traditions of colonized regions. Artists

became nostalgic for their nation's true identity that had been lost to the uniformity of the factories. They attempted to revive the methods and aesthetic of folk production.

The adoption of Arts and Crafts ideals into the colonies of the British Empire caused the movement to persist even after its heyday in London was long over. William Butler Yeats' sisters left London in 1902 to start their own Arts and Crafts style enterprise known as Dun Emer. The eldest sister worked in William Morris's manufactory, and adapted his method to a more Irish style. Yeats and his sister's work with Dun Emer produced many characteristically Irish goods, including "rugs, carpets, quilts and other bed linens, portières, cushion covers, furniture covers, framed embroideries, and books." The fact that Yeats's sisters also produced embroideries and books shows an Arts and Crafts connection to the construction of the written word. Dun Emer valued writing as an act of craft and placed it alongside decorative household items that would be created with handcrafted precision and Irish tradition. Again, the production of these Irish household and literary items outlasted Arts and Craftsism, as a movement in London.

The effect was likely similar in Wales. As Arts and Craftsism faded in London, it would be gaining steam in Dylan Thomas's nation. "Welsh Folk Industries," written in 1933 by Iorwerth C. Peate, discusses the remarkably Arts and Crafts oriented thought of Welsh nationalism. The fact that this essay was written in 1933 demonstrates the staying power of Arts and Craftsism in the surrounding areas of the British Isles, but it also shows a uniquely Welsh connection to the movement's aesthetic. The most striking passage from this article details the medieval conception of the poet as craftsman:

This insistence upon the importance of the craftsman is of high antiquity. The laws of the Welsh princes gave pride of place to three craftsmen, namely, the custodian of the written word, that is, the clerk, the illuminator of manuscripts; the custodian of the spoken word, the bard, the story-teller, the carpenter of words and phrases; and finally, the blacksmith, the representative of the material culture of the community. Poetry has always been a craft in Welsh tradition and the Welsh strict meters lend themselves to a superb craftsmanship the like of which I do not know in any other literature. The Welsh poet, if he writes in the classical meters of his nation, dovetails his consonants as the carpenter dovetails his pieces of wood, and in the hands of a master, this craft becomes an art of the highest order, a mystery which can be enjoyed but never fully comprehended. (177)

First and foremost, this piece suggests nostalgia for medieval Wales, placing value upon the arts and crafts traditions of “high antiquity.” Peate reveals a medieval conception of the poet as craftsman, presenting the poet as a dovetailing woodcarver. The Welsh value the poet and view his art as a mystical act that can never be fully understood. Peate points out that “[p]oetry has always been a craft in Welsh tradition,” meaning Thomas would have likely encountered this view of the poet’s role. Peate also points out his national pride by highlighting the Welsh poet as a force unknown anywhere else in the world. For Peate, it is the careful attention to meter and craft that differentiate the Welsh poet and make him/her stand out in world literature. The same careful approach also makes Arts and Craftsism an appealing movement to those working within the Welsh tradition.

Peate goes on to discuss the threat of the industrial revolution upon rural Wales and begins to explore a variety of Welsh Arts and Crafts products, including pottery, wood carving, and even work with woolen material. Peate views these products of physical labor as a tool to combat the encroachment of the industrial revolution and encourages their study in an attempt to preserve the fading Welsh traditions consumed by the forces of modernity:

What is needed in Wales to-day, as in many another country, is not a return to primitive methods but a control of our system of production to such a degree that the spirit of the old individual craftsmanship may be born again, a control of our industrial system so that the machine becomes man’s servant and not his master, because, as Murry emphasizes, “living art can only arise out of a surrounding body of living crafts” which the present inordinate mechanization of labor makes quite impossible. (180)

This section showcases the Arts and Crafts atmosphere of Wales during Thomas’s lifetime. Just as Yeats’s sisters established their Arts and Crafts manufactory after the heyday of William Morris’s popularity in London, Writers in Wales still utilize Arts and Crafts ideals long after the movement has faded in the core of the British Empire. Peate wrestles with industry as possible enslavement, and the value of individual craftsmanship provides a solution to the darkness of the modern machine. Peate’s use of Murry’s quote also exemplifies the need to surround oneself with “living crafts,” implying great value lies even within owning products produced in an Arts and Crafts fashion.

This article exemplifies a zeitgeist of arts and crafts ideals within Dylan Thomas’s lifetime. This piece was published in 1933, a period when Thomas was actively writing

poetry. Thomas would likely have encountered the Arts and Crafts oriented Welsh nationalism within both his childhood and young adulthood. More importantly, Peate's article locates the poet as carpenter image within the paramount medieval era, a time valued by Arts and Crafts thinkers. This tradition would have great potential for the poet interested in Arts and Crafts ethics, encouraging the writer to approach his work with the care and devotion of a tradesman and suggesting the important social contributions such work can yield. Thomas could have viewed poetry as a component of Welsh Arts and Crafts tradition, and sought to establish his works as an alternative to the expanding world of industrial products.

Evidence of the influence of Arts and Craftsism upon Thomas may also be present in his workspace. Thomas wrote poetry in a tool-shed behind his home in Laugharne, where he moved in 1949. Thomas's final days were spent traveling on poetry reading tours between America and Wales, but the tool-shed was one place he often returned for the sole purpose of writing poetry. The tool-shed itself is a symbol of Arts and Crafts ideals. Thomas composes poetry in the same place that a worker would use physical tools to build, shape, and repair material objects. He equates mental, poetic composition with physical work of the hands. The contents of Thomas's tool-shed may suggest identification with many Arts and Crafts themes. Again, this description comes from the biography, The Days of Dylan Thomas:

In the afternoons he would go to his workshop, a little gardener's toolhouse perched precipitously on a cliff a few hundreds yards from the Boat House. He called it his "shack" or sometimes his "log cabin." About nine feet square, it had a stove, a bookcase, and a work table in front of a large window looking east out over the estuary of the Taf and the Towy Rivers to the sea. The floor was normally littered with the discarded versions of poems. The walls were covered with pictures clipped from magazines...There were reproductions of a Chinese painting, a Cartier-Bresson photograph of Mexicans crowned with thorns, a French Renaissance treatment of Le Beau Tétin, an Italian primitive, a photo of huge Indian street dolls, a Rouault, and many others. (146)

The imagery of the discarded poems littering the floor once again supports the image of the poet as a woodcarver. The work shop is not a fancy or embellished structure, and Thomas refers to it as his "shack," suggesting a kind of rustic construction far removed from the industrial uniformity of the urban area. The way Thomas treated his workspace contrasts the notion of clean efficiency and regularity associated with industrial production. Thomas worked among with the discarded drafts of poems to constantly

remind himself of the very real work he placed into the development of his pieces. He treated his “tool-shed” exactly as its namesake, creating poems in a physical process that took time, effort, and endless work of the hand.

Thomas wrote with extensive drafts very early in his career, even before he worked in the tool-shed study. This method seemed very important to Thomas and constituted a great deal of his creative process. Thomas was open with his approach to poetic composition and wrote about his methods often. Andrew Sinclair discusses the contents of a letter to Thomas’s friend Charles Fisher in his biography No Man More Magical. In this letter, Thomas’s reveals a very Arts and Crafts approach to writing poetry.

My method is this: I write a poem on innumerable sheets of scrap paper, write it on both sides of the paper, often upside down and criss cross ways unpunctuated, surrounded by drawings of lamp posts and boiled eggs, in a very dirty mess, bit by bit I copy out the slowly developing poem into an exercise book; and, when it is completed, I type it out. The scrap sheets I burn. (44)

The date of this letter reveals that Thomas’s interest in the more tradesmen like manner of composition began long before the tool-shed atmosphere he acquired in Laugharne. Notice that Thomas writes his poems in a clearly defined process, beginning with written “unpunctuated” text surrounded with drawings, and evolving into the type-written finished product. Also, Thomas describes the method as a “very dirty mess” to once again contrast the cleanliness and order of industrial production. The burning of the scrap sheets seems symbolic. Thomas could easily discard the sheets as waste, but instead he takes the time to burn the fragments. This might remind the reader of blacksmith fires, or the kiln used in the making of pottery. Thomas molds and shapes his poems over an extensive process, and the fire used to burn the fragments is a tribute to the many Arts and Crafts methods of physical craft.

The pictures Thomas placed on his walls are also intriguing. The pictures show art from many cultures, including a Chinese painting, photographs of Mexicans, likely showcasing folk religious rituals, and French Renaissance art. The “Huge Indian street dolls” could also indicate Arts and Crafts influence. These dolls are likely hand crafted and were possibly used in an Indian religious ceremony, such as the Durga Puja celebration. Arts and Crafts thinkers, including William Morris, expressed interest in oriental arts as an alternative to British design and tradition. The Italian primitive may

also suggest arts and crafts aesthetics. Many Arts and Crafts theorists believed that the renaissance period, especially after the work of Raphael, ushered in the modernity Ruskin and Morris wished to escape. Thomas's photograph of Italian primitive art indicates an interest in Pre-Renaissance creations, just like a true Arts and Crafts thinker. The toolshed does not contain any items directly related to Arts and Craftsism, but Thomas seems to associate the creation of poetry with many other art forms and cultures, and true to the quote within Peate's article, Thomas surrounds himself with "a body of living crafts."

\* \* \*

### *Verse of Physical Labor.*

Considering Thomas's likely connection with the Arts and Crafts Movement, it is safe to assume that images of tools, architecture, and hand crafting will appear in his poetry and prose. Thomas incorporated the language of physical labor within his poems to create verse that both ponders the redemptive, but difficult nature of physical work of the hand, and poetry as a craft. Thomas is not fully adhering to the tenets of Arts and Craftsism, rather he appears to use their terms and ethics to supplement his own nostalgia. As I stated in the last chapter, Thomas, in his adolescence, longed for something unclear, and he was anxious for a concrete experience to hone and shape his nostalgia. Arts and Craftsism arms Thomas with concrete terms, and an object to focus his nostalgic writing.

The poem "Oh No Work of Words" is a primary example of Thomas's use of Arts and Crafts imagery. The poem seems preoccupied with equating written composition with the toil and effort of physical labor. Notice the tone of this poem seems negative, implying that Thomas suffers from some writer's block:

Oh no work of words for three lean months in the bloody  
Belly of the rich year and the big purse of my body  
I bitterly take to task my poverty and craft:

To take to give is all, return what is hungrily given  
Puffing the pounds of manna up through the dew to heaven,  
The lovely gift of the gab bangs back on a blind shaft. (164)

These are the first two of four uniform stanzas. The first two lines of each stanza show a slant rhyme and the final words of each stanza rhyme precisely. Thomas's earlier poems are usually more spontaneous and experimental with form. This poem demonstrates a new phase of Thomas's poetic career with its tight construction and specific form,

resembling a designed piece of physical craft. Thomas's poems are beginning to resemble more traditionally poetic constructions, using classical devices and strict (though self created) forms.

The subject matter of the poem deals directly with craft. The speaker begins by evoking the image of poetry as physical labor, by declaring "no work of words" has been composed for three months. Describing writing as a "work" begins the poem with the image of physical construction as opposed to the mental effort usually placed into written material. The speaker develops this image further with the closing phrase of the stanza: "I bitterly take to task my poverty and craft." The word "task" has an interesting history. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "task" originally meant a payment or tribute to a monarch, but also included one's personal duty or obligation. Later, the word also came to represent educational assignments involving mental development. Thomas seems to be using both definitions of this word to combine physical labor of craft with the mental challenge associated with writing. Poverty in this instance suggests the simple, artistic endeavor of the medieval peasant outlined by Ruskin and Morris, while concretely referring to the act of poetic composition as a "craft." The speaker explores this craft aspect of poetry through images of the swelling/bloody body, implying that the lack of poetic labor has somehow left the body weak or wounded.

The "work" aspect of the poem may be yet another link to the Edenic world with which Thomas was trying to reconnect. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were commanded to work in the garden and take care of its contents. After the fall, work became labor and an unpleasant requirement for survival. The fact that Thomas would refer to his craft as "work" may indicate his fallen nature. His craft cannot simply be a joy, but a labor requiring real effort and suffering. Thomas may be indicating the persisting knowledge of his fallen state after the fall of his adolescent years, and Arts and Crafts imagery provides some understanding or comfort for that knowledge.

Thomas takes the ambiguity of the word "work" even further. This first stanza of this poem is so ripe with not only craft imagery, but an almost subversive attitude toward the tenants of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Arts and Craftism placed emphasis on the creative abilities of the individual worker. Here, Thomas expounds upon the value and necessity of his own personal craft by employing images of decay. The speaker fails to



write in “the bloody / Belly of the rich year.” The speaker uses a paradox to describe the year without writing. It is both “rich” indicating a time of comfort and excess, but also a “bloody belly.” “Bloody Belly” is a complicated term and can make the reader think of violence, decay, or more healthy images such as birth. The body is also described as a “big purse” contradicting the “three lean months” in the first line. The passage is confusing, but the speaker is likely exploring the hunger for the physical act of poetic composition even as he is successful in other lines of work. Perhaps this poem is the first Thomas wrote after a period of writers block or abstinence from his art due to his occupation with documentary films, or his work with the BBC. In either case, the comfort of craft also seems somewhat threatening, as failure to engage with creative construction yields very negative consequences.

Even though Thomas hungers for the act of poetic construction, his emotions about returning to the act are mixed at best. Thomas shades this return to poetry with the word “bitterly” in the third line of the first stanza. Perhaps Thomas intends irony with this word, disagreeing with the overtly idealistic conceptions of the Arts and Crafts thinkers. “Work” in “Oh No Work of Words” is not the perfect institution defined by Ruskin and Morris, but rather a physical labor, suggesting both excitement and dread. Even though Thomas is actively engaging with the philosophy of Arts and Craftsism, there is a sense that his desire for Edenic innocence is not fully satisfied. Arts and Craftsism cannot relieve his hunger for the fruit of Eden; it can only provide a poetic context, and a theory for how that need may one day be met.

It is the actual product of Thomas’s work that may satisfy the hunger for a time before the fall. Thomas extends the imagery of craft into the second stanza by equating work with “manna.” Manna is a biblical substance with the power to nourish and refresh the body, and it is usually sent from heaven in the form of white flakes. In Exodus 16:14, God sends manna to the lost Israelites in their time of hunger. Thomas equates manna with physical labor by equating the act of physical craft with the consumption and return of spiritual food. Somehow, the act of poetic creation “puffs” manna up to heaven through dew. Thomas uses the imagery to say that satiating the need to create and participate in physical craft also fulfills the needs of others, creating a kind of renewable manna. Thomas wishes to use his creative gifts for others and “return what is hungrily

given.” The poems and work of the speaker provide beauty and art for the world, capturing, even if momentarily, the essence of Eden through the symbolic action of Arts and Crafts creation. Thomas reconnects with his lost innocence with an almost altruistic philosophy of art and reveals the biblical nature of this innocence with the simple word “mana.”

Compare the mana imagery of “Oh No Work of Words,” with the hopeless, ugly imagery of “We Who are Young are Old.” In Thomas’s adolescent poetry, nostalgia is a hopeless act that only highlights loss of the beautiful and serene. “We Who are Young are Old” offers no solution to the horrific imagery associated with the decay of the modern city. Now, in Thomas’s more mature poems, there exists the image of heavenly mana conveyed within the beauty of Arts and Crafts creation. Thomas has grown, and his nostalgia has become much less threatening and despairing. Remembering the past no longer simply highlights the ugliness of the present, but rather provides a solution to the decay of encroaching modernity. Thomas seems to have found power and joy within the traditional ideologies of Arts and Craftsism. In short, Arts and Craftsism serves as a kind of saving grace for Thomas in his despair. It is a source of creative energy and even enables Thomas to return to a time before his sexual, adolescent fall.

The last line of this stanza uses an effective example of alliteration with the line “The lovely gift of the gab bangs back on a blind shaft.” The hard “b” sounds in this line make the poetry sound like the strikes of a hammer. Thomas may equate the craft of poetry with the physical labor of the black-smith, pounding on a piece of hot metal to shape and mold it to perfection. The word “lovely” at the beginning of this line makes the hammer strokes a beautiful, non-threatening device within the poem, but the heavy “b” sounds could also sound heavy and mechanical, not unlike the impacts of an industrial assembly line. The inclusion of the word “blind” to describe the shaft anticipates this reading and ridicules the short sighted and dumb construction associated with the industrial revolution. The image is slightly ambiguous, but remains loaded with imagery of physical labor while also praising the individual craft.

Overall the poem is almost a celebration of the images, emotions, and ideology of the Arts and Crafts movement, placing value and beauty on the physical labor of the speaker as an individual. The fleeting negative emotion of the word “bitter” resurfaces

several times within the poem with images of ogres and death, but the speaker resolves this conflict by embracing the work before him. Overall, the poem ends with a solemn appreciation for the physical labor and craft the speaker associates with the mental construction fueling the art of poetry. Thomas has essentially created a nostalgic poetry based upon Arts and Crafts ideals and a lingering desire to return to some lost idyllic state. The poem starts with the speaker restless and hungry, apparently suffering from the lack of meaningful labor. The only cure for this hunger is to engage in the very physical and demanding task of poetic construction. Thomas does not describe his art as a contribution to modern society, but as a personal task, laced with images of medieval, peasant, and individual labor. Thomas flees from the oppression of modern progress to a poetry made in a traditional way. He does not use a printing press, or elaborate on the sounds of a type writer, but rather the strokes of a hammer. Thomas retreats to the nostalgia of Arts and Crafts method when composing poetry, rejecting the convenience of modern tools and machinery. This rejection of modernity offers a very real “manna” of artistic potential, fueling Thomas’s compositions, and providing a solution to even the darkest images of his disillusioned adolescence.

Thomas’s earlier poem, “O Make Me a Mask,” explores the concept of Arts and Crafts as a solution to modern decay as well. Written in 1937, one year before “Oh No Work of Words,” the poem anticipates the “manna” of Arts and Crafts methods of composition. In the poem, the speaker retreats behind an apparently man made mask, hiding from the frivolities and hardships of the modern world. The poem uses an unpredictable form and contains archaic language.

O make me a mask and a wall to shut from your spies  
Of the sharp, enameled eyes and the spectacled claws  
Rape and rebellion in the nurseries of my face,  
Gag of a dumbstruck tree to block from bare enemies  
The bayonet tongue in this undefended prayerpiece,  
The present mouth, and the sweetly blown trumpet of lies,  
Shaped in old armor and oak the countenance of a dunce  
To shield the glistening brain and blunt the examiners,  
And a tear-stained widower grief drooped from the lashes  
To veil belladonna and let the dry eyes perceive  
Others betray the lamenting lies of their losses  
By the curve of the nude mouth or the laugh up the sleeve. (156)

The first word of the poem “O” gives the poem a song like quality, and the poem tends to follow an iambic pattern with many trochees. The poem sounds traditional while maintaining a modern independence from traditional form. The poem does contain erratic rhyming between the words “spies,” “lies,” “perceive,” and “sleeve.” Again, this pattern gives the poem a traditional sound without adhering to a specific traditional form such as the sonnet. This device infuses the poem with nostalgia for older patterns of poetry. Just as Thomas suggests a link with traditional/nostalgic Arts and Crafts ideologies by means of poetic composition, he also links modern poetic instability with the unity of traditional verse forms.

The poem also utilizes Arts and Crafts images directly. The first line, “O make me a mask and a wall to shut from your spies,” suggests a retreat to the handmade craft as a shield against some unspecified enemy. The “Rape and rebellion” of the third line suggests the modern horror explored in “We Who are Young are Old,” personified with “spectacled claws” and enameled eyes.” Thomas is not yet mature enough to let go of the horrific imagery associated with his adolescence, yet he has begun to retreat from the threat of modernity behind the obviously hand made “mask” of traditional art. The speaker then explodes into a list of almost antique images including a “trumpet of lies,” and the shielding “shape in old armor.” It appears Thomas began to take great interest in antiques and symbols of past eras, using them in poetry as a protective cover for his own “glistening brain.”

But what is the speaker running from? If we read the poem at face value, the only real antagonist would be the world itself and the sinful people inhabiting it. The overwhelming pattern of negative images seems closely related to the concept of a biblical fallen world. Thomas writes of a “trumpet of lies,” “rape and rebellion,” and “lamenting lies” of loss. The poem is full of despair and the speaker seeks some asylum from the world of sin and pain. The only relief the speaker can find rests within the made mask that protects him from the mysterious spies in the first line. Again, Thomas is using craft imagery to create a fleeting shelter from the reality of his own fallen nature, reflected in the horror of the world itself.

The fallen imagery extends even into plant life. The poem ends oddly with a series of organic and once again despairing images. A “tear stained widower” appears

along with “veiled belladonna.” A widower obviously embodies loss as he suffers the death of a loved one, but belladonna is a bit more confusing. Belladonna is the poisonous deadly nightshade plant, and suggests the toxic themes of “We Who are Young are Old.” Belladonna once again alludes to the loss of Eden, as the plant image indicates not nourishment, but premature death. Shortly after this poison is introduced, the poem ends with unidentified “others” betraying “lamenting lies” of loss, and the ambiguous image of a mouth, which appears to be smiling. Thomas attempts to hide from this world behind a mask, but the ambiguous end will make the reader question the success of his attempt to use Arts and Crafts to escape fallen reality.

The poem is amazingly difficult to interpret, but seems to combine the despair of Thomas’s adolescent nostalgia with the hope of retreating to Arts and Crafts ideals characterized by his more mature works. Despite the poem’s vague nature, the act of creating a mask and using it to hide from some undefined threat could be construed as an Arts and Crafts inspired act. When compared with the later piece “Oh No Work of Words,” one could conclude that Thomas was still developing his Arts and Crafts ethic and attempting to fit that subject appropriately into verse. Perhaps this poem appears ambiguous because Thomas is still developing his method of Arts and Crafts retreat. There is some comfort in the mask which begins the poem, but he has yet to build Arts and Crafts images into the biblical manna which highlights “Oh No Work of Words.”

It is the developing nature of “Oh Make Me a Mask” that makes the poem so crucial. Thomas’s interest in the image of the antique provides great insight into his still burgeoning nostalgia. More than any other poem, “Oh Make Me a Mask” pays careful attention to the concept of the antique and its power. The antique itself would be a very Arts and Crafts concept as antiques would likely be products developed before the onset of the industrial revolution, and created outside of factories. Thomas’s list of antiques within “Oh Make Me a Mask” suggests a kind of collector mentality, considering the poem alludes to multiple objects from past eras, including swords, shields and bayonets. This pattern is highly nostalgic, and a sociological study of the modern antique collector will show even more connections between Dylan Thomas, Arts and Craftsism, and the nostalgia of the antique collector. Consider Janelle L. Wilson’s sociological study, Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning:

Collectors describe their antique collection as something that helps them to relax, enables them to pretend they lived in a different time, and allows them to appreciate the way in which things were made in the past. Interestingly, collectors often do not use the collected objects in the way they were originally intended to be used... There seem to be two main goals among these individuals: The goal of not letting the past be forgotten—indeed, of honoring the past by keeping it alive via their collecting—for, with the collecting of antiques comes the association with the particular objects use and function in an earlier time. (115)

The desire to preserve the past and connect with a different time is one of the hallmarks of Arts and Craftsism. This is not to say that the two notions are the same, but modern antique collecting may have roots with the advent of Arts and Crafts aesthetics. The most important aspect of this passage is the notion that antique collectors often adapt an object for a use not originally intended. This should remind the reader of Dylan Thomas's tool-shed workspace. Thomas adapts the tool-shed for the purpose of composing poetry, rather than the original use as a garden shed. Thomas's habit of posting photographs of differing cultures and time periods on the walls of the shack is also reminiscent of antique collecting. Thomas surrounds himself with collected objects in the area in which he composes poetry, implying that the act of collecting is closely associated with the act of creation itself. Thomas infuses his poetry with antique images in the same way he covers the walls of his tool-shed twelve years later. For Thomas, Arts and Craftsism fuels his creative ability and inspiration.

The most important aspect of the antique collecting mentality is its desire to preserve, and indeed reconnect with the past. For Thomas, there was no specific time period with which he wished to reconnect, rather a desire to return to a lost state of innocence and idealism. Thomas never writes of a medieval period, or a time before the world wars began. Dylan Thomas, in his birth during the war period, cannot conceive of a time before the presence of war and its destruction, therefore the lure of nostalgia has nothing to do with its ability to provide a connection with a concrete past, but the ideals and innocence he associates with "pastness" itself. This is the reason Thomas writes with an Arts and Crafts mentality. It does not identify a set idealized time period, but rather the ideals and practices of the past. And as I established in my first chapter, Thomas actively searches for lost ideals, sacrificed within his adolescence. It is precisely Arts and Craftsism's ability to honor and preserve the past that causes Thomas to use Arts and

Crafts imagery so extensively, it also provides an explanation for the unstable nature of its relief. Remembering, and honoring Eden will also remind the nostalgic thinker of its loss and its ultimate irretrievability.

Thomas embraces Arts and Crafts imagery again in 1945 with the poem “In My Craft or Sullen Art.” Here the negative emotions of “Oh No Work of Words” are much less evident, and the poem embraces the tenants of the Arts and Crafts movement more directly. The language also makes reference to the peasant/individual nature of Arts and Crafts Labor in much more detail than in “Oh No Work of Words.” Due to the extensive development of its verse, this poem must be presented in its entirety:

In my craft or sullen art  
Exercised in the still night  
When only the moon rages  
And the lovers lie abed  
With all their griefs in their arms  
I labor by singing light  
Not for ambition or bread  
Or the strut and trade of charms  
On the ivory stages  
But for the common wages  
Of their most secret heart.

Not for the proud man apart  
From the raging moon I write  
On these spindrift pages  
Nor for the towering dead  
With their nightingales and psalms  
But for the lovers, their arms  
Round the griefs of the ages,  
Who pay no praise or wages  
Nor heed my craft or art. (227)

Notice that the speaker pairs the word “craft” and “art” three times within this poem, including the title. Thomas is directly connecting these two words to suggest the Arts and Crafts movement as a primary influence on the text itself. The speaker of this poem labors alone for “common wages” suggesting the peasant mentality present within “Oh No Work of Words,” but the speaker connects these wages with the lovers’ “secret heart”. Thomas is working to emphasize the emotional and literary aspect of his personal labor, evoking such romantic images as “a raging moon,” “the towering dead” and even “nightingales and psalms.” Thomas lists these images to show that the poem is comprised of fragments that must be pulled together through craft.

In a final metaphor, the speaker links physical craft with the obscurity of the writer, as the lovers described by the speaker fail to praise or even notice his craft. Yet the speaker does not create this poem just for the sake of art. He does not labor for “ivory stages” or “strut and trade of charms,” but rather for the lovers themselves. The idea is very similar to the manna imagery of “Oh No Work of Words” as the speaker writes for the benefit of others. This piece is highly ironic due to the lover’s complete ignorance of the one creating for them. Thomas is dealing with the plight of the poet’s craft and the risk of obscurity. One may assume that the craftsman creates simply for the satisfaction of personal labor, but the speaker denies this assumption, dedicating the poem to the ignorant lovers.

The significance of “My Craft or Sullen Art” lies in the explicit comparisons between poetic composition and physical craft. Thomas may have evinced the Arts and Crafts movement in his self reflective poetry. Both “In My Craft or Sullen Art” and “Oh No Work of Words” analyze the creation of poetry, highlighting its isolation, labor, poverty, and personal spiritual value. Thomas’s approach to poetry duplicates the approach outlined by John Ruskin, William Morris, and the Arts and Crafts Movement in general, but Thomas modifies their ideals for his own personal use. He utilizes the tenants of Arts and Craftsism and creates a metaphor for the plight of the poetic craftsman. Morris and Ruskin assumed that the physical labor and creativity of the peasant would hold value and trump the encroaching machine of industrial mass production, but Thomas confronts the possibility of obscurity and the failure of the public to appreciate his art. The speaker faces this possibility by feeling the simple joy of creation itself, not of the public’s appreciation, and that joy is directly reliant upon the traditional, Arts and Crafts method of construction. The speaker works “in the still night,” not during the bustle of a day shift. He works alone, not on the crowded assembly line. Rather than create art or goods to sell on some modern market, he clearly works with some greater, personal intention in mind. Just as “Oh No Work of Words” the joy and use of the speaker’s work is deeply rooted in the nostalgic method of physical composition. Again, the source of poetic power lies within the nostalgia of its creation.

And the creation of “In My Craft or Sullen Art” is irrefutably nostalgic. The nostalgia of this poem is not relegated to the medieval period of peasant idealism, but



also in the security and love between the couple for whom the speaker creates. Considering that Thomas's nostalgia should focus upon his adolescence (as suggested by Nancy Davis) and the "depth and drama" of that period, then we can perhaps identify the mysterious "lovers" of this text. The speaker describes the lovers almost tragically: "But for the lovers, their arms / Round the griefs of the ages." Thomas shades this couple in grief, and a reader could easily interpret this description as a hint to some, unspecified romantic disappointment. That disappointment could easily be linked to the first dramatic experience with sex Thomas encountered with Pamela Hansford Johnson.

Thomas creates poems as an attempt to reconnect with a time before his sexual fall and the end of his relationship with Johnson. This explains the futility of the act of poetic creation itself within the poem. The lovers will "pay no praise or wages," because Thomas's attempt to reconnect with them is doomed from the start. It is the same force that causes Thomas to be bitter within "Oh No Work of Words," and the reason he cannot fully escape the world in "Oh Make Me a Mask." Thomas realizes that his nostalgic art can never resurrect the innocence lost in 1934. He can never return to that lost Eden, but must instead find joy in preserving its memory.

Beyond the attempt to reconnect with a lost ideal past, Thomas's poems focus on the attempt to preserve and honor past on the most fundamental level. Thomas expounded upon the nostalgic power of Arts and Crafts creation within his prose piece "Notes on the Art of Poetry." Located within The Poems of Dylan Thomas, the work answers a graduate student's inquiries about Thomas's influences and practices in composing poetry. Thomas answers his questions in great detail, outlining his method and philosophy of poetic construction. Thomas relies upon the image of the craftsman consistently, and the simple act of shaping words becomes the dominant trope within the essay. Thomas even begins to list the particular devices available to the poetic craftsman:

To your third question—Do I deliberately utilize devices of rhyme, rhythm, and word formation in my writing—I must, of course, answer with an immediate, Yes. I am a painstaking, conscientious, involved and devious craftsman in words, however unsuccessful the result so often appears, and to whatever wrong uses I may apply my technical paraphernalia, I use everything and anything to make my poems work and move in the directions I want them to: old tricks, new tricks, puns, portmanteau-words, paradox, allusions, paranomasia, paragram, catachresis, slang, assonantal rhymes, vowel rhymes, sprung rhythm. Every device there is in language is there to be used if you will. Poets have got to enjoy themselves sometimes, and the twistings and convolutions of words, the

inventions and contrivances, are all part of the joy that is part of the painful, voluntary work. (xx)

Notice first that Thomas answers with a capitalized “Yes” to the question. He uses this kind of emphasis to leave no doubt about his intentional use of poetic devices. Thomas then equates the use of these poetic devices with the craftsmanship so present within his poetry. He uses the words “painstaking,” “conscientious,” “involved,” and “devious” as adjectives modifying the word “craftsmen,” indicating a complicated relationship to the word itself. He is not simply one who works with words, but rather a devoted, serious, and somewhat mischievous expert in the art of forming written work.

Thomas then begins to describe what is involved in the actual work of writing poetry. For Thomas, craft is a complicated process involving particular tools. Despite the appearance of spontaneity, his poems are carefully constructed utilizing clearly defined methods and components, and Thomas lists some of the almost infinite number of language “tricks” that can be deployed within the trade. Thomas is very clear that the use of the traditional tools of poetry give the poet enjoyment. The work is “painful” and “voluntary,” hinting again at the peasant mentality of “Oh No Work of Words” and “In My Craft or Sullen Art.” The most important aspect of this passage lies in Thomas’s assertion that the poetic devices and crafting of words give the poet “joy.” Thomas is clear that his conception of poetic creation is directly related to the Arts and Crafts approach to creating physical art. It is the nostalgic and traditional method of using established tools and traditional approaches to composition. Again, Thomas is implying that the nostalgic practice of Arts and Crafts creation bring some form of personal happiness. He applies Arts and Crafts ideals in a poetic and literary framework, preserving the inherit nostalgia of the movement.

The critical point of “Notes on the Art of Poetry” is the persistent pattern of Arts and Crafts “joy” and the “pain” in the physical labor. Just as Thomas both rejoices and suffers in the act of preserving his more innocent adolescent past, the act of writing itself is a complicated process of happiness and grief. Thomas cannot take a simple attitude toward either nostalgia or artistic composition. It is a concept fueled by polar opposite emotions that continuously shift. It seems that nostalgia is an emotion that continuously offers great pleasure and deep depression in the same moment. Thomas is caught in an

interesting whirlpool of nostalgic desire that could possibly save or damn him, and knowing in advance the agony of his final years, we can easily assume that nostalgia will become a drowning tidal force.

The influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement may seem straightforward after such careful exploration, yet Thomas's verse is complicated and elegant to a point that many critics fail to see the importance of its presence. One such example is Henry Treece. Treece was a close friend of Thomas, and published some of his first poems. Treece attempts to analyze and break down Thomas's poems to provide a "better background for tackling this difficult poet" (xiii), as opposed to the vague description provided by most of his other contemporary critics. Treece's work Dylan Thomas: Dog Among the Faeries explores a variety of themes, poetic influences, and even poetic devices which litter Thomas's work, yet Treece's own attempt to simplify Dylan Thomas for the uninitiated reader falls short. Treece explores the medieval aspect of Thomas's writing and comments on the difficult nature of ascertaining a medieval theme in the poetry:

Those who revel heartily and nostalgically in the superficial Motteux-Rabelaisianism of J.B. Morton and D.B. Wyndham Lewis, or pathetically and nostalgically in the prettily pictorial Medievalism of the Pre-Raphaelites, may find it difficult to see Dylan Thomas against a background of the Middle Ages. They will miss, from his poems, easily-assembled tales of Knights and ladies, the lyricism of "Two red roses across the moon", and all the tragedies of chivalry which they have come to associate with the Dark Ages. (73)

Treece implies that the unskilled reader will "miss" the "easily-assembled" medieval image patterns. These medieval images relate very closely to Arts and Crafts ideals. When Treece speaks of "Pre-Raphaelites" he of course means the thinkers who claim that modern decadence began to take hold after the work of Raphael, a sentiment shared by many Arts and Crafts figures. Later, Treece goes on to name Morris as another figure the reader would associate with clichéd "medieval" imagery. This chapter of Treece's book attempts to locate the "Knights and ladies" images in Thomas's poem by analyzing Welsh, Medieval verse forms and Thomas's use of particularly medieval image patterns. It is also important that Treece expounds on the inherently nostalgic nature of medievalism, pairing nostalgia with the words "heartily" and "pathetically." His

argument is extremely detailed with close scans of Thomas's poems, and a possible link with Gerard Manley Hopkins, who experimented with Medieval Welsh parody forms.

If Treece wants to establish a medieval reading of Thomas's poetry, or even delve into his possible medieval influences, there is no real need to look beyond the simple subject matter of his Arts and Crafts verse. Thomas's conception of the medieval was not just rooted to the verse forms and metrical patterns Treece works so hard to find within his poems. Thomas's medievalism is the simple Arts and Crafts conception of labor, focusing on the creativity of the peasant rather than the damsel in distress. Treece's reading is intriguing, but completely overlooks the obvious images of hand made craft. This oversight is magnified by the obvious fact that this medievalism also defines Thomas's personal attitude toward his art. Arts and Crafts imagery indicates a thematic shift in Thomas's poems, as he begins to focus less on emotions of despair and images of ugliness. The medieval themes of Thomas's poetry provide a positive image of reality, and the hope that the horror of his earlier, adolescent poetry may somehow be solved. His poetry utilizes the medieval in construction and subject; yet Treece's analysis would dissuade readers from valuing the surface level Medievalism of Thomas's verse.

Finally, Treece's attitude toward the inherit nostalgia of the Pre-Raphaelites, and consequently the Arts and Crafts movement leaves something to be desired. He states that those who revel "pathetically" in the nostalgia of the Pre-Raphaelites will have difficulty seeing the medieval aspect of Thomas's writing. This statement is simply incorrect. Thomas's poetry is ripe with the nostalgia of the Pre-Raphaelites, and his lifetime showed dramatic examples of discussion of medieval arts and crafts imagery. And considering Peate's article on Welsh industry, Thomas would have considered himself a medieval poetic craftsman. Even the titles "Oh No Work of Words" and "In My Craft or Sullen Art" have a Pre-Raphaelite tone due to their direct mention of art and craft as an individual and traditional practice. Treece attempts to construct a better introduction for Thomas's supposedly difficult poetry, but he has completely missed one of the most defining aspects of Thomas's and more importantly *Welsh* verse. He downplays the reader's ability to ever grasp the medieval themes within Thomas's work, discouraging him/her from trying. If anything, this work is misleading regarding the medieval aspects of Dylan Thomas's verse.

The metaphor of Thomas as poetic craftsmen which opens this paper contains many more historical implications than one may initially think. This metaphor and the general nostalgia of Arts and Craftsism may constitute its legacy, giving insight into the greater nostalgia of the modern world. Arts and Crafts imagery lingered in Wales, fostering a zeitgeist of the poet as physical master craftsman. As thinking men, including the poet Dylan Thomas, look back upon the simpler times before the expansion of technology and modernism, they pay quiet tribute to the intellectual movement which dominated Great Britain in the nineteenth century. For Thomas, the language, method, and nostalgia of Arts and Craftsism became a source of poetic inspiration and shaped his attitude toward the role of the poet. More importantly, Arts and Craftsism gave Thomas a method to reconnect with his lost innocence, through the ideals of poetic labor.

An understanding of Arts and Crafts imagery in understanding Dylan Thomas's poetry is essential in analyzing Thomas's creative nostalgia. Thomas utilized the metaphor of poet as physical craftsman as inspiration for some of his most famous poems. The "tricks" and tools of the poetic trade give Thomas creative joy, juxtaposed to his more depressing adolescent poems. The arts and crafts nostalgia present in Thomas's verse provided a temporary stability for a poet obsessed with images of death and lost innocence. Thomas the craftsman harbors a profound joy, as he creates for the people around him and as tribute to his own ghosts from the past. The speaker in his "craft" poems is unconcerned with matters of finance or identity. He creates and crafts the only real joy that can be known- the joy of physical, nostalgic, composition.

*Chapter 3*  
Death in the Garden of Eden:  
Lost Innocence in the Last Days of Dylan Thomas

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“As we sat in a dark booth, Dylan took his wallet from his vest pocket and began to finger through its somewhat flimsy contents. He did not seem to be looking for anything in particular, but then he unfolded a yellowed newspaper clipping. It was a photograph, very dim and hazy, of a thin little boy dressed in a droopy sort of gymkhana costume. His curly hair hung unevenly on his forehead, his face was serious, his eyes upturned, no hint of a smile on his lips. The caption beneath read: DYLAN MARLAIS THOMAS, AGED 12, SON OF MR. AND MRS. D.J. THOMAS OF SWANSEA and went on to report that he had been victor in the 220-yard dash at the annual games of some grammar school competition. Dylan had carried this grimy scrap of a photograph with him for more than twenty years”— John M. Brinnin, *Dylan Thomas in America*

An aging Dylan Thomas carried around a photograph of himself at age twelve twenty years after the photo was taken. The grime on the image illustrates just how worn the photo became as it journeyed with Thomas over the years. What is even more curious is the subject matter of the photograph itself. One would expect Dylan Thomas to carry one of his first poems published in the *Swansea Grammar School Magazine*, but rather Thomas opts to preserve an uncharacteristically athletic moment. Thomas often commented on his own lack of athletic ability, and he was a sickly child. One can only wonder what memories or motivations caused Dylan Thomas to treasure this photograph so intensely.

This event is reported in the biography written by John Malcom Brinnin, *Dylan Thomas in America*. The book was controversial for a number of reasons, exposing Thomas’s wild personal life, and providing intimate details of some of his extramarital affairs. It depicts the final three years of Dylan Thomas’s life. Impoverished and desperate for work, Thomas seeks salvation in a series of poetry readings and tours of America. What he finds is a world of excess as his hosts conduct an almost never ending series of parties, fueling his alcoholism and depression, and finally contributing to his agonizing demise. The biography is filled with drunken misadventures, violent arguments with his wife Caitlin, and personal moments of confession that show Thomas as a hurt man, begging for death. Yet the single nostalgic moment of Thomas’s accidental revelation of a childhood picture stands out amongst the biography’s depravity. It is a

dramatic moment revealing the final turn of Thomas's ever changing nostalgia. In the final chaotic years of his life, Thomas retreats to a personal nostalgia beyond the abstract images of lost innocence or the long forgotten era of peasant arts and crafts. Thomas obsesses with the image of his own childhood and the ideal Welsh countryside in the hope of ascertaining some moral meaning from his decaying world. Unfortunately for Thomas, the closer he comes to November of 1953, the more threatening that image of perfect childhood innocence becomes. In his agony, he begins to associate perfect morality with death itself.

Turning to the past for a sense of morality is nothing new in nostalgic studies. The trend of retreating to memories of one's past to recover some sense of a lost good has been carefully documented. Ralph Harper discusses the almost fairy-tale like quality of nostalgia. For Harper, nostalgia is a psychological process of reconnecting to one's morality. He analyses nostalgia as a kind of homesickness indicative of a decadent modern age. Harper also analyses the very mental and psychological aspect of nostalgia, highlighting the imaginary quality of the memories associated with nostalgic emotion. What follows is a philosophical exploration of the forces fueling nostalgic sentiment within Harper's work Nostalgia:

Homesickness or nostalgia is an involuntary conscience, a moral conscience, positive rather than prohibitory. It reminds a person, by way of giving him the experience, of the good he has known and lost. Nostalgia is neither illusion nor repetition; it is a return to something we have never had. And yet the very force of it is just that in it the lost is recognized, is familiar. Through nostalgia we know not only what we hold most dear, but the quality of experiencing that we deny ourselves habitually. This is why nostalgia is a moral sentiment. It is also the moral sentiment of the present century. (26)

Notice that Harper associates nostalgia with a type of homesickness rather than a simple longing for a past era. This conception of nostalgia is very reminiscent of the word's actual origins as a medical disease. Nostalgia was at first a form of depression that broke out amongst troops who spent many years away from home. It was only later that nostalgia became more indicative of emotion rather than an actual medical condition. Nostalgia, therefore, represents a desire to concretely retrieve something thought lost.

It appears that the object of Thomas's nostalgic desire would be his childhood period. Following Harper's theory of nostalgia, Thomas's revelation of the photograph betrays a desire to recognize some lost good. It is likely some imaginary quality Thomas

longs for and something Thomas would seem to “deny” himself “habitually.” Thomas must long for an idealized past personified by the innocence of childhood, a perfect innocence which likely never existed the way Thomas would recall it. That Harper also identifies this conception of nostalgia as a sentiment “of the present century” also suggests some connection with the traumatic period of transition which plagued the 1900’s, considering his book was published in 1966.

Of course when considering the horrors and transitions of the twentieth century, one immediately thinks of the world wars. Thomas, who was born in 1914, the first year of World War I, and lived through World War II, shows signs of trauma from experiencing life through the most difficult wars in history. Even though Thomas never fought in either of the two conflicts, Brinnin’s biography shows Thomas’s personal mental injuries caused by the graphic images of the wars. Several days before his death, Thomas, drunk and confused, rants about his own imagined wartime experiences:

Dylan, already drunk, ordered one whiskey after another. When the conversation turned toward politics and war, without warning, he suddenly went into a raving fantasy. His talk, implying that he had been in actual wartime combat, that he had witnessed horrors involving his family, became disconnected, violent, maudlin and obscene. A waiter came to the table to quiet him, but Dylan, helplessly gripped by his fantasy, ranted on about blood and mutilation and burning and death. In an attempt to calm him, Liz held his hand; he broke into tears and began to sob. (262)

Notice the very specific, violent imagery. Thomas is not simply mourning the loss of unnamed soldiers, but rather associating the images of war with the faces of his family. The rant becomes graphic with descriptions of “blood,” “mutilation,” and “burning.” Thomas then becomes even more emotionally broken, falling into tears at the comfort of his friend. All of this material erupts from a discussion of politics and war, indicating Thomas’s disillusionment with the political atmosphere of the time. Even though Thomas was drunk when this episode occurred, it provides very useful insight into his personal fears and emotional scars in a modern era with nostalgia acting as both a medical symptom and method of therapy.

Moreover, Thomas lived in an era ripe with the fear of warfare. As World War II approached, many British citizens wanted to avoid open conflict altogether. World War I was an event that stripped Britain of an entire generation, and the possibility of engaging in another conflict of that magnitude caused the British to adopt a more diplomatic



approach to the Axis powers at first. Many attempts were made to appease Hitler before the war began, and Thomas would have witnessed these desperate attempts to avoid another world wide catastrophe. He saw them fail. And the fear of that failure plagued him for the rest of his life.

Thomas's disillusion with his childhood may include more than the influence of Twentieth Century Warfare. Thomas's childhood was a period of flux and change, and saw encroaching industry threatening the lush Welsh landscape. In one of many radio broadcasts, Thomas gives an honest look at the images of his youth, and while mixed with the idyllic, death and doom loom over the horizon. The following passage is taken from the book Dylan Thomas: The Broadcasts, by Ralph Maud:

I was born in a large Welsh industrial town at the beginning of the Great War: an ugly, lovely town (or so it was, and is, to me), crawling, slumped, unplanned, jerry-villa'd, and smug-suburbed by the side of a long and splendid-curving shore where truant boys and sandfield boys and old anonymous men, in the tatters and hangovers of a hundred charity suits, beachcombed, idled, and paddled, watched the dock-bound boats, threw stones into the sea for the barking, outcast dogs, and, on Saturday summer afternoons, listened to the militant music of salvation and hell-fire preached from a soap-box. This sea-town was my world; outside, a *strange* Wales, coal-pitted, mountained, river-run. (3)

Thomas begins this passage with the telling description of his home as "an ugly, lovely town." Harboring many polar opposites, the Wales of Thomas's youth was indeed a "strange" place, but also a world harboring both ideal innocence and the ever present inevitability of death. Every figure Thomas describes in this anecdote is either "truant," "anonymous," "outcast," or hung-over. The boys and men of Thomas's youthful world are both inviting and threatening in their displacement, and darkness looms over the entire speech as the image of "militant music of salvation and hell-fire" brings the nostalgic journey to a close. Considering that Harper describes nostalgia and the search for lost morality as a symptom of the twentieth century, it is clear that Thomas participates in the general trauma associated with this particular symptom of the era. Thomas's nostalgic search will be plagued with the conflicting images of the "strange" Swansea, in particular the hell-fire sermons present in what should be an idyllic framework.

All of these discussions of idyllic atmospheres should remind the reader of Thomas's true nostalgic desire. Thomas does not simply long to physically return to a

specific period of childhood, rather to a state of innocence which once destroyed, was rendered irretrievable. It seems that Thomas was thoroughly immersed in the language of Eden and original sin from a very young age, as what should be an idyllic nostalgic memory is also plagued with images of hellfire and damnation. Thomas lived in a very religious household and often referred to himself as a puritan. The Welsh literary tradition is rooted in the sermons and hymns of the church, and Thomas would confront religious ideology in every facet of his life. Thomas tried to make himself in a rebellious poet, but never could escape the very firmly established religious patterns that surrounded him in youth.

When one considers the very religious and idyllic childhood Thomas lived, it is no wonder that he would preserve the memory of childhood so fiercely in the form of photographs as Thomas likely viewed those years as a time resembling the sinless Garden of Eden. As we begin to discuss the poems and prose of Thomas's final years, keep in mind the concrete fall from grace represented by his failed relationship with Pamela Hansford Johnson. Considering that Thomas experienced a fall from grace, it is safe to assume that his nostalgic writing for that period will be constantly threatened by imagery of decay and death.

A good example of this pattern lies in Thomas's iconic short story "A Child's Christmas in Wales," first published in 1954. Thomas reminisces on the sights, sounds, and smells of a childhood Christmas. One would think that the story would focus on images of innocence and joy associated with the holiday, but at several key moments within the text the tone becomes surprisingly dark and foreboding. Although they are hidden as a kind of subtext, the atmosphere of "A Child's Christmas in Wales" focuses on disturbing questions of morality, mortality, and the value of knowledge. One of the most intense examples of this pattern is when the speaker discusses the Christmas gifts:

I had a little crocheted nose bag from an aunt now, alas, no longer whinnying with us. And pictureless books in which small boys, though warned with quotations not to, would skate on Farmer Giles' pond and did and drowned; and books that told me everything about the wasp, except why. (16)

This passage begins with the child's discussion of a gift from a deceased aunt. The "whinnying" is a reference to an earlier section which describes riding bareback. The intrusion of death into a section concerned with Christmas presents is odd, and it is

presented alongside animal imagery, suggesting the child has not yet achieved a full understanding of death and speaks of it in metaphorical terms.

The passage gets even darker as the child describes the “pictureless” books. The word “pictureless” is important, because it signals advancing age. The child no longer reads the picture books so readily associated with young childhood, but rather a longer and more adult oriented text. Even more interesting is the subject matter of these books. The book seems to discuss consequences of disobeying rules with imagery of boys falling through ice and drowning. The cold and snow of Christmas is no longer associated with childish games and snowballs, but rather the potential tomb beneath the pond. The fact that death claims the boys who disobey could also suggest a “fall of man” mentality. The childhood the speaker describes is full of mischief, but the time will come when the speaker will be held accountable for his actions.

The “presents” passage ends with a cryptic description of yet another book. This book appears to be about the natural world, giving information about wasps. The speaker states that the book delivers all the possible information about the wasps, yet it fails to answer the chilling question “why.” The book discusses a stinging insect, and the “why” the speaker fails to understand may be the necessity for this creature within the world. Again, this imagery resembles Thomas’s obsession with the fall of man. Man can understand the physical nature of pain and suffering within the world, but why it must exist is a different matter. The child within the story is learning that the world is haunted by the specter of pain and sin, and Thomas’s nostalgia obsesses not with the ideal memories of the past, but with the moment when innocence begins to fade from youth.

Considering Thomas’s strong emotions about warfare, death, and his own complicated past as a Swansea youth, it is easy to assume that he would adhere to Harper’s conception of nostalgia as the attempt to recover a lost experience of moral stability. Even in his final hours, Thomas reveals an obsession with death and a horror of warfare. Combine this with the implied displeasure with the political world of his time, the “strange” Swansea with fragile innocence threatened by looming doom, the failed adolescent relationship with Pamela Hansford Johnson preserved in letters, and the decadent atmosphere of Thomas’s tours of America, and it is easy to understand Thomas’s desire for moral stability. In short, Thomas exists in a world of despair and

trauma, and the search for a nostalgic morality surfaces in his personal and contemplative verse.

Yet when a reader searches for images of moral stability and archetypal innocence in the verse Thomas constructed in the later years of his life, the concept rarely appears without an immediate evocation of an atmosphere of death and oblivion. Thomas found no real salvation in the nostalgia of morality described by Harper; rather, he found a metaphor for the inevitability of moral and physical decay. In many of his poems focusing on childhood, the beauty of the Welsh landscape, and even heaven itself, figures of darkness and impending death loom over the beauty. It seems that Thomas was so thoroughly affected by the harsh realities of the twentieth century, that any attempt to establish a moral safe zone was instantly complicated.

Thomas began to explore the complication of childhood innocence destroyed by death with poetry focused on concrete events. One of the earliest examples of this pattern is the work “Ceremony after a Fire Raid.” This poem was published in May, 1944 in the magazine Our Time. This poem consists of three sections with varying form. Presented is the second section, in which the speaker ponders the casualties of what appears to be a bombing. The poem is dark and ominous, as the images of the dead are presented along with an almost constant reminder of the innocence and youth of the victims. To complicate this pattern even more, Thomas splices the concept of the Garden of Eden onto the chaos. What results is the ancient question of why the innocent suffer in a fallen world:

I know not whether  
Adam or Eve, the adorned holy bullock  
Or the white ewe lamb  
Or the chosen virgin  
Laid in her snow  
On the altar of London,  
Was the first to die  
In the cinder of the little skull,  
O bride and bride groom  
O Adam and Eve together  
Lying in the lull  
Under the sad breast of the head stone  
White as the skeleton  
Of the garden of Eden.

I know the legend  
 Of Adam and Eve is never for a second  
 Silent in my service  
 Over the dead infants  
 Over the one  
 Child who was priest and servants,  
 Word, singers, and tongue  
 In the cinder of the little skull,  
 Who was the serpent's  
 Night fall and the fruit like a sun,  
 Man and woman undone,  
 Beginning crumbled back to darkness  
 Bare as the nurseries  
 Of the garden of wilderness. (202)

Notice first the sonnet like length of the two stanzas. Divided into fourteen lines a piece, this poem emphasizes uniformity and control. This pattern is very appropriate considering the title "Ceremony After a Fire Raid". Thomas is careful to give the poem a traditional, formal sound indicative of ceremony. The poem seems to have no rhyme scheme, yet a pattern emerges at places with repeated words at the beginning of lines. "Or the" appears twice in lines two and three of the first stanza, and "Over the" repeats in lines four and five of the second stanza. Thomas is trying to give this unorthodox verse form moments of traditional unity in an attempt to deliver a ceremonial weight to the verse.

The ceremonial atmosphere becomes ominous in the conflicted images of innocence and death at war within the poem itself. The speaker repeatedly invokes the characters and setting of the Genesis account of creation. The poem begins with the speaker wondering if Adam, Eve, an "adorned holy bullock," a lamb, or "the chosen virgin" was the first victim of the attack. The speaker compares the dead to holy sacrifices, making war an almost god-like figure within the piece. The speaker then evokes the image of a child's remains with the poignant, yet disturbing eighth line: "In the cinder of the little skull." Using the concrete setting of the fire raid aftermath, Thomas experiments with the image of the ideal childhood confronting the reality of death. The child's innocence is highlighted by the introductory images of the Eden myth, concluding the section with the scene of the garden itself.

Thomas expounds upon this image even further within the second stanza. He equates the Garden of Eden imagery with the children themselves: "I know the legend /

of Adam and Eve is never for a second / Silent in my service / Over the dead infants.” As the speaker mourns the lost children, he knows that his “service” is ripe with the images of Adam and Eve, looking back to a time before the fall of man. This equates the death of the children with the end of innocence and essentially man’s expulsion from the garden. The speaker once again references “the little skull,” as he ponders the child as “priest” and servant. Apparently the child has power in innocence, but the child’s death negates this power and instigates the “Beginning crumbled back to darkness,” and an age of bare nurseries, all set within the “garden of wilderness.” The garden of innocence has now become the garden of the fall, disheveled and wild.

The account of Thomas drunk and ranting about the horrors of war should immediately come to mind for the reader. Thomas reveals in poetry his trauma associated with the age of the world wars. “Ceremony After a Fire Raid” mourns more than the actual infant casualties; rather, it mourns the loss of Harper’s nostalgic morality. Thomas cannot look back to the past for his moral base as Harper suggests without complicating the image of childhood morality. The image of the children and innocence is haunted by the violence of war, as the cultivated Garden of Eden transforms into the wilderness of the fall. The reader should also recall the BBC broadcast of Thomas’s nostalgic description of the “strange” Swansea. The “hell-fire sermons” mix with the theme of idyllic innocence, and Thomas cannot deliver the image of Adam and Eve without exploring the process of man’s fall.

As with many other Dylan Thomas poems, critical analyses have tended to over-complicate and distort the real message fueling the verse. Often critics will take a section from one poem and turn it into a commentary on Thomas’s poetry as a whole. One such critic attempted this type of analysis using “Ceremony after a Fire Raid.” William T. Moynihan describes Thomas’s use of Edenic imagery as “regenerative vision.” In his book, *The Craft and Art of Dylan Thomas*, Moynihan argues that Thomas’s conception and use of the fall evolved through the years.

Thomas describes not an Edenic universe but—as does Blake—a world which falls in the very act of creation. As the poetry moves along, from “Incarnate Devil” to “Fern Hill,” for example, he comes to align his concept of creation more with the Biblical story—he supplies an “Eden” to precede the “Fall.” It is relatively late in his poetry (“Ceremony After a Fire Raid”) that he comes to realize that “the legend / Of Adam and Eve is never for a second / Silent in my service.” (222)

Moynihan's argument is quite elegant and convincing, but to use "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" as a comment upon Thomas's greater use of the Garden of Eden imagery is a gross misrepresentation of the poem's true meaning. The speaker in Thomas's poem is commenting upon the use of "the legend / Of Adam and Eve" in the specific context of the service for the dead children. If Moynihan is to construct any grand scheme for Thomas's use of Edenic imagery within his poems, he must address the peculiar habit of pairing it with the violent and inevitable death of the young and innocent. Thomas is not just contemplating the fall and inherent guilt in man, but also the suffering and death of the innocent. There is no creation imagery within "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" as Moynihan suggests, only destruction and mourning.

The reader will recall that my primary argument for this Thesis is Thomas's desire to reconnect with the innocence lost during his adolescent relationship with Pamela Hansford Johnson. It is my belief that the later periods of Thomas's poems have finally begun to accept the impossibility of that reconnection, and have instead begun to mourn the inevitability of permanent loss. There are many examples from Thomas's personal life that can support this claim, but for now I have chosen to focus simply on the poetry due to its complex pairing of the desire to engage with nostalgia and the simultaneous fear of the almost suicidal realization that no past can ever be fully re-experienced. In short, these poems continue to mourn the loss of innocence itself, comparing that loss with the violence and horror of warfare and inevitable decay. Thomas longs to return to Eden, but as we progress through these final works, he begins to realize that the only way to return to a state of pure innocence is death itself.

It does take time for Thomas to understand the state of death as a possible return to Eden. Thomas once again uses a concrete setting for the conflict between childhood innocence and impending death. The poem "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, of a Child in London," recounts the emotions concerning a girl's funeral. Published in March, 1945 in the magazine New Republic, the poem moves beyond the faceless "infants" and "little skulls" of "Ceremony after a Fire Raid" and focuses on the grief associated with the death of a very specific child. From the text we can infer that the child is female, and the characteristic images of innocence are once again present within the poem. The

speaker's refusal to mourn is at first confusing, but he explains his reason behind his lack of traditional emotion:

The majesty and burning of the child's death.  
I shall not murder  
The mankind of her going with a grave truth  
Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath  
with any further  
Elegy of innocence and youth.

Deep with the first death lies London's daughter,  
Robed in the long friends,  
The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother,  
Secret by the unmourning water  
Of the riding Thames.  
After the first death, there is no other. (221)

This is one of the few poems Thomas wrote with clearly noticeable rhyming. The first stanza's rhyme is remarkably regular with a simple ABCABC pattern. The second stanza destabilizes this pattern a bit with a slant rhyme with "friends" and "Thames." This could suggest a disjuncting in the second stanza as the speaker attempts to explain his motivations. The slanted rhyme betrays a hint of emotion as the speaker's form becomes violated. The line lengths also become slightly irregular in the second stanza. The rest of the stanzas usually show a pattern with the second and fifth lines shorter than the others. In the final stanza of the poem, the fourth line is abnormally short, changing the look of the stanza when compared to the others. All of this leaves the reader with an oddly shaped final stanza, suggesting lingering emotion where the speaker claims there is none.

And how could the speaker not react to the scene with emotion? It is the death of a child. Despite the speaker's claim, there is no "majesty" in this death for the speaker to murder. She takes no "grave truth" with her. The speaker mentions elegies "of innocence and youth" but will not add to them. He refuses to speak of innocence and youth because her death symbolizes the end of both. Just like the dead children in "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" signaled a new age of wilderness and darkness, this small girl's death is symbolic of the death of innocence. This effect is created through the speaker's vague descriptions of the child. There is no name within the poem, the only hint of her gender is the word "daughter" in the second stanza, and the reader has no information regarding the circumstances of the child's actual death. The vague information invites an allegorical



reading, as the only description the speaker provides is the abstract concepts of innocence and youth.

The reader has no clear information regarding the child's age, but the speaker hints at a greater evil surrounding the scene. The child is now "Deep with the first dead," suggesting the inescapable mortality of the human experience while also implying that others have died under similar circumstances. The speaker explores this pattern even more, revealing the death of the child's mother as well: "The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother, / Secret by the unmourning water." The natural world fails to mourn for both figures, and the speaker remarks on the ultimate finality of death: "After the first death, there is no other." Death in the poetry of Dylan Thomas is no step in a greater process of life. It is instead a dead end from which no one returns. The child will not live to experience a metaphorical second death of innocence; rather, the physical death is a concrete, irrefutable end.

Thomas takes the youthful death to a new dimension in some of his most famous poems. What differentiates the works "Poem in October" and "Fern Hill" from the more abstract works of "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" and "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, of a Child in London" is the image of the dying child as opposed to the already dead and mourned. As the speaker in these poems looks back upon an innocent and idyllic childhood, death looms as a threat to both the life and the innocence of the child figures. As Dylan Thomas attempts to depict his Welsh childhood and look back nostalgically upon his past, he complicates the image of uncorrupted youth with the inevitability of both physical death, and the adult life symbolizing the death of childhood innocence. Harper's theory of nostalgia as a search for lost good holds true, but Thomas complicates Harper's theory with an unrelenting poetic image of death, superimposed upon the innocence. It is in these poems that we begin to see death as the only possible return to Eden; however that possibility does not make the threat of death any less horrifying.

"Poem in October" is a perfect example of Thomas's more personal nostalgic poems with a focus on childhood. Published in 1944, but likely written in 1941 according to the notes in The Poems of Dylan Thomas, this poem shows early evidence of Thomas's coupling of childhood imagery with inevitable death. If the piece was truly written in 1941, it would predate "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" by three years, showing

Thomas's desire to incorporate the image of physical death with the metaphorical death of innocence even before the nightmarish war poem. "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, of a Child in London" was written in 1945, so it is safe to assume that "Poem in October" will be the weaker of the two poems, considering that Thomas treats the theme of childhood death so extensively four years later.

This poem is extremely elegant and uses an unorthodox verse form. This poem is one of the first examples of Thomas's later use of line indentions within the stanza form. It is also one of several poems based on Thomas's birthday. Thomas explores the concept of aging and death on the anniversary of his birth, bringing images of death and life together in a single unit. The result is a dance between innocent youth and death before the backdrop of the beautiful Welsh landscape:

And the twice told fields of infancy  
That his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved in mine.  
    These were the woods the river and sea  
        Where a boy  
        In the listening  
Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy  
To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.  
    And the mystery  
        Sang alive  
    Still in the water and singingbirds.

And there could I marvel my birthday  
Away but the weather turned around. And the true  
Joy of the long dead child sang burning  
    In the sun.  
    It was my thirtieth  
Year to heaven stood there then in the summer noon  
Though the town below lay leaved with October blood.  
    O may my heart's truth  
        Still be sung  
    On this high hill in a year's turning. (207)

Notice how this verse explodes upon the page with the line indentions. A reader may feel overwhelmed simply by the appearance of "Poem in October." The rhyming pattern is also apparently random. The most striking rhyme within the piece is third and final lines of the last stanza. "[B]urning", and "turning" give the poem a dreadful sound, suggesting that the process of life is a constant flaming grind. Overall the poem combines pleasant natural imagery with the intimidation of exploding form.

The poem also presents several disturbing images. The speaker describes a boy (likely Thomas himself) in the lush landscapes of Wales. Yet this boy is locked within the “Listening / Summertime of the dead,” revealing “truth” and “joy” to the natural world around him. Even though this mystery “sang alive,” the image is framed within the threatening setting of the dead summer. Even if this boy lives within memories and nostalgia, his joy and truth can never escape this time of death.

Thomas darkens the image of the child even further in the last stanza. What is implied with the setting of the dead summer is confirmed near the poem’s closing: “And the true / Joy of the long dead child sang burning / In the sun.” The joy may survive in the memories, but the child is definitively dead. Although Thomas seems to have reclaimed some of this nostalgic joy, the landscape of Wales also begins to suffer: “Though the town below lay leaved with October blood.” Thomas shades the nostalgic reclamation of some forgotten good, just as Harper suggests, but the entire situation is bathed in images of death and blood, as if Thomas cannot escape the harsh reality around him. Even though he hopes his truth will be sung the next year, the only real joy of the poem seems to belong to the child locked in images of death.

“Poem in October” is still a remarkably vague poem, considering that the speaker gives us no name for the child. The reader’s first instinct is to equate the speaker and the child with Thomas himself, considering the presence of the Welsh landscape. The vague identity of the child hints at the faceless mass of “Ceremony After a Fire Raid” and the mysterious girl in “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, of a Child in London.” Despite the slightly arguable identity of the child and speaker, this poem is still one of Thomas’s more personal works, and the presence of the dying innocence of childhood suggests a deep trauma and anxiety in Thomas’s psyche. Even in 1941, something caused Thomas to seek moral asylum in childhood nostalgia, and he depicted this search within his poetry. When we analyze the poems themselves, we see that Thomas fails in his attempts to reconnect with whatever moral ground he has lost, and the reader is left with images of joy relegated to the sight of a child within a “dead summer.”

Thomas has begun to hint at what could be a very dangerous aspect of nostalgia. He characterizes the long dead images of childhood with innocence and ideals that are still obviously intact. Knowing of his desire to reconnect with those ideals, one may

suspect that his constant pairing of death imagery with childhood may suggest that death is the only real way to achieve that state of purity. The end of this poem then may not be a hopeful look to the past at all. The question is, would Thomas need to be present (or more accurately *alive*) for his “heart’s truth” to be sung one year later? If anything, that hope indicates a foreknowledge of death looming beyond the horizon and the hope that despite the threat of demise, his memory would carry on. Thomas is covertly writing of his desire to die, to return to the childhood barred by a “dead summer.” Death is becoming less and less of a force of terror, but rather a possible return to a lost state of Edenic innocence.

The desire to return to Eden through death appears once again within what could be called Dylan Thomas’s most popular poem. The final and most powerful poem of childhood death is, of course, the well known “Fern Hill.” Although the poem was published in 1945, it was a piece Thomas had written and revised for quite some time. John Malcom Brinnin describes Thomas’s drafts of “Fern Hill” extensively within Dylan Thomas in America:

When I asked him about this laborious repetition, he showed me his drafts of “Fern Hill.” There were more than two hundred separate and distinct versions of the poem. It was, he explained, his way of “keeping the poem together,” so that its process of growth was like that of an organism. He began almost every poem merely with some phrase he had carried about in his head. (126)

Thomas’s method of writing “Fern Hill” is in itself a nostalgic exercise. Thomas carries the concept of the poem through two hundred complete drafts, likely shaping the piece over the course of several years. The poem is not so much a written work, but a living “organism” that grows over time. Thomas begins his poems with a single phrase, “carried about in his head.” The longer finished works are essentially a nostalgic treatment of the moment Thomas first conceived the poem, as he works to preserve the initial phrase. Thomas relies upon nostalgia as a facet of his creative process, allowing time to shape his works in intricate ways.

The nostalgia of “Fern Hill” goes far beyond its construction. The poem explodes with images of the Welsh landscape. The real Fern Hill is a well known landmark in the life of Thomas. Fern Hill was the rural farm owned by his Aunt Annie, and Thomas spent

many days at this farm in his childhood<sup>11</sup>. As we analyze this poem, it is important to consider the undeniable relationship Thomas has with the speaker in the poem. The title of “Fern Hill” implies that Thomas is writing of his own childhood experience and memories. For the first time, Dylan Thomas explores his nostalgia directly without hiding behind a projection of himself as a youth. The poem consists of six stanzas. What follows is the final three:

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white  
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all  
Shining, it was Adam and maiden,  
The sky gathered again  
And the sun grew round that very day.  
So it must have been after the birth of the simple light  
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm  
Out of the whinnying green stable  
On to the fields of praise.

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house  
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,  
In the sun born over and over,  
I ran my heedless ways,  
My wishes raced through the house high hay  
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows  
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs  
Before the children green and golden  
Follow him out of grace,

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me  
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,  
In the moon that is always rising,  
Nor that riding to sleep  
I should hear him fly with the high fields  
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.  
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,  
Time held me green and dying  
Though I sang in my chains like the sea. (225)

Like so many of Thomas’s later poems, “Fern Hill” contains no easily discernible rhyme scheme or metrical form. The only strict verse form within this piece lies in the visual pattern upon the page. The lines form predictable waves, expanding and contracting in uniform ways. The poem’s appearance calls to mind the continual growth and death of the farm, as crops thrive and fade with the changing seasons in remarkably

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<sup>11</sup> Brinnin’s *Dylan Thomas in America* discusses a visit the adult Thomas made to Fern Hill. He found himself disillusioned, for a new owner had made considerable changes to the farm.

similar patterns. This verse form emphasizes the inevitable cycle of life and death discussed in “Fern Hill.”

This passage begins with an invocation of the Adam and Eve myth, so present in “Ceremony After a Fire Raid.” The speaker describes the scenery of “Fern Hill” as a symbol of the Garden of Eden myth: “it was allegorical / Shining, it was Adam and maiden.” As the poem progresses, the speaker makes it clear that the lush scenery indicates more than a childhood filled with beautiful memories, rather it is a time of innocence and idealism. Thomas goes as far as to describe Eve as a “maiden” to indicate her virginity and emphasize unfallen man as the figure associated with the innocence of Welsh childhood. The stanza concludes with the very biblical images of horses walking “on to the fields of praise.” The religious aspect of this stanza continues to its conclusion, and the fiery sermons of Thomas’s “strange” Swansea are nowhere to be seen. In their place is a benevolent religious presence which comforts, resembling heaven itself.

The idyllic imagery continues through the second stanza as the speaker discusses honor among images of the natural world, including foxes and pheasants. Happiness abounds in a world presented as a new creation, and freedom is the primary facet of this version of the Welsh country. Unfortunately, the stanza ends with a hint of the characteristic complication Thomas often brings to his poems dealing with childhood. The final four lines of the stanza explore the presence of time, and the final two lines carry an oddly dark tone: “And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows/ In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs / Before the children green and golden / Follow him out of grace.” Time constrains the amount of “morning songs” which can be sung, and children can only sing those songs before time rules over them. The children in the poem start “green and golden,” but “follow [time] out of grace.” As time progresses, the “green and golden” innocence of the “Fern Hill” world fades, and the children slowly become adults. Thomas’s use of the phrase “out of grace” also suggests a fall from the Eden imagery in the first stanza. Thomas has moved out of the realm of physical child death associated with “Ceremony After a Fire Raid” to now explore the symbolic death of innocence associated with the everyday act of growing older. Once again Thomas cannot take solace in the nostalgia of perfect moral youth without introducing the image of inevitable age and a fall from innocence.

The final stanza of the poem is also the most devastating. The speaker once again invokes the idyllic imagery of the Garden of Eden, describing youth as “the lamb white days.” The image of the lamb associates childhood not only with innocence, but with the image of Christ as well. Yet time always moves and threatens the moral perfection of Thomas’s moral nostalgia. The speaker awakens from a dream to “the farm forever fled from the childless land.” Reality is a world not only devoid of the farm, but also without children. “Fern Hill” no longer exists as the speaker conceives of it, and the innocence of childhood has “fled” along with it.

The final three lines present the most complicated image of nostalgia in all of Thomas’s poetry. Thomas once again recalls his youth and vitality, but shades it in the ongoing process of decay: “Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means / Time held me green and dying / Though I sang in my chains like the sea.” The speaker is at “the mercy” of time. Though he is vital, young, and “green” he is also dying. The speaker combines the image of youth and vitality with death, illustrating Thomas’s inability to depict innocence and youth without also including the presence of death corrupting it. The final line illustrates the speaker’s final attempt to overcome the inevitable success of death. The speaker sings, but the final image of the poem focuses on the chains that weigh him down. He sings “like the sea,” yet what resonates for the reader is the imprisonment of the chains. “Chains” is the harshest and most concrete word in the line and also grants the reader’s best visual image. The word is also abrupt, as the speaker gives little indication that death is so heavy on the mind of the child. The reader is likely to interpret the death and doom imagery of “Fern Hill” as imposed by the speaker, but the final lines reveals that the child himself is afflicted with mental bondage. The speaker, obviously Thomas, shows how inescapable the reality of death can be within the moral longings of nostalgia, constructing a perfect moral world and childhood only to place the emotional weight of death upon the shoulders of that very creation. There is no final moral comfort found in the idyllic rural images of “Fern Hill,” only the “childless land” and the weight of chains.

We can take the child’s song that concludes “Fern Hill” a step further. The child sings in his chains not because of some fleeting hope to escape death and mortality, but rather in celebration of his imprisonment within both. Death will provide the child with a

path to return to the Edenic imagery presented within the first stanzas. This would also explain the child's song resembling the sea. The ocean, due to its tides and unpredictability, is often used as a symbol for the transitional nature of the world. The child has exited the world of the ideal and entered the physical reality of flux, sin, and death. The promise of death would be the only real cause for the child to sing, as physical death has become the only path back to Eden. Death is the only moral stability within Dylan Thomas's poems, as the land of ideals represented both by "Fern Hill" and the Garden of Eden have passed away.

For the last and most striking example of Thomas's inability to find a moral connection with his past, we look beyond the poetry and return to John Malcom Brinnin's biography. Dylan Thomas in America details the painful final days of Thomas's life and catalogs in careful detail his final words. Shortly before Thomas became unconscious for the final time, he revealed just how closely he associated perfect morality with inevitable death. As he suffers, he mutters a cryptic line suitable for any poem:

Liz sat with him through the evening. Fretfully turning on his bed, he awoke to speak sometimes in tears, of his wife, of the misery of his existence, and of his wish to die. "I want to go to the Garden of Eden," he said, "to die...to be forever unconscious..." (271)

As Thomas faces his death, he longs for an idyllic past far beyond his own memory. What he finds there is no regenerative power or afterlife, but the promise of death itself. "To be forever unconscious" is no longer something to be feared, but a relief and a state to be desired. These words, uttered so close to Dylan Thomas's final end, are a perfect final comment upon his common trope of death encroaching upon innocence. Innocence and life before the fall of man are ideals that can only be obtained once the body has ceased to function. The poems focus upon the physical death of innocent children and their slow decay as time removes them from the realm of the ideal. As Thomas faced his own demise, he revealed a very detailed personal philosophy. Death liberates humanity from a world of decay, and once the ideal state of childhood is lost it can never truly be reclaimed in life. Thomas's nostalgia is a longing for perfect morality, just as Harper predicted, but the only way to truly achieve a new state of innocence is "to be forever unconscious:" to die.



In a final critical note, Thomas's nostalgia does align with one darker theory of nostalgia. Linda M. Austin mentions briefly in her book Nostalgia in Transition that Freudian conceptions of nostalgia focus upon the emotion as an expression for death:

Michael S. Roth, one of the few who has sought the grounds of nostalgia's transition in psychology, has pinned the transformation on our essentially Freudian understanding of desire as a manifestation of the death instinct, a longing to return to an initial, inorganic state. (1)

Austin downplays this approach, referring to its scarce number of proponents, yet its relevance for Thomas's growing nostalgic associations between innocence and death are intriguing. Although his equation with ideal childhood and impending death are very easily attributed to his war time traumas and the "strange Swansea" of his childhood, the final day of Dylan Thomas could very well reveal a "death instinct" inherent within nostalgia itself. As we look back upon an era of life which will never again exist, death can become an attractive way of eliminating the present which robs us of youth, and innocence. Thomas's case is extreme, but Austin may be wrong in writing off the Freudian conception of nostalgia as an expression of some latent "death instinct." For Thomas, death became an ideal state, comparable, and indeed located within, the Garden of Eden itself, and in the end, that state was something he clearly longed for.

It may be wrong to define Dylan Thomas by the nostalgic poems and speech of his painful final days, but the fact remains that Thomas's fame is due largely to his early death and the legendary behavior of the three years he spent in America. In the case of nostalgic study, the later poems cannot be analyzed without also delving into the particulars of Thomas's biographies. His last words hold great insight into the imagery of the final poems. Nostalgia for Dylan Thomas ultimately proved to be a double edged sword. His longing for innocence and an ideal, unfallen world ultimately resulted in a desire for death itself, and this desire grew gradually over a lifetime with roots in his adolescent romance with Pamela Hansford Johnson. Whether this desire for death contributed to his passing is obviously open for debate, but the words preserved within John Malcolm Brinnin's biography expressing the desire to return to Eden echo on.

#### Chapter 4

#### “Time Shall Belong to Man:”

#### Nostalgia as the Creative Act in the Letters and Poems of Dylan Thomas

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“I can see the sensitive picking of words, but none of the strong, inevitable pulling that makes a poem an event, a happening, an action perhaps, not a still-life or an experience put down, placed, regulated; the introduction of mist, legend, time’s weir, grief’s bell...seem to me ‘literary’, not living. They seem, as indeed the whole poem seems, to come out of the nostalgia of literature.”—Dylan Thomas (qtd. in Ackerman 56)

The above letter, written by Dylan Thomas in 1938, criticizes a poem written by his friend Vernon Watkins. I first stumbled upon this letter in John Ackerman’s book, Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work, as Ackerman discusses the concept of action within Thomas’s poetry. He sums up Thomas’s attitude toward poetic action well, describing it as a concern “with the poem’s existence as an action and not as a regulated, set-down experience with beginning and end.” This fascination with action over a simple narrative form causes Thomas to reject simple story telling as a poetic medium. Poems must have purpose and life and not exist as a dead memory. Thomas’s desire for action in his art creates an uncomfortable contradiction between the obvious nostalgic themes present in his other poems and his criticism of Vernon Watkins for his overuse of nostalgia as a theme.

Thomas senses the poetic ability of Watkins, but seems dissatisfied with the overtly nostalgic nature of his work. Thomas lists many particular phrases within Watkins’s piece, including “time’s weir,” and “grief’s bell” which showcase the “literary” as opposed to “living” qualities of poetry. Thomas desires more action and life within the poem and urges Watkins to utilize more violent, and perhaps vulgar, imagery in order to produce a clear action, or “happening.” What is interesting about this criticism is Thomas’s assessment of the presence of nostalgia within art. He remarks that many images of the poem “come out of the nostalgia of literature.” Literature is, for Thomas, a nostalgic phenomenon, and when nostalgia becomes the primary purpose of literature it loses the force and “living” quality Thomas values. A poet must consciously write against “the nostalgia of literature” to make the poem an active work. Thomas has engaged repeatedly with nostalgic subjects even before this letter was written, so the attitude

toward nostalgia in this criticism is very important in understanding his method of using the subject in his work.

Upon closer examination of Thomas's nostalgic poems, a reader will find a very original and modern approach to the literary longing for the past. Thomas does not write poems simply for nostalgic sentiment; rather, his speaker takes a personal role in shaping, glorifying, and finally taking control of the past. Thomas's poems use nostalgia as a means for reinventing memory and ultimately taking control of inner emotion as well as physical reality. In short, Thomas criticizes Vernon Watkins not for the use of nostalgia within poetry, but for failing to make that nostalgia into a living, active moment. Thomas recognizes the past as a ripe subject. It is not something that should be simply placed within a work to create a clichéd, poetic voice. Thomas instead treats the past as something malleable. Thomas acknowledges memory as an ever changing experience that can be shaped and molded. He creates new, fictional narratives of the past out of concrete experiences, and this recreation of the past produces action within the poem. At first the action is deeply personal, considering Thomas works mostly with memories of friends and Swansea: his home town. As Thomas's nostalgia evolves, his treatment of the past becomes more social and open. He continues to create new memories and narratives of the past, but the action becomes much more universal, shifting from personal memories, to more general experiences of humanity including very religious and archetypal experiences.

The themes Thomas explores with his nostalgia should come as no surprise to the reader. Thomas will repeatedly focus on images of religious atonement and failed attempts to return to an ideal innocence. As Thomas matures, the religious aspect of his poems will darken in accordance with the process of childhood innocence being consumed by death (as discussed in the previous chapter). In short, the action explored by Ackerman is likely related to Thomas's constant search for lost youth and idealism. The relationship between Thomas's longing for an ideal past and his desire for action in poetry will best express itself in Thomas's ability as a poet to shape and mold the images from his memory. Thomas will recreate the past through nostalgia rather than simply chronicling his memories in a realistic, narrative format.

The literary aspects of nostalgia have firm foundations in sociological and psychological studies. Many have described nostalgia as an emotion which shapes the past into an idealized form. Linda Hutcheon explores the transformative aspect of nostalgia and highlights the many literary qualities within the emotion in her article “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern.” For Hutcheon, nostalgia is a psychological act that interprets and shapes the past, often reflecting some un-lived desire in the present:

Nostalgia, in fact, may depend precisely on the *irrecoverable* nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia’s power—for both conservatives and radicals alike. This is rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire. In this sense, however, nostalgia is less about the past than about the present. It operates through what Mikhail Bakhtin<sup>12</sup> called an “historical inversion”: the ideal that is *not* being lived now is projected into the past. (3)

Due to the “*irrecoverable* nature of the past” the images conceived in nostalgia must exist outside of reality. Memory is filled with gaps, and the thinker (or in this case poet) will likely fill the mental gaps with idealizations, resulting in the creative “power” fueling nostalgia. For Hutcheon, the idealizations and creative license within nostalgia will likely reflect the un-lived desires of the moment through Bakhtin’s “historical inversion”. What matters most at this point is not the unfulfilled desires of Dylan Thomas, but rather the images produced within the creative realm of nostalgia. As Thomas writes living nostalgic verse, the concept of mental shaping and control of reality appears often. Thomas rarely approaches poetry as an outlet for nostalgia, rather as a way of exploring a speaker’s relationship with and control over the past.

This control over the past is the “action” Thomas uses to differentiate his poetry from “the nostalgia of literature” prevalent in Watkins’ work. What makes this control intriguing is the way Thomas diversifies it. Thomas opens a space for action by creating a new narrative of the past, and in that space Thomas creates a variety of actions to suit his personal needs. Sometimes he will recreate a memory of a friend. Other times he will re-shape the Christian apocalypse or redefine his attitude to Christianity in general. Toward the end of his life, he focuses more on the act of memory in a more social and comforting context. This device could become clichéd, but Thomas’s avoids that trap by diversifying

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<sup>12</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) was a Russian philosopher, social theorist, and literary critic.

the images and actions he creates. Thomas was a masterful poet, and was well aware of the need to expand and develop his themes, rather than obsess and fall into mediocrity.

To see Thomas's interaction with the past exemplified in verse, one must first analyze his correspondence. Thomas wrote very detailed, self reflecting letters that read almost like poems. In a letter written in 1935 to his boyhood friend Daniel Jones, Dylan Thomas waxes nostalgic and describes the Swansea of his youth. This description stands out for the way Thomas emphasizes the "*irrecoverable* nature of the past" explored by Linda Hutcheon. Thomas's nostalgia is fueled by the constant reminder that the past he visualizes will never exist again:

The second, and the most important reason for my writing is: I never can believe that the Warmley days are over—(just a song at twilight when the lights Marlowe and the flecker Bedoes Bailey Donne and Poe')—that there should be no more twittering, no more nose-on-window pressing and howling at the streets, no more walks with vampire cries, and standing over the world, no more hold-a-writing-table for the longest and wrong adjectives; I can't believe that percy, who droppeth gently, can have dropped out of the world, that the 'badger beneath my vest' and homage to Admiral Beatty' are a song and a boat of the past (196).

Notice that Thomas is not simply recording his memories upon the page. He laments the very "pastness of the past" as an event which can never be experienced again. He can never "believe that the Warmley<sup>13</sup> days are over," and the emotion fueling that fact is the primary reason Thomas writes to Jones here. What follows is an apparent barrage of literary references and private jokes, mixing a song parody with random poets, likely referencing some of his favorite at the time. Notice also the repeated use of the phrase "no more." "No more" appears four times within a short space, and is used to negate vivid details. Thomas evokes the images of "twittering," noses "on-window pressing," "walks with vampire cries," and "hold-a-writing-table" literary contests. He then makes these memories disappear within the mind of the reader with the simple affix "no more."

Thomas is following the same advice he gave Watkins in a letter three years later. Rather than simply record and discuss the concrete memories of the past, he creates an action within the description as a frame for the nostalgia within. The primary action of this very "literary" letter is the disappearance of the past. As Thomas describes the very detailed images of Swansea, he undermines the description with the constant reminder

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<sup>13</sup> Warmley was Dan Jones' home in Swansea. (The name also belongs to a small town in southwest England.)

that what is being described has ceased to exist. The reader of this letter is left between the comfort of pleasant nostalgia, and the anxiety of knowing that time has completely negated the existence of what once was.

The action of the letter is not relegated to the disappearing reality. Thomas seems to be writing this letter for a clear purpose. Thomas is recreating his friend: Daniel Jones. The memories he resurrects are very descriptive, but the reader must remember that Daniel Jones conception of the Swansea “Warmley days” could be markedly different from Thomas’s. Thomas speaks for Jones here, picking memories and valuing certain experiences over others in favor of an obviously mythical Swansea. Thomas is self serving here. He creates these memories for a reason, though getting into his head is rather difficult. He may be lonely. He may also be suffering from an illness or personal failure, and these memories of his youth provide comfort. Whatever the reason, Thomas creates this mythical “Warmley days,” and the image of his friend Daniel Jones. It seems Thomas needs a friend and a past to relate to, and that creation constitutes the real action of this letter. It is deeply personal, and powerful.

For Thomas, the past is not a treasure to keep, but a moment long dead. His very conception of memory and of pastness itself laments the loss of the moment. The Garden of Eden metaphor applies very well in this letter. Thomas concentrates on the fading past almost obsessively early in his life. Just as man looks back to the lost Garden of Eden as a time of pure innocence, Thomas regards the past as an object lost and irretrievable. For Thomas, the past itself has now become the Garden of Eden beyond any mortal reach. As he chants repeatedly “no more” within the letter, a reader can almost imagine the garden fading after the first taste of knowledge.

Thomas uses the negative affix “no more” to complicate physical description within verse as well. The poem “And Death Shall Have No Dominion” was dated April of 1933, predating the letter above by two years. The poem is widely known as a religious piece, likely exploring the concept of apocalypse. The poem consists of three stanzas, all beginning and ending with the titular refrain: “And death shall have no dominion.” The first two stanzas affirm the immortality of the soul despite the physical suffering and doom of the body. The final stanza breaks the positive mood of the poem with almost disturbing imagery of destruction. The world seems to disappear as the poem

concludes, and the final unsettling stanza maintains the uniform opening and closing line as the world vanishes:

And death shall have no dominion.  
No more may gulls cry at their ears  
Or waves break loud on the seashores;  
Where blew a flower may a flower no more  
Lift its head to the blows of the rain;  
Though they be mad and dead as nails,  
Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;  
Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,  
And death shall have no dominion. (55)

Notice first the repeated use of “no more” in lines two and four. Line two describes both the cry of gulls and breaking waves, but just as in Thomas’s letter, the image is complicated by the assured disappearance of all images. Line four takes the emotional weight of this device further: “Where blew a flower may a flower no more / Lift its head to the blows of the rain.” The flower the speaker describes will no longer “lift” its head to the life-giving “blows of the rain.” The rain may sound threatening with its “blows” but the flower lifts its head at the impact, and it is that lifting that will cease to exist. The speaker is describing beautiful images of nature, but the phrase “no more” placed in proximity to the images shows the reader that the natural world is fading away. The speaker extends this imagery to the cosmos as well. “[C]haracters “hammer through daisies” to once again show the destruction of nature, but the speaker extends this violence to the heavens: “Break in the sun till the sun breaks down, / And death shall have no dominion.” The sun itself has been destroyed in the same mysterious process the speaker describes simply with an affix, “no more.”

The “no more” pattern within “And Death Shall have No Dominion” is paramount in understanding the criticism Thomas gave to Vernon Watkins. Thomas is not simply rejecting the influence of nostalgia within poetry, but rather the centrality of nostalgia as a subject. Thomas uses his own nostalgia as a poetic device, as proven by the presence of the “no more” pattern in his nostalgic letter to Daniel Jones. The action of nostalgia within “And Death Shall Have No Dominion” is the speaker’s engagement with the disappearing reality. Death may have no dominion, but only because the physical world is disappearing around the reader. Death can only be rendered inept when the world is without the presence of mortal beings and objects subject to decay. The fact that Thomas

would use the same verb pattern “no more” in a nostalgic letter to Daniel Jones points to the presence of nostalgia within the earlier poem. Thomas’s early writings use the power of nostalgia, but only indirectly.

The action of this poem again lies in a personal space created from liberal use of the past. Here Thomas is recreating the image of apocalypse in a manner very similar to the creation of a mythical Swansea and Daniel Jones. Thomas again appeals to his memories of Swansea in this personal creation of the end times. He uses natural images including flowers, gulls, and waves. All of these images are closely related to the beautiful, sea-side landscape of Swansea and Wales. Thomas ignores the more industrial and metropolitan aspects of Wales in favor of the natural beauty of the unspoiled, though disappearing, landscape. This action is still deeply personal, as not many readers may understand the very Welsh images Thomas pours into the poem.

Several interesting questions remain. Why would Thomas want to reconstruct the apocalypse? And why would the image he creates focus more on destruction and obliteration rather than the hope and redemption Christianity usually emphasizes? Thomas may want to lament the beauty of Wales as it slowly disappears before him. He may also wish to understand the more frightening aspects of the end times in a more personal way. The Book of Revelation delves into some very confusing and unsettling images, and Thomas may derive some comfort by making the concept more Welsh, and home-like.

Whatever the reason behind Thomas’s personalization of Armageddon, “And Death Shall have Dominion” did not always have the ending which links it to Dylan Thomas’s nostalgia. Ralph N. Maud explores the revisions predating its publication in the article “Dylan Thomas’ first published poem”. Maud discovers an earlier, somewhat weaker version that delivers the work’s themes explicitly. The “no more” device is absent from this earlier version, and the poem reads somewhat differently.

Under the sea or snow at last  
Man shall discover all he thought lost,  
And hold his little soul within his fist;  
Knowing that now he can never be dust,  
He waits in the sun till the sun goes out;  
Now he knows what he had but guessed  
Of living and of dying and the rest. (117)



This earlier version of the poem succeeds in evoking a universal theme. Notice that all of the Swansea natural images are absent. Instead Thomas writes of the experience of “Man” in a general way; however, the desire for personal understanding remains as man discovers “all he thought lost, [a]nd hold[s] his little soul within his fist.” Man holds his own soul within his hands and learns “what he had but guessed.” Within this earlier draft, there is possession of something unclear. It is not defined, but it is held close and intimately, and Thomas’s lack of description invites the reader to interpret the poem freely. Thomas’s use of Swansea imagery in the final draft accomplishes the personal affect more poetically, as Thomas supplants his own experiences to make the poem more mysterious. This mysterious imagery produces an action very similar to the letter to Daniel Jones. Thomas wants to personalize and modify the apocalypse into something deeply personal. At first he tries to make this modification universal, but in a wise move, he makes it personal and cryptic. Just as he describes Daniel Jones with very personal and selective memories, Thomas molds an apocalypse based upon the rural landscape of his home town.

Ultimately it is the landscape of Wales that Thomas consistently relates to the Garden of Eden, and the eerie disappearance of that landscape says a great deal of Thomas’s attitude to the ideals Eden represents. As I stated in my introduction, this poem is the primary reason I suspect that Thomas had a persistent desire to return to an idyllic past represented by the Garden of Eden itself. The line “man shall discover all he thought lost” is particularly telling. The poem obviously discusses a world beyond death by describing the Earth plunged into complete annihilation. This is the moment man will discover the lost garden of innocence. It is only through death that man can reclaim innocence and purity, and this consistently constitutes the “action” of Dylan Thomas’s poetry.

“And Death Shall Have No Dominion” is likely the most fitting example to illustrate Thomas’s keen use of nostalgia to supplement the action of a poem, but the pattern appears quite regularly in his poetry, prose, and radio broadcasts. Thomas’s use of nostalgia is almost always hidden within the text, and he rarely writes with a nostalgic goal in mind. Just as the nostalgic aspect of “And Death Shall Have No Dominion” lies hidden within a relatively obscure piece of correspondence, the nostalgia of Thomas’s

poems lingers beneath the surface, waiting for the close reader to find. For Thomas, nostalgia becomes a complex tool in the myriad devices and techniques of poetry. The purpose of these tools is to produce a free narrative space, reinterpret the past, and create a very personal myth of memory and experience. This process is the action Thomas outlines in his letter to Watkins.

Thomas uses nostalgic devices again in the poem “Before I knocked.” Dated September twenty third, several months after “And Death Shall Have No Dominion” in 1933, the poem also uses biblical themes exploring the life and crucifixion of Christ. This poem presents a dramatic shift in Thomas’s poetic action, as the personal, creative narrative of the past becomes less personal, and more open to mass audiences. Religion is the vehicle Thomas uses to accomplish this new universality. The speaker contemplates the various forms of Christ from conception to death. As the poem progresses, the role of time becomes paramount. What follows is the final three of eight stanzas:

And time cast forth my mortal creature  
To drift or drown upon the seas  
Acquainted with the salt adventure  
Of tides that never touch the shores.  
I who was rich was made richer  
By sipping at the vine of days.

I, born flesh and ghost, was neither  
A ghost nor man, but mortal ghost.  
And I was struck down by death’s feather.  
I was a mortal to the last  
Long breath that carried to my father  
The message of his dying christ.

You who bow down at cross and altar,  
Remember me and pity Him  
Who took my flesh and bone for armour  
And doublecrossed my mother’s womb. (79)

Thomas rarely uses regular rhyme, so the use of a rhyming pattern in this poem requires some attention. While the rhymes are somewhat slant and thought-rhymes are used (I.E. Rhyming feather with father and seas with shores), the pattern is rigorous. The first two stanzas utilize an ABABABA pattern, while the final stanza uses ABAB. As usual with Thomas’s poems, the rhyming creates an atmosphere of ceremony and formality. His use of such an obviously biblical subject may have inspired him to use the very structured

and formal rhyming form, creating a nostalgic atmosphere just in the poem's audible sound.

The role of time within this poem is also remarkably nostalgic. The speaker (apparently Christ himself) comments upon death as a product of time, casting forth the mortal form "to drift or drown upon the seas." Death and the passage of time grants the speaker power in this poem, as he sips "at the vine of days." This expression sounds nostalgic, as a person longing and contemplating the past could symbolically "sip" at the days. This action has benefited the speaker greatly as he is made "richer." Time is not a force of decay and death within "Before I knocked." Instead, looking back upon the past becomes a source of strength and knowledge. The speaker in the poem commands authority over the past, and describes the way the reader should understand it.

In the second stanza, the speaker looks back upon the past as Christ remembers his death and emphasizes his mortality: "I was a mortal to the last / Long breath that carried to my father / The message of his dying Christ." Memory and nostalgia in this poem define the nature of Christ's mortality. Thomas is showing, through poetry, that religious sentiment flows through nostalgia. Religion requires belief and faith projected into an ancient era, as the reader contemplates the nature of past events to understand the world. Dylan Thomas maintains Christ's mortality to his "last long breath," instead of exploring his divinity. In short, the nostalgic musing of Christ illuminates Thomas's particular religious interest rather than existing for the sake of poetics.

The final stanza once again emphasizes the importance of nostalgia for religious sentiment. The speaker appeals to the reader to "remember" the events surrounding his final hours: "You who bow down at cross and altar / Remember me and pity him / Who took my flesh and bone for armor." Christ commands his followers to remember his sacrifice and also "pity" those who executed him. In this poem, the religious are required to think back upon the history of Christianity and react emotionally with the events that define it. Nostalgia helps the reader to explore the more disturbing facets of Christianity, and Thomas demands the reader engage with the most difficult aspects of the religion.

Once again, nostalgia is simply the device Thomas uses to supplement the action of the verse. Instead of looking back upon biblical times, Thomas engages his reader by creating an intriguing speaker persona in the form of a nostalgic Christ. The Christ

speaker looks back upon his changes in form and the suffering of his final moments. The “action” of this poem ultimately lies in Christ’s demand that readers “remember” his death, and “pity” those who acted violently upon him. This form of nostalgia challenges the reader’s religious perceptions and encourages personal interaction with religious history. Once again, Thomas makes a personal, creative narrative space, speaking for Christ and not quoting directly from any religious text. Thomas invents the words Christ says within the poem, instilling his own religious sentiment.

This poem does not erupt from “the nostalgia of literature;” rather, it utilizes nostalgia to highlight Thomas’s own religious ideas. Thomas could have simply constructed a poem detailing the events of Christ’s death and resurrection; he instead creates a complicated work, demanding that the reader engage emotionally with a fictional version of Christ himself. Thomas’s version of Christ values pity over everything else, asking the reader to remember and pity those who mistreated him. Again, I can only guess at Thomas’s personal goal or need in creating this fictional Christ, but it seems safe to assume Thomas desires pity for himself. Thomas committed many sins in his life, including adultery, and this poem’s emphasis on pity for the sinful may highlight his persistent guilt. Just as Thomas may have created Daniel Jones in a moment of loneliness, he may create the Christ figure to help deal with a moment of extreme guilt.

Not only does “Before I Knock” avoid the pitfall of clichéd poetic nostalgia by allowing Thomas to engage with his personal demons, but it also allows Thomas to create a personal narrative that is much more universal. Thomas uses Christianity as a common ground between elevated, poetic language, and common symbols of lower class and less educated masses. Thomas has moved away from a system of solely personal memories characterized by his experiences with Daniel Jones and the Landscape of Swansea. This is a reinterpretation of widespread religious ideas, and Thomas can reach a massive audience by discussing these universal themes.

Thomas continued to maintain the elegance of his poems by utilizing nostalgia to open a personal, narrative space. One month after “Before I knocked,” Thomas completed one of his most nostalgically centered poems. Many would predict that the central nostalgic theme present within “The Almanac of Time” would condemn the poem to suffer many of the same problems Thomas points out within Vernon Watkins’s verse.

Thomas sidesteps the “nostalgia of literature” once again, but utilizes a very original method to avoid the pattern. The “action” of the poem is maintained by directly addressing the power of nostalgia itself. Thomas uses a very vague verse style and avoids any concrete memories within his poem about memory and time. Thomas now addresses the power of memory itself, reaching an even more universal audience than religious symbols could bring.

The word of time lies on the chaptered bone,  
The seed of time is sheltered in the loin:  
The grains of life must seethe beneath the sun,  
The syllables be said and said again:  
Time shall belong to man. (93)

This is the last of three uniform stanzas. Time no longer rules over man and exists under his influence, yet the speaker uses arcane language to illustrate this point. “The word of time lies on the chaptered bone, / The seed of time is sheltered in the loin.” The bone is “chaptered” to suggest age and even a literary backdrop to the human body. The “word” of time exists within the bones of man, which may indicate man himself is its source. The use of the word “loin” is intriguing, suggesting man also engenders time with his own sexuality. “[L]oin” is a word which appears often in the works of Shakespeare and earlier English literature. It also appears prominently as “the fruit of your loins” in the King James Bible. For Thomas to use such a dated word to discuss sexuality within the poem alludes to a persistent religious world view, supported also by “And Death Shall Have No Dominion” and “Before I knocked.” In short, the modernity of the poem seems to be at war with a repressed religious nostalgia.

Beyond the hidden religious themes, Thomas illustrates the power of man’s imagination over the influence of time. The final lines show that man owns, and consequently conquers time itself: “The syllables be said and said again / Time shall belong to man.” The speaker shows the power of verse with the image of spoken “syllables” and proclaims in the almost rebellious last line: “Time shall belong to man.” Through the spoken word, which also implies the art of poetry, time becomes subservient to the rule of man. This implies that through memory, nostalgia, and the simple act of procreation, man can conquer the inevitable passage of time and preserve his memory for the future. As Thomas focuses on the act of nostalgia and explores the power of memory over time, he once again avoids the clichéd images and themes of the “nostalgia of

literature.” Rather than explore a lost period of time, Thomas engages with the “act” of remembering itself, praising its power over the inevitable decay of time.

The line “time shall belong to man” also provides great insight into Thomas’s approach to nostalgic verse. As Thomas avoids addressing nostalgic themes in clichéd ways, he consistently uses nostalgia as a poetic device to deliver more abstract and poignant ideas. In short, time is a tool for understanding the world, whether to rationalize death, to engage in religious debate, or even to understand humanity’s place within the universe. The act of creating a nostalgic poem is, in affect, the act of owning time. This poem is remarkable in its action. Until “Time Shall Belong to Man,” Thomas’s primary action within his poems was the creation of a personal narrative of the past. He reshapes the past to fulfill very specific needs, whether it is the desire for a friend in memories of Daniel Jones, a more personal understanding of the apocalypse, or the image of a pitying Christ. “Time Shall Belong to Man” takes readers in a remarkable new direction. Thomas’s need in this poem is a better understanding of man’s role within the universe. Most people assume that time rules over humanity, considering its mortality. Thomas ignores personal mortality and focuses on man’s ability to preserve himself through memory, history and procreation. Nostalgia is no longer a simple emotion; it is an agent that allows man to live forever, and thus conquer time.

Thomas takes the immortality of nostalgia to heart. As Thomas matures, nostalgia and the power of memory become a theme more central to a poem’s overall subject. Memory and conceptions of the past become more obvious in both his correspondence and his verse. As Thomas brings nostalgia forward in his writing, he maintains the action of the earlier poems by highlighting the ambiguity and psychological instability inherent within the emotion itself. Furthermore, Thomas begins to explore the various ways humanity can control and influence the past through imagination. The action of Thomas’s later poems often involves a speaker shaping his conception of the past through intense emotion, focusing on the act of memory rather than the actual images recalled. Thomas’s desires in these poems will be much less straightforward than the one’s explored earlier. Thomas is no longer remembering the past to create a friend, rather he explores profound and dark subjects. He seeks some resolution, but never quite finds it.

One of the most striking examples of this pattern is found within Thomas's correspondence. In an ironic twist, Thomas wrote a highly nostalgic letter to the same poet he criticized for writing with too much nostalgic emphasis. This letter to Vernon Watkins, postmarked in 1946, shows obsession with the past and uses remarkably sentimental language. This letter seems less focused on the disappearing reality present in his letter to Daniel Jones. Thomas embraces sentimental nostalgia while also showing the displeasure with the present highlighted by Linda Hutcheon. This is no longer the adolescent Dylan Thomas, demanding poetry of pure action, but an aged poet looking back upon the past with simultaneous reverence and regret:

And Cwmdonkin Park. I wish we were there now. Next month sometime I'm going down to see my mother, who has been very very ill, outside Carmarthen, and will stop at Swansea on the way back? Have you a little sheetless, must be sheetless, dogbox with nails for me to sleep in? Any shelter for a night? Unless you've been mending the roof. Then we could, maybe, all spend one evening together, wipey-eyed, remembering, locked in these damned days, the as-then-still-forgiven past. (588)

Thomas frames this entire nostalgic episode with adverse circumstances, implying that Watkins will provide a "dogbox with nails" to sleep in. He likely evokes a troubled, impoverished adolescence, considering that the imagery is so detailed and seems to come directly from some memory. Notice that Thomas is much more interested in the actual act of remembering. It appears to be a social sentiment, considering he invites others to "all spend one evening together, wipey-eyed, remembering". Nostalgia is much more of an emotion here rather than a "literary" element, and Thomas embraces the sentimentality of nostalgia readily. It appears that Thomas now views nostalgia itself as an action, worthy of poetic exploration. His focus is no longer the effects or rewards of nostalgia (i.e. the possible friendship, or religious pity) but rather nostalgia for its own sake.

The final sentence showcases Thomas's interest in control over the past through emotion. He comments upon nostalgia as an act of "remembering, locked in these damned days, the as-then-still-forgiven past." First, notice that the present is described as "damned days," once again declaring Thomas's view of the world as a fallen realm separated from the innocence of Eden. Hutcheon's theory of nostalgia as a force rooted in the present becomes paramount. Hutcheon claims that ideals "*not* being lived now" become "projected into the past," and Thomas's displeasure with his age cannot be

denied. Yet Thomas's projections into the past are vague. He describes his youth in Swansea as "the as-then-still-forgiven past." The many hyphens and chronological words make decoding this phrase difficult. Thomas attempts to make the past a persistent and powerful force even in the present. The words "as," "then," and "still" all represent points in time. "As then" indicates the past was forgiven even as it was being lived, while "still" suggests that the past remains forgiven even in the present. This passage simply states that the past was forgiven then and remains forgiven now, showing Thomas's comfort with memory and nostalgia. The hyphens suggest a control and fluidity with the way Thomas engages the past. He is open to inflect and shape his own memories in creative ways, even bending the rules of grammar to show his poetic nostalgia. The simple act of remembering becomes a source for creative potential, and Thomas seems ready to explore nostalgia as primary theme.

This letter shows a remarkable transition for Thomas as a poet. Nostalgia no longer seems to be the forbidden, dull subject protested in the 1938 letter to Vernon Watkins. Now nostalgia becomes a central theme in another remarkably poetic letter. Yet action still remains the central goal of his poetry. As Thomas describes "the-as-then-still-forgiven past" he showcases the poet's ability to inflect and translate memories into different emotions and contexts. Even though Thomas's focus has become remarkably nostalgic, he still follows his advice to Watkins by writing with a nostalgia that engages and shapes reality through memory. In essence, the nostalgia of Dylan Thomas rarely exists as nostalgia alone, but as active psychological control over the past, even in his later, more nostalgic verse, "Time shall belong to man."

One question remains, what could Thomas be trying to achieve by writing of his memories in such a vague and complex way? Thomas once again creates a personal narrative space, but his purpose for doing so is unclear. What does "the-as-then-still-forgiven past" provide for Thomas? This is one of the most complex questions one can ask about Dylan Thomas, and the answer would likely reveal a great deal about his poetry. The answer again requires some speculation. I have already established Thomas's guilt over many things in his life, ranging from his adultery during adolescence and adulthood, his ruined finances, and even the wild partying lifestyle. Thomas may be trying to forgive himself by constructing an already forgiven past. Notice he never states



who forgives. It could be God, friends, his wife, or ultimately himself. I believe this letter suggests deep guilt rather than contradicting it, considering Thomas's knowledge of the past as a changing subject. Thomas needs forgiveness for his sins, and the only way he can achieve that forgiveness is by creating a past that has already been "forgiven."

Thomas has begun to take his personal narrative space in a radical new direction. Thomas's writings begin to cast real doubt upon the accuracy of his own memory for the sake of creative control. Control over the past and memory is also explored in the famed prose piece "A Child's Christmas in Wales." Another work written later in Thomas's life and published posthumously in 1955, "A Child's Christmas in Wales" explores both idyllic and somewhat dark memories of past holidays in Swansea. Before the speaker begins the nostalgic journey into the past, he shows the fluidity and amorphous nature of memory by undermining his own story. The first paragraph of the piece suggests that the memories recalled have no definite boundaries and may run together. Thomas's prose reads much like his poetry, and a reader can never really be sure of what is real.

One Christmas was so much like another, in those years around the sea-town corner now and out of all sound except the distant speaking of the voices I sometimes hear a moment before sleep, that I can never remember whether it snowed for six days and six nights when I was twelve or whether it snowed for twelve days and twelve nights when I was six. (7)

The memories bleed together as "One Christmas was much like another." The first sentence is somewhat ironic, as the speaker sets out to tell the story of a particular Christmas in Wales, but begins by telling the reader that he cannot distinguish one holiday from another. The speaker undermines his own narrative authority even more by confusing specific details. He states that he cannot remember how many days snow fell and confuses the number of days with his own age. Although these details may seem irrelevant to the overall narrative of "A Child's Christmas in Wales," it still begins the story with unease as to the narrator's credibility. This unease negates the possibility that the speaker can deliver a completely factual account of the past. If he cannot recall even the small details of dates, the reader may also doubt his ability to remember names, events, places, and other important elements to the story.

But the inability to recover the factual past is no weakness to the work. Thomas uses this theme as a source of poetic license to create new idealized images within "A

Child's Christmas in Wales." The poetic value of the story lies not in the actual names of relatives or the locations of the events, but rather in the reshaping of past Christmases to show the reader the overall atmosphere of all the childhood holidays. The speaker undermines his ability to accurately portray actual events in order to show the intrinsic need to poetically reconstruct the past. Once again, Linda Hutcheon's theory of nostalgia gives great insight into the power of memory upon the prose of Dylan Thomas. The past in "A Child's Christmas in Wales" is "the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire," and the speaker begins the piece with very obvious signals that he is constructing a poetic past from various memories.

Readers can see the pattern of memory construction concretely in the final paragraph of the story. Here the speaker addresses the narrative of the story not as a single event, but as a conglomeration of multiple Christmases all converging into one description. Thomas picks and chooses among various memories to deliver an ideal Christmas, hoping to give the reader an idea of what all of the holidays were like to a child living in Wales.

Always on Christmas night there was music. An uncle played the fiddle, a cousin sang "Cherry Ripe," and another uncle sang "Drake's Drum." It was very warm in the little house. Auntie Hannah, who had got on to the parsnip wine, sang a song about Bleeding Hearts and Death, and then another in which she said her heart was like a Bird's Nest; and then everybody laughed again; and then I went to bed. Looking through my bedroom window, out into the moonlight and the unending smoke-colored snow, I could see the lights in the windows of all the other houses on our hill and hear the music rising from them up the long, steady falling night. I turned the gas down, I got into bed. I said some words to the close and holy darkness, and then I slept. (31)

Just like the "as-then-still-forgiven past" within the letter to Vernon Watkins, the memory of Welsh Christmas is an amorphous and changing reality. At first, the speaker gives no names for the uncles and cousin singing, but the first sentence, "Always on Christmas night there was music," implies that at least one, if not all of these events would occur. Then the speaker describes, in very clear detail, the songs of his Auntie Hannah about "Bleeding Hearts and Death," and then another in which she said her heart was like a Bird's Nest." The narrative shifts from the general memories of Christmas, to the detailed memory of one specific event. Clearly, Thomas intends for "A Child's Christmas in Wales" to represent a myriad of memories, coalescing to one ideal narrative.

The final lines of “A Child’s Christmas in Wales” continue the idealization of the past. The speaker describes his process of bedding down in concrete terms, as if he is describing an actual memory. The final sentence of the story shows this process in detail: “I turned the gas down, I got into bed. I said some words to the close and holy darkness, and then I slept.” Notice the three concrete verbs “turned,” “got,” and “said.” This is a departure from the very passive method of describing events within the story. On the surface, this is a specific event exploring the child’s almost ritualistic process of bedding down, yet it is the ritualistic method of description that once again locates this passage in the realm of idealization. The reason the speaker describes this event so precisely is that it is an action that has been repeated. The speaker is no longer relaying Christmas events, but the everyday ritual of bedding down. Unlike the songs of uncles, there are few conflicting events to complicate this event, and it is much easier for the speaker to deliver an ideal description of the ritual. The changing voice and methods of description within “A Child’s Christmas in Wales” prove Dylan Thomas’s desire to paint a creative, idealized description of the past, rather than relaying factual data for nostalgia’s sake.

It is this constant idealization and shifting voice that separates “A Child’s Christmas in Wales” from the simple “nostalgia of literature” criticized in the 1938 letter to Watkins. Thomas opens a very wide personal, narrative space here. Once again, I believe Thomas’s goal with this piece was a refuge from guilt. The language and imagery is delightfully simple, and the images are pleasant. Yet Thomas clearly hints that some unpleasant events occurred on Christmas, considering the threatening imagery of the gifts and the Aunt’s odd song about death. Thomas touches on these events only partially, and clearly constructs a Christmas that is idealized and innocent for the most part. Later in life, Thomas focuses on childhood innocence, a concept explored in great length in the previous chapter. Just as he imposes forgiveness upon the “As-then-still-forgiven past,” Thomas also seems to impose innocence and idealism upon childhood, despite the awkward moments where trauma seems to slip in. Thomas has a great desire for innocence and tries to invoke the emotion with the very creative interpretation of “A Child’s Christmas in Wales.”

Nostalgic control over the past takes an obscure and strange turn in the poem “Lament.” Written on March 20<sup>th</sup> 1951 and published in *Botteghe Oscure*, “Lament” tells

the story of a man growing up. As he reaches old age, he regrets his raucous life style, and pays the price for his mischievous early years. What sets this poem apart is its flamboyant metaphors and odd descriptive pattern. A narrator interjects regularly within parenthesis and describes the primary speaker as an “old ram rod,” and each stanza places the “old ram rod” within a different emotional context. The last stanza is the most significant of the poem’s five:

Now I am a man no more no more  
And a black reward for a roaring life,  
(Sighed the old ram rod, dying of strangers),  
Tidy and cursed in my dove cooed room  
I lie down thin and hear the good bells jaw-  
For, oh, my soul found a Sunday wife  
In the coal black sky and she bore angels!  
Harpies around me out of her womb!  
Chastity prays for me, piety sings,  
Innocence sweetens my last black breath,  
Modesty hides my thighs in her wings,  
And all the deadly virtues plague my death! (238)

First notice the resurgence of the “no more” device at the stanza’s beginning. The presence of the words “no more” repeated twice again suggests the disappearing reality, in this case the reality of manhood. Already this poem has an obvious nostalgic context as Thomas recycles a regular nostalgic device. More importantly, the phrase “no more” signals that the speaker longs for a past condition. The speaker is no longer a man, and mourns the loss of that reality. The speaker suffers a “black reward for a roaring life” and exists “dying of strangers.”<sup>14c</sup>

Half way through the stanza, the speaker begins an obviously nostalgic tirade, but the nostalgia of “Lament” is an amorphous reality, shifting from a positive context to a fiercely negative one. The past appears to be idyllic but quickly shifts to a nightmare: “For, oh, my soul found a sunday wife / In the coal black sky and she bore angels! /Harpies around me out of her womb!” The speaker found a “sunday wife” and she bore children. This section could easily fall into “the nostalgia of literature,” but Thomas once again complicates his nostalgia by turning the children into demons in the same instant. The children have no chance to transform, and the speaker does not indicate any passage of time. The children are simply angels one second, then “harpies around me out of her

womb.” This immediate transformation of the past suggests the same instability found in Thomas’s 1946 letter to Vernon Watkins, and the unstable past of “A Child’s Christmas in Wales.”

What separates “Lament” from both the 1946 letter and “A Child’s Christmas in Wales” is the shift of nostalgia from a positive to a negative context. “Lament” appropriately reveals a darker side of the creative power of nostalgia, taking what could be a joyous past, and twisting it into a demonic force. The poem’s date is remarkably close to Dylan Thomas’s painful, and impoverished final years; therefore, the unstable attitude for nostalgia is justifiable considering the stress Thomas suffered when he wrote it. Even the final lines of the poem betray a strange moral instability, as the “deadly virtues plague” the speaker’s death.

Despite the confusing instability, the poem still utilizes nostalgia to supplement action. The speaker’s memories are far from clichéd, and explore a suffering far beyond the simple longing for the past. Even in Thomas’s more nostalgic years, he refrains from indulging in the simple “nostalgia of literature” and continues to use his longing for the past to supplement a deeper, more profound poetic action. The final darkness of “Lament” appropriately evinces the confusion and despair of the closing stanza in “And Death Shall Have No Dominion,” and the nostalgia of the early letter to Daniel Jones concretely connects the two through the simple repeated phrase “no more.” It is sad that Thomas’s experiments with nostalgia would conclude so miserably in the poetry of a “Lament.”

Just as I stated in the previous chapter, the longing for the innocence of Eden has corrupted Thomas’s verse, transforming what should be joyous imagery of childbirth and age to nightmares of demons. Again, death seems to be the only way to once again achieve the purity of childhood as innocence “sweetens” the speaker’s last breath. The speaker looks forward to death as the only way to have solace from the horrible plagues that haunt him. The fact that this poem was written late in Thomas’s life confirms his desire to achieve the ideal through death. The action of “Lament” goes beyond the simple ability of the mind to shape and mold the past, into the speaker’s desire for death as

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<sup>14</sup> This statement gains poignancy in that Thomas suffered a painful death in America, an ocean away from his family.

liberation. Again, the seed of Dylan Thomas's poetic nostalgia hinges on the loss of innocence and the desire to reconnect with it, despite the cost.

As Dylan Thomas's poetry matured, he never lost sight of the advice given to Vernon Watkins in his adolescence. Nostalgia is a powerful poetic device when used to supplement a greater action. Even as Thomas begins to become more nostalgic in his later years, his poems use nostalgia to express creative control over the past, and the changing nature of our relationship with it. Time, may ultimately conquer the individual body, but will always "belong to man" through the power of the mind. Linda Hutcheon explored the individual human's psychological nostalgia, but she also granted a great insight into the mechanics of nostalgic poetry. The power of nostalgia in poetry is not relegated to single memories, but rather the ability to shape and mold those memories into various contexts, and Thomas's later poetry often either shows that process, or presents multiple conceptions of the past at once. Dylan Thomas never wrote within the "nostalgia of literature" but rather used nostalgia to create a remarkably new literature. Indeed, for Thomas, time was a tool well used.

*Epilogue*  
Creating Eden:  
The Future of Nostalgia and Literature

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After four full chapters devoted to Dylan Thomas's poetic use of nostalgia, it should be remarkably apparent that nostalgia is force a beyond the poet. The chronology of Thomas's life may give some insight into the consistent appearance of nostalgia as a theme not just within his works, but also within the greater literature and philosophy of the time period. World War I and II brought about a new age of destruction and death so immense that nostalgia became a kind of therapeutic response to a world tainted with the technology and ideology of mass murder. The real tragedy lies in the irrefutable fact that the past many longed for was not only an era long gone, but an imaginary construction which never actually existed. Thomas is unique in his ability to acknowledge nostalgia as a force for creative construction and not just a stagnant memory to ponder in moments of despair.

Thomas's creative nostalgia acts medicinally, but unfortunately fails to relieve him during his final days. Through nostalgia, Thomas confronts the ancient loss of some ideal state. He repeatedly engages with images of an ideal existence, often pairing it with the encroaching reality of death. Death, for Dylan Thomas, promises a return to the Garden of Eden and freedom from a world corrupted by war. Nostalgia itself is the symptom, diagnosis, and disease that elusively torment Thomas. Thomas himself attempts to speak of this pattern in a letter to Princess Caetani, but the words fail him: "When I try to explain my fear, the confused symbols grow leaden and a wooly rust creeps over the words" (Collected Letters, 844). This letter was written very late in Thomas's life, one year before his death. The very language Thomas uses to describe his fear becomes overtaken with "wooly rust." The words age before him, and the creative outlet for his nostalgia becomes choked.

Thomas's suffering may shed light upon some hidden consequences of nostalgia. It is obvious that his longing for the Garden of Eden has tormented him, and any man that values death as the only satisfaction for that desire feels unhappy with his current state. It is tragic to read Thomas's letters as they become increasingly agitated. Compare this with the heightening tension of the child/harpy imagery in the poem "Lament" and the

medicinal benefits of nostalgia will certainly be called into question. The question readers must ask themselves is simple: does the nostalgic desire to return to an idyllic state offer any positive benefits at all? Perhaps knowing of that desire will only strengthen its draw somehow leading the thinker to the early demise Thomas himself suffered.

Society has become fixated on progress, and advances in technology have allowed us to create a new idyllic myth to replace the one thought lost. We look forward to a coming time when war, disease, and famine, will be eradicated by some higher knowledge waiting to be discovered. Rather than looking back nostalgically to some lost idyllic time, we fantasize and create future possibilities where ideal life can once again be lived. The mental processes that fuel nostalgic longing for the past and idealistic projections into the future are no different. Both seek to resurrect some recreation of the Garden of Eden.

Humanity exists in a constant act of creating Eden. Dylan Thomas realized this and designed many poems around the fact. “Fern Hill,” and “Ceremony After a Fire Raid” use this imagery quite extensively, but his repeated use of childhood imagery combined with the beauty of the Welsh landscape suggest a personal connection with the garden of Eden Myth. What Thomas did not realize were the polarities of creating Eden through nostalgia, or idealistic anticipation. If a person becomes too enmeshed within nostalgia, they will become numb to their surroundings. The world will become, much like Hamlet’s famous soliloquy, a vale of decay. Life will no longer hold meaning for those who are inexorably driven from a lost, unattainable Eden. They will become just as melancholic as Dylan Thomas, seeing children as harpies, and youth forever trapped in the jaws of death.

We, in the twenty first century, deal not so much with the melancholy of nostalgia, but the euphoria of anticipation. We look forward to a fulfilled desire for Eden, losing sight of the sin that cast us from its gates. Technology gives humanity the ability to act like God, altering the genetic code, communicating across the globe in an instant, and obliterating nations in one atomic swoop. Ironically, it was the desire to become God that caused man to take the first fatal bite of knowledge. Progress may promise a reality very much like the Eden myth, but fixating upon the future is as much a mistake as becoming absorbed in melancholic nostalgia.



Nostalgia and anticipation exists in a necessary symbiosis. Anticipation for a better future provides man with the desire to move forward. It is his drive and motivation to continue past the melancholy of nostalgia. Nostalgia offers a kind of grounding morality. In the Christian myth, man lost the Garden of Eden due to the inherit flaw of pride, and our perpetual mourning for that loss reminds us of our imperfection. If society errs on the side of anticipation, it runs the risk of becoming a dystopian society, guarding some illusion of an ideal reality. Examples of these dystopias have been explored in such works as 1984 and Brave New World. If nostalgia becomes the driving force within the psyche, man runs the risk of becoming the self destructive seeker of a lost reality, and Dylan Thomas gives a perfect example of that possibility manifest within the individual.

This conflict has raged forever within the human mind, and as we begin a new millennium of possibilities, it is important to look back upon the past and understand both the desire to reconnect with the lost ideal and the need to create some form of that ideal within the future. The conflict between these opposing desires outlines literature and history. It is present within the lament of Hamlet as he chides the rotting flesh of the world. It forms the dividing lines of America's political parties as the democrat longs to create a new future of civil rights, while the Republican hopes to preserve the ideals and security of tradition. Even in consumer technology one will find a dividing line between nostalgia and progress as newer cars become more complex and difficult to maintain due to the presence of complicated computer technology within their design. Many long for the simpler era when car repair was simple enough to be performed by any individual. Now the average motorist must consult a technician trained in the use of a diagnostic machine.

The conflict between nostalgia and anticipation will one day exist within evolution. As man becomes more entwined with the technology he has created, he will begin to produce prosthetic limbs stronger and more durable than the natural appendages they are meant to replace. At what point does man cease to be man and become machine? Is progress so important that the boundary of the flesh should be cast off and abandoned? Many may wonder if man is capable of making such monumental decisions regarding his own existence. The melancholy of nostalgia alone holds the secret of man's limitations,

and if we are to step into the unknown and embrace whatever vision of Eden that reveals itself to us, we must keep the symbiosis between the two close to heart.

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