“When, like a running grave"

The Theme of Death in the Poetry of Dylan Thomas

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**Introduction**

All I know about death

Can be said in one breath:

It’s tall and it’s short

And it shouldn’t ought. (Dylan Thomas, 1937, Lycett 169)

In the poems of Dylan Thomas (1914-53) death is a dominant theme. It can be found in his work from the first adolescent imitations that he wrote for his school paper up to the last unfinished poems that he was working on at the time of his death. As a result of this, I counted that one hundred and fifty of the two hundred and fifty one of his surviving Notebook poems and eighty three of the ninety one poems\(^1\) of his *Collected Poems* are either about death itself, about writing poetry about death, or draw on the theme of death to illustrate other subject matter.\(^2\) Yet the manners in which he approached and portrayed the theme of death appear to have undergone a number of changes through time. When closely studying Thomas’s work and his approaches to death, I was confronted with a number of questions:

What moved him to write about it? Was he influenced by events that took place in his life, or was he simply following the works of other poets regarding their approaches to the theme of death? How did he change his manners of approach to this subject over the years and what were the possible reasons for him to do such? And should we perceive his poetic death statements as genuine expressions of anguish, or are they mainly artificial mechanics used to

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1 I included Thomas’s verse “Prologue” as a poem.

2 After careful consideration I decided not to consider “Not from this anger” as a death related poem. This is a poem about sexual failure and therefore about not being able to conceive new life. Even though Thomas has used this theme several times in his poetry, and in using it almost always denoted that sexual failure is (also) producing death as it is not producing life, he does not use any imagery that is directly related to the theme of death in this particular poem. The member is compared to a flower withering from lack of water and the “she “of the poem receives “a bellyful of weeds” (*CP* 90, l. 5). Although both of these can be regarded as metaphors for disablement in general, I am of opinion that regarding this poem as bearing any direct connection to the theme of death would be carrying it too far.
convey a classic topic? Even though William Tidall was certainly right when saying that Thomas lived a poet’s life and died a “poet’s death” (15), many of his poems appear to have been based on classic themes and concepts rather than on actual experiences from life. Thomas developed his own voice and style through a long process of imitating and experimenting during his adolescent years. With this distinguishing style, he created a personal cosmos out of the archetypal notions of life and death. He would use these characterising thematics of life and death and their accompanying imagery in a number of manners throughout his poetic career. He stylised them abundantly in doing so, densely packed his words with ambiguity and puns, and even went to the extent of parodying himself in the process, as the quote at the start of this introduction also illustrates. But even though they were part of his signature style, Thomas also appears to have trouble escaping them. As he explains to Glyn Jones in December 1936:

[M]y attempts to get away from those rhythmic and thematic dead ends, that physical blank wall, those wombs and full-stop worms, by all sorts of methods— [are] so many unsuccessful. But I’m not sorry that, in that Work in Progress thing, I did carry ‘certain features to their logical conclusion’. It had, I think, to be done; the result had to be, in many of the lines and verses anyway, mad parody; and I’m glad that I parodied those features so soon after making them, and that I didn’t leave it to anyone else. (SL 187)

As this letter fragment demonstrates, his parodies were thus often more than a stylistic feature: many times they were also the result of an inability to break away from established concepts, both classic as well as his own. Thomas had much knowledge of the history and techniques of poetry and as a poet this made him very conscious of his work. It is very likely
that he was aware that everything he stated in his poems had been stated many times before. It is therefore also probable that he would know what any possible critic could comment on when evaluating his work. Next to this, his excessive knowledge made him also very aware of the roles that society had attributed to poets and what was therefore expected of him in being a poet. It is well known that as a public figure he certainly played the parts that accompanied this role, even to the extent that his role as a poet became an act in itself.

The topic of this dissertation is how Dylan Thomas approached the subject of death in his poetry, how he worked with as well as against both classic and self-developed concepts about death and whether his approaches to death and the manners in which they change over the years correspond to his personal life. My first chapter is a background chapter in which I explore the possible reasons why Thomas wrote about death in the manners in which he did, by placing him and his work into his historical background. In my second chapter I will focus on how Thomas developed his own personal style that would later be known as his ‘womb-tomb thematics’ in his Notebooks between 1929 and 1934. My third chapter subsequently examines how Thomas developed these thematics further when he selected, wrote and rewrote his poems for publication in his first and second poetry volumes 18 Poems (1934) and Twenty-Five Poems (1936), and how he exhausted them and turned them into his own personal clichés during this process of development. My fourth chapter discusses how Thomas continued using and applying his signature concepts in his next volumes The Map of Love (1939), Deaths and Entrances (1946), and In Country Sleep (1952). In my conclusion I will bring all my findings together in order to reflect on them.
Chapter 1

In order to explain why so many of Dylan Thomas’s poems contain the theme of death, it is necessary to look at his general motives to write poetry. The origins of his poetic ambitions appear to lie in his childhood. He presumably began to write poetry at the age of seven or eight (Lycett 30). Unfortunately most of these writings have been lost, and what remains has never been published. Nearly all of the earliest poetry and prose that survived and has been published dates from his early teenage years. Most of these writings are modelled after the works of other poets and are experiments while searching for a personal style and voice. As Thomas himself tells in 1951 in “Poetic Manifesto”\(^3\), he spent a lot of time as a child in his father’s study reading “indiscriminately” and writing “endless imitations” of “anything [he] happened to be reading at the time” (EPW 156). It is of no doubt therefore that the young Dylan Thomas possessed a great knowledge of poetry. Since death is an often occurring topic in poetry, writing about death might have appeared to be one of the assets of being a poet.

When looking at his childhood and his adolescent years, there do not seem to be many instances that might have caused him to write about this subject apart from the influences of the works of other poets and Thomas’s personal ambition to become a poet.

It appears that even when he was still very young, Thomas already put himself under a lot of pressure when it came to writing poetry. As Maud Tells in Poet in the Making, from 1925, Thomas published some of his early poetry in his school magazine. Despite the fact that they were obvious imitations, the first poems that he published were serious attempts to write poetry. They would however soon change into “deftly turned parodies” (12). I reckon that his use of parodying even at this primal stage might already reflect an early struggle in finding his own style and voice. Since Thomas presumably already knew a great deal about poetry at that

\(^3\)“Poetic Manifesto” appears to be a written reply by the poet to questions asked to him by a research student (EPW, 154).
time it is very likely that he therefore was very conscious that, even though his poems were intended to be taken serious, they were often imitations, and that in being unable to develop his own style and subject matter at that moment he therefore took to parodying that what he could not surpass. As I will explain in my third chapter, he would in later life also use parody as a stylistic device when being unable to escape his over repeated death thematics. Since Thomas grew up in a post Great War atmosphere, it is not a great surprise that many of his earliest poems are imitations of Great War poetry. An important factor in this was Thomas’s father who was an English teacher at the local grammar school that Dylan also attended. According to Lycett, D.J. Thomas did not take part in the war himself, but many pupils and former pupils of the school where he taught had volunteered to do so. In the end, seventy-six of around nine hundred men who joined died in the war, and among them were all but one member of the school’s upper sixth form of 1917. Because of the many casualties, D.J. felt ashamed not to have taken part in the fighting. As a result of this, he took great care in honouring and remember the dead of the Great War and treated this subject with great severity in his classes. Young Dylan in turn therefore probably took to writing Great War related poetry in order to please his father, who appears to have played an important role in his life. Being an aspiring but unsuccessful poet himself, D.J. took to correcting his son’s juvenile work with extreme accuracy and strictness (33-35). It appears that the young Dylan Thomas felt a lot of pressure to write good poetry and to be known as a poet. This not only resulted in the parodies I mentioned earlier, but also in an occasional act of plagiarism. In January 1927 (at the age of twelve) he sent in a poem called “His Requiem” to the Western Mail that made it to print. The fact that this poem had been a direct copy from an edition of The Boy’s Own Paper that had been published four years earlier, was not found out until it was republished after Thomas’s death. Lycett implies that it was probably no coincidence that the poem had a war-related subject. There is also another known incident in which Dylan did
get caught when trying to submit a poem that he copied out of a children’s encyclopaedia with his own name under it to the school paper (35-37). Whether he has succeeded in doing so in more instances is still unknown today. These two occurrences of plagiarism and his use of parody are the result of the frustration of a still young boy who appears at that time to have been unable to write poetry that was sufficient enough to his own established high standards. This demonstrates how serious Thomas appears to have verged on poetry and on being a good poet, even at this early age.

The four surviving manuscript exercise books, or ‘Notebooks’, that Thomas kept between April 1930 and April 1934, demonstrate the developments that his poetry underwent as he tried to create his own poetic style. As he explained in a letter to Charles Fisher in February 1935:

[M]y 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 the developing poem into an exercise book; and, when it is completed, I type it out. (SL 152)

Even though later in his life Thomas would regard his Notebooks poems as first drafts and would treasure them as reminders of his industrious adolescent years and as sources of inspiration for new poems (Maud 9-10), he referred to them as “exercise books” in 1935, and this is also how we should view them. He started his first notebook at the age of fifteen and wrote down his last known notebook poem at nineteen. When keeping his school paper war poems in mind, it is remarkable that, apart from an occasional reference, the Notebooks do not appear to have much war related subject matter or imagery at all. The most likely
explanation for this change is probably that his Notebooks were originally intended for personal and private use only and therefore did not have to contain any poetry intended to be shown to an overbearing father. As Maud states, the poems in his Notebooks were not intended to end up in the school magazine, but to write down “what was in him” (11). To a great extend the poems are imitations and experiments with words and poetic styles in between which Thomas is trying to find his own voice and style. However, when placing all the existing Notebook poems into chronological order it becomes apparent that Thomas’s numerous craftings undeniably underwent a number of processes in development that resulted into the poetic style and subject matter that were to be characteristic of 18 Poems and Twenty-five Poems. Up to 1939 Thomas often went back to his Notebooks for inspiration and reworked many of the poems that were in there. In effect, more than forty of the ninety poems that make up Collected Poems find their origin in the period 1929-34 (Ferris 6). I do not fully agree with Maud’s assumption that since much of the poetry published up to his twenty sixth year was in fact a reworking of his adolescent Notebook Poems, Thomas’s [poetic] development was confounded (PitM 10). Even though it is certainly true that in most of the poems in his first two volumes Thomas continually uses the same underlying topic that he had developed in his Notebooks, closer examination shows the poems that he had written after his Notebooks are notably different in style, and that their style also appears to change over time. Furthermore, many of the Notebook poems that he has reworked for these two volumes have also undergone adjustments to correspond to these changes in style.

Thomas’s poetic strength lay for the most part in the high level of craftsmanship that his poems contained. His primary and most important ambition to become a poet appears to have lain in the fact that he simply loved working with words:

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4. Thomas sold the four Notebooks in April 1941 when he was in need of money after having carefully balanced any possible use of them in the future against their immediate financial gain (Maud, PitM 273).
I wanted to write poetry in the beginning because I had fallen in love with
words. [...] I knew, in fact, that I must be a writer of words, and
nothing else. The first thing was to feel and know their sound and substance;
what I was going to do with those words, what use I was going to make of
them, what I was going to say through them, would come later. [...] What I
like to do is to treat words as a craftsman does his wood or stone or what-have-
you, to hew, carve, mould, coil, polish and plane them into patterns, sequences,
sculptures, fugues of sound expressing some lyrical impulse, some spiritual
doubt or conviction, some dimly realised truth I must try to reach and
realise. (‘Poetic Manifesto’, EPW 154-56)

When writing poetry, Thomas could work on a single poem, or even on a single sentence of a
poem, for lengths of time with extreme accuracy. He would spend months, if not sometimes
years, working on them and of some of his poems hundreds of working sheets have survived.
Next to his love for the sound of words, Thomas also enjoyed applying several poetic
techniques to them:

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, allusion, paronomasia, 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 convulsions of words, the inventions and contrivances, are all
part of the joy that is part of the painful, voluntary work. (158-59)
When it came to the subject of death, it was therefore also the intensity in which it was expressed that stood out, and not the underlying theme itself. The underlying themes of most, if not all, of Thomas’s poems concerning the subject of death were not new, and I am of opinion that even though it had always been Thomas aim to become a poet, it never has been Thomas’s aim to be a renewing poet as far as underlying subject matter was concerned. His subject matter is in fact mostly a new rendering of classic assumptions, and the underlying themes that he conveys are simple and repetitive.

The main concept that comes forward when reading his poems that relate to the subject of death is ‘mutability’: the notion that death and the process of dying are already present in life and that life therefore is a doomed subject to change and decay. This is a classic concept that was already mentioned in the works of ancient Greek philosophers. In the 5th century B.C, Anaximander stated that when with the passing of time entities perish, they go back into the limitless unknown where they also originated from. Life could thus even be perceived as a formation that originated from death for a short period of time before returning back to it. Heraclites observed that all living beings are part of this process and Socrates contemplated that our souls are contaminated with our mutable bodies during the short period in which we are in between limitless and eternal death, and that we are therefore incapable of knowing absolute truth until we have died. Platonism continued with the assertion that life and death are accordingly inseparable. The ancient Greek were also aware of the fact that, since death is present from birth, death must therefore also be present in the sexual intercourse that denotes birth. This paradox of procreation would later be observed by the early Christians who contemplated that the sin of mankind, which was caused by the Fall, implied the entrance of death and mutability. Death should therefore be compensated by procreation, in doing this replacing the deaths that have occurred with new lives that were subject to dying. The topic of mutability was approached with an intensified preoccupation in early modern western culture.
in the works of writers as Shakespeare, Donne, Blake, and Shelly. In their works, the image of the rose became an often recalled metaphor or symbol for the notion that the process of withering and decay is present in everybody. Furthermore, they contemplated that death was also present in sexual ecstasy since these feelings of desire often resulted in death-giving procreation. This topic was continued by Freud in 1921 who discussed the notion of death being present in life and sexuality in The Ego and the Id (Dollimore 5-6, 9, 11, 44, 68-69, 135-45, 187). Even though Thomas might not have been familiar with the precise history of the theme of death in western culture, he was certainly familiar with this concept, and all of the notions that I presented here can, in fact, be found in his poems. Thomas based many of his Notebook poems and the poems of his first two volumes on the works of the 17th century metaphysical poets. It had, in fact, been T.S. Eliot who at that time had incited poets to appraise the 17th century, thus bringing the metaphysical poets back into poetic fashion (Tindall 23). What was renewing however, were the manner in which he approached these classic notions and the imagery that he developed to embody them. According to Tindall, Thomas “agreed to call [this style of writing] his ‘womb-tomb period’” (37). In his womb-tomb poems, Thomas put the emphasis of the concept of mutability in the notion that death was present in sex and conception. He illustrated this topic with highly organic and especially physical imagery, and with these he often conveyed explicitly sexual depictions that he frequently combined with Biblical imagery. In doing so, he created a personal cosmos of life and death that was perceived from out of his own body:

I dump the waxlights in your tower dome.
Joy is the knock of dust, Cadaver’s shoot
Of bud of Adam through his boxy shift,
Love’s twilit nation and the skull of state,
Sir, is your doom. (“When, like a running grave”, CP 19, l. 36-40)

With these womb-tomb poems Thomas introduced himself to the London public. They appealed to an audience that had become tired with Modernism and with the political and moral issues of the works of poets such as W.H. Auden and that embraced Anglo-Welsh writing and anything else that was perceived as being renewing (Mathias 91). From 1933 he managed to get several of his poems and stories published in various newspapers and magazines. Although the poems that Thomas got published delivered him a number of responses, not all of these were positive. Among them were also various comments or even complaints about the strange and often horrifying imagery and the sexual puns that his poems contained. A poem that received many complaints was “Light breaks where no sun shines”, which was published in The Listener. In a letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson, written on 25 April 1934, Thomas discusses one of the fragments that had caused the offence: “Nor fenced, nor staked, the gushers of the sky/ Spout to the rod divining in a smile/ The oil of tears” (CP 24, l. 16-18). “The little smut-hounds thought I was writing a copulatory anthem. In reality, of course, it was a metaphysical image of rain & grief. [...] All my denials for obscenity were disregarded. Jesus, what are we up against, Pam?” (SL 109-10). Whether he was completely honest when stating this remains to be questioned. It is very likely that Thomas deliberately chose to use this type of imagery when he developed his work. The high amount of phallic references that the poems of his womb-tomb period contain might certainly suggest such contemplation. It is of no doubt that it drew the audience’s attention. Although we must of course also not disregard the fact that Thomas was a very skilled poet whose poems, as I stated before, were highly crafted and therefore also stood out for their great poetic qualities. Thomas’s first volume of poetry became published through winning the bi-annual award for submitting the best work of the Poets’ Corner in the London newspaper The Sunday Referee
on 22 April 1934 (SL 109). When looking at the poems of *18 Poems*, it is appears that he was determined to use his womb-tomb theme and its accompanying organic imagery as his signature style. The thirteen poems that Thomas selected – and if necessary improved - from his Notebook poems, all came from his last Notebook (the *August 1933 Notebook*) and were therefore most developed in this style. Next to these, he also wrote five new poems between April and November 1934 that also shared this style. He opened his volume with “I see the boys of summer”, written down in the *August 1933 Notebook* in April 1934 and reworked to its final draft in May 1934 (Maud, *PitM* 333):

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I see the boys of summer in their ruin
Lay the gold tithings barren,
Setting no store by harvest, freeze the soils;
There in their heat the winter floods
Of frozen loves they fetch their girls,
And drown the cargoed apples in their tides. (CP 1, 1 1-6)
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This poem contains many of the characteristics that Thomas wanted his work to be known for: It has the topic of mutability and emphasises the notion that death is also present in sex was and that conception is thus a paradox, which he depicts with organic and sexually denoting imagery that frequently bears contradicting connotations (as for example “heat” and “winter” in line 4), and puns (as “winter pulls” in line 29).

Thomas’s determination to become a poet not only had its effect on his poetry, but also on his public behaviour. When looking at Thomas’s letters and the recollections of his life it appears that, during his writing career, he created a poetic character out of himself to accompany his poems. Particularly the letters that he wrote at the time when he was writing in
his womb-tomb style seem to represent an, in my opinion rather forced, effort to reflect the sentiment of his poems:

Life passes the windows, and I hate it more minute by minute. [...] I see the unborn children struggling up the hill in their mothers, beating on the jailing slab of the womb, little realising what a smugger prison they wish to leap into[.]  (To Pamela Hansford Johnson, 15 April 1934, SL 102-03)

Thomas sometimes carried this act to extremes. About six months before this letter, he had told Pamela Hansford Johnson that he had been diagnosed with tuberculosis and had only four years to live:

Four years, my sweet. 1340 days & nights, and thank you for the optimistic remarks. I don’t believe it either, but then it would be very odd if I did. You should hear me cough, though — a most pleasing sound, exactly like a sea-lion peeved. (11 November 1934, 62)

According to Fitzgibbon, all of his Swansea friends remembered him to be very healthy at that time, yet in the meanwhile Thomas continued to spread this story of his impending death in London (57-58). Even though Thomas was asthmatic and a heavy smoker and therefore had chest problems (Lycett 95), this acclaimed condition was to all likeliness a lie. A post mortem autopsy in 1953 revealed that Thomas’s lungs, though badly damaged, did not bear any signs of possible tuberculosis, neither did he appear to have had much his later in life acclaimed cirrhosis of the liver (438). It is likely that he had come across the concept of the poet as an ill, morbid and dying character at school or when studying the diverse works of poetry that
were available in his father’s study, and had started to behave accordingly. As his wife would later state in an interview:

He wanted to be pale and dying all the time, and he wanted to be long and sickly and green, and all that he tried in effect because he was square and small and not like the conventional idea of a poet at all. (Caitlin Thomas, qtd. in Williams 0:53-1:04)

Thomas’s overabundant use of alcohol that he is still greatly known for today probably initially started for this same reason. In his teens, drinking was probably a manner to rebel against provincialism. Beer was sin preached against in chapels. Pamela Hansford Johnson would later recall that he would sometimes even pretend to be drunk when running into an acquaintance (Ferris 67), thus appearing to live the bohemian lifestyle that was expected of an artist. Although in later years his use of alcohol appears to have genuinely gotten out of hand. Still, despite the fact that “drink was deeply woven into his life”, Ferris questions whether Thomas was a genuine alcoholic: “The hard-drinking poet was so much a part of the picture of himself that he had sought to project since adolescence, that when and if he crossed into alcoholism, the borderline was heavily obscured” (199-200). Alcoholic or not, together with his morbid outlook on life, the heavy drinking and its accompanying ill mannerism certainly fitted a poet’s lifestyle, and particularly when touring in the United States between 1950 and 1953 this certainly contributed to his fame. Because of Thomas’s poetic act it is often difficult to distinguish the real Thomas and his opinion, and this can often be troubling when looking at his poetry. If the subject of Thomas’s poems is Dylan Thomas, as Tindall states (24), which Dylan Thomas is it? I reckon that this might more often be Dylan Thomas the Poet rather than Dylan Thomas the man. And this is something that we should certainly keep in mind.
The reason for Dylan Thomas to incorporate the subject of death in so many of his poems might have lain in the simple fact that he wanted to write poetry and death was one of poetry’s main themes. His ambition to become a poet primarily originated from his love for words, and for Thomas the words themselves were often more important than what he would say through them. His underlying themes were therefore not renewing, neither was this his intention. Within the theme of death, Thomas made use of classic concepts which he depicted in a highly stylised and frequently overtly sexual manner. Next to this he also adapted the morbid and self-destructive lifestyle that he expected a poet to live. His determination to write good poetry and to be regarded as a poet appears to have been Thomas’s driving forces throughout his life. As a result of this, many of the sentiments that he expresses in his poems might simply be the sentiments that he expected a poet to express. And although this is a fact that is easily overlooked, it is something that in my opinion should be remembered when looking at his poems.
Chapter 2

When studying Thomas’s poems in chronological order, it becomes clear that a great part of the poetic development that he made towards and within his signature thematics of life and death occurred in the four year period that he was working on his Notebook poems. Between April 1930 and April 1934 he developed his signature thematics by starting with imitating and experimenting with various styles and forms of poetry. With the passing of time, the theme of mutability gradually started to dominate his poems, while within this concept he narrowed his focus by repeatedly emphasising the notion that death is present in sex and conception.

Even though the 1930 Notebook appears to contain a number of imitated and inspired styles, Imagism is the one that comes forward most. The first poems of the Notebook appear to be descriptive and pensive, often following in the Imagists’ footsteps, although in using this style Thomas’s poems also start to depict the theme of mutability. A good example of this is poem 14, which first six lines, as Maud points out, are “hard to distinguish” from those of Richard Aldington and Sacheverell Sitwell, two Imagist poets whom the adolescent Dylan Thomas said to admire (PitM 13):

My love is deep night
Caught from the tops of towers,
A pomp of delicious light
Snared under the tips of each stalk,
Dew balanced to perfection
On the grass delicate beyond water. (66-67, l. 1-6)
When being perceived as an Imagist poem, the first line simply states that the speaker loves the night after which the poem depicts its manifestation in nature in order to convey its ambience (Carr 544). But there are more manners in which this line can be understood. Read in another way, “deep night” in being the end of the day, is a metaphor for the end of life and thus a metaphor for death. Read in this manner, the speaker states that his “love” (here being his beloved one) by comparing her to night is also death in being mortal and therefore with the passing of time subject to the process of ageing that leads towards death. Another manner to interpret this line is that “love” represents the speaker’s feelings of love that are dead in being subject to time’s process of withering and decay. As the speaker continues, these underlying ambiguities become more apparent:

But beauty is a very old friend,
And in the coming and going of the seasons
It is lifted to a high pinnacle
So that we may admire it from a distance,
Not touching it with our cruel fingers
For they might break it into pieces. (67, l. 7-12)

The concept of beauty is ancient and eternal, but in real life beauty is fragile and decays with the passing of time. From our mutable perspective it can thus only be captured in an abstract form. The speaker concludes that loving each other, or rather making love to one another, is nothing more than a vain attempt to deny this process of decay that leads towards death:

We are too beautiful to die;
All our life is bound to the green trees,
And in the citern evening
The darkness is insistent,
Loading a pleasure of love upon us
In its great desire to overcome. (67-68, l. 33-38)

“Green” is a classic metaphor for youth that Thomas frequently uses in his work. Having all life “bound to the green trees” might be interpreted as the fact that all lives revolve around the short amount of time in which they are young and fertile. The use of the word “bound” might even imply that they are not only dependent on this period of youth and fertility, which in nature (and therefore also in human nature) is necessary for reproduction, but also that this process is inescapable. Thomas emphasises this notion by continuing that the “darkness”, death, “is insistent”, or rather demanding, either for attention or simply “to overcome”. “[I]n the citern evening” might be explained as a metaphor for the awareness that death approaching is a topic that is often depicted in song or in poetry. The “great desire to overcome” can refer to the insisting darkness as well as to the “pleasure of love”. Love is a cunning device used by darkness, or death, “to overcome”, meaning here to conquer life. Life reproduces itself by the act of love, or sex. Death desires to conquer life, and therefore having life reproducing itself might be a method that death uses to continue its practice. The “pleasure of love” is thus a vain attempt (“desire”) to conquer (“overcome”) death by reproducing new life. Even though the poem at fist appears to begin as an Imagist’s depiction of night, Thomas elevated the use of this style and added depth and meaning behind the words. It seems that his first manner to combine Imagism with the theme of death was generally achieved by denoting how transposing an image to verse immortalised that image’s underlying abstract concept, juxtaposing these two states of being at the same time. The role of the poet and the act of writing, and especially writing in the style of the Imagists, is when
taken quite literally capturing an image by putting it into verse and hereby evoking the experience (Carr 544). But in capturing an image, it also becomes eternalised. Whereas the actual matter that is described in the poem will decay with the passing of time, its captured image will remain. At a later stage in the 1930 Notebook, the image that Thomas tries to capture in his poems often becomes the passing of time itself:

I know this vicious minute’s hour;
It is a sour motion in the blood,
That, like a tree, has roots in you,
And buds in you. (Poem 30, PitM 85, l. 1-4)

The passing of time is presented as “vicious” and as a “sour motion” that ages a body and therefore leads it to its death. By comparing it to a tree that “roots” and “buds”, Thomas notes that this is a natural process that takes place in everything, which anchors us down and blooms in us. The “roots” and “buds” might also refer to the ancestors and offspring that are also subjects to the passing of time, or even suggest that death is already present at birth.

Towards the end of the Notebook, this notion has become one of the main topics in Thomas’s poems. These poems are generally contemplative and observant in tone. The speaker is aware that time passes and that death is thus advancing, but apart from an occasional conclusion that life must therefore be enjoyed before it is over he simply observes that this process is present around him and within him:

Minutes are mine
I could devote to other things.
Stop has no minutes,
But I go or die. (86, l. 24-27)

Although in the 1930-1932 Notebook Thomas continues to write poems about the passing of time towards death, the 17\textsuperscript{th} century metaphysics gradually start to replace the Imagists as his main influence within this topic, subsequently changing the mode of his poems from being overtly meditative to more expressive, emphasising death’s presence in sex and in the womb. His poems develop a more sober tone than they previously contained and therefore become cruder in language:

This puss runs deep.

There’s poison in your red wine, drinker,

Which spreads down to the dregs

Leaving a corrupted vein of colour,

Sawdust beneath the skirts; (Poem XLVIX, 144, l. 13-17)

The “vicious” passing of time that was a “sour motion in the blood” from 1930 Notebook poem 30, has now become deep running “puss” and “poison” which is present in everything and therefore also in the “red wine”, which might represent the joys of life and the fruits of nature. It “spreads down to the dregs”, which are not only the small sediment particles in the wine but also the least valuable part in anything, hereby again emphasising the omnipresence of death. Death is present in sex itself, as line 17 states. It seems that whereas most of Thomas’s earliest poems appear to have the positive underlying motif to enjoy life before it is over, this motif becomes rarer in the 1930-1932 Notebook, in which most poems simply have the negative underlying motif that everything ends with death. Emphasising the notion that
death was already present in the womb, and therefore even before the womb in sex itself, became a topic in itself which Thomas began with poem XXXVI:

The womb and the woman’s grave  
Lie near, the thumb and thread  
Are gone – no labour’ll thrive  
Which asketh not from God  
Some strength no labour has.  
Womb was for life she gave,  
And woman was;  
Grave was for death she hath.  
She takes and she returns  
From God and then to God,  
Gives what her body had  
And takes a little death from him.  
Not one man can. (135, l.1-13)

Since a woman gives life by giving birth, and life is a process towards death, she gives death as well. Her womb is therefore also a tomb. By giving life, a woman carries out the work of God who also has the power to give and take life, and even takes part of the work from him. This womb-tomb paradox seems to have been inspired by the poems of John Donne of whom, as Tindall explains, Thomas knew the more familiar poems together with his last sermon “Death’s Duel” (22-23). The latter probably served as an underlying source: “We have a winding sheet in our mother’s womb, which grows with us from our conception, and we come out into the world wound up in that winding sheet, for we come to seek a grave” (Donne
This topic becomes increasingly dominant throughout the rest of the 1930-1932 Notebook. Although Thomas started it in an explaining and descriptive manner, it soon adapted the grim tone of his other poems. Poem XLVI, titled “Written for a personal epitaph”, was written about a month after poem XXXVI:

Feeding the worm
Who do I blame
Because laid down
At last by time,
Here under the earth with girl and thief,
Who do I blame?
Mother I blame
Whose loving crime
Moulded my form
Within her womb,
Who gave me life and then the grave,
Mother I blame.
Here is her labour’s end,
Death limb and mind,
All love and sweat
Gone now to rot.
I am man’s reply to every question,
His aim and destination. (PitM 142, 1-18)
Both poems speak of “labour” which does not only refer to the act of going into labour and hereby giving life but also to the labour as an act of creating a life. This creation is referred to as a “loving crime”: the crime of sending someone towards death by creating him when making love. From the grave, the poetic persona blames his mother for giving life to him. Being born and therefore being subject to dying, he concludes, is a destiny that awaits everyone.

Whereas Thomas’s previous notebooks also contained several poems that did not concern the theme of death, the February 1933 Notebook is almost completely focussed on it. Next to the fact that his poems are now overtly sober in tone, Thomas also develops organic, or rather physical, imagery to convey his subject matter:

“Find meat on bones that soon have none
And drink in the two milked crags;
Eat till all’s gone, drink to the dregs
Before the waxred breasts are hags
And the limbs are worn.
Disturb no winding sheets, my son,
But when the [fodder’s] cold as stone
Then hang a ram rose over the rags.

[...]

Rebel against the flesh and bone,
The seed and blood, the jailing skin,
And the maggot no man can slay. (Forty Six, 214, 1-16)
Finding “meat” should not only be interpreted in the literal sense of the word but moreover be regarded as a sexual denotation. We must “rebel” against the passing of time by having sex, and therefore reproducing life, until death catches up (“disturb no winding sheets”) (Maud 92). As “the jailing skin” implies, man is held prison within his own body that cannot escape the process of ageing and dying. The concept of the body and its limitations and of perceiving the mutable world from one’s own body becomes one of the main features of Thomas’s womb-tomb thematics. A letter that Thomas sent to Trevor Hughes in January 1933 explains his philosophy behind this:

   Where the true artist differs from his fellows is that [the outer world] is not the only world. He has inner splendour [...]. The inner and outer places are not, I admit, entirely separate. Suffering colours the inner places, and probably adds beauty to them. So does happiness. [...] My poems rarely contain any of it. That is why they are not satisfactory to me. Most of them are outer poems. [...] Perhaps the greatest works of art are those that reconcile, perfectly, inner and outer. (SL 10)

The eternal and all-embracing process of ageing and decay that ends with death, which Thomas first illustrated with imagery from nature, is now conceived out of the organic cosmos of the body. As Maud states, “it seems that [...] with poem Forty Six [...] [Thomas] had really begun to express lyrically his philosophy, bringing the living inner world successfully onto the living page” (PitM 27). Still, these poems only occur occasionally at first, since Thomas was still experimenting with concepts and theses regarding the theme of

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5 Furthermore, Maud implies that this line also refers to drawing the line at necrophilia (WHtOWGM? 93).
death. A good example of another kind of poem that was written around the same period of time is “And death shall have no dominion” (24-25):

And death shall have no dominion.
Under green shiftings of the sea
Man shall [lie] long but shall not die,
And under the white darkness of the snow;
Twisting on racks when sinews give way,
Strapped to a wheel, yet he shall not break;
[...]
split all ends up, he shan’t crack;
And death shall have no dominion. (Twenty Three, 187, l. 12-21)

Although death is again portrayed as a cruel actor whose process of physical decay accompanies the passing of time —here described as a torture sequence—, this poem does not convey the notion that this process is present in sex or in the womb. Furthermore it implies that death can be withstood, therefore contradicting what Thomas stated in the poems that I mentioned earlier.

The *August 1933 Notebook* shows a further development of the organic womb-tomb poems. Thomas now went completely inward and put the emphases on the fact that death started in conception by literally turning it into the poem’s main topic:

Before I knocked and flesh let enter,
With liquid hands tapped on the womb,
I was shapeless as the water
That shaped the Jordan near my home,
Was the brother to Mnetha’s daughter
And sister to the fathering worm. (Seven, 231, l. 1-6)

Although the narrator has not even entered the womb he, or rather it, is already part of the organic cosmos of life and death. Maud suggests that “Mnetha” might be an anagram of ‘the man’ (WHtOWGM? 66). Being a brother to the daughter of the man suggests that the narrator is not human yet, but is already related to it. The narrator is also related to “the fathering worm” which could refer to the phallus and therefore to life giving semen, as well as to death’s underlying presence. “As yet ungotten, I did suffer” (PitM 232, l. 19), the narrator continues, anticipating its own life and its process towards death:

My throat knew thirst before the structure
Of skin and vein around the well
Where words and water make a mixture
Unfailing till the blood runs foul;
My heart knew love, my belly hunger,
I smelt the maggot in my stool. (232, l. 31-36)

As the poem proceeds the narrator identifies himself as Christ:

I, born of flesh and ghost was neither
A ghost or man, but mortal ghost
And I was struck down by death’s feather.
I was 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 armbour [sic],
And double-crossed his mother’s womb. (232-33, l. 43-56)

Thomas appears to emphasise the notion that even Christ was part of the organic cosmos. The Christ narrator is a “mortal ghost”. This not only indicates that he was the human (“mortal”) son of God (“ghost”) but also that the narrator was already mortal before he was formed. The last stanza is difficult to interpret. Maud suggests:

I take it that, rather than allowing her a normal son, God gave the Virgin Mary two crosses to bear, the pain of giving birth and the cruelty of Cavalry. The ‘[h]im’ of this last stanza will be the Son-of-God Christ, who appropriated the mortal Christ’s body for God’s purposes. The Virgin Mary is further double-crossed by a sort of deception involved in having to give birth to this double, the mortal son and the Heavenly son. (WHtOWGM? 68)

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6 Lycett states that Thomas’s portrayal of Christ might have been inspired by the discussions he had with Bert Trick, a local shopkeeper, who was “an unusual character, a self-thought radical with a quasi-religious view of the perfectibility of man”. He and Thomas became friends around spring 1932 and spent many evenings discussing various subjects. “Under Tricks influence Dylan began to see Jesus Christ as an archetypal figure of compassion, who had tried, as he was doing, to reconcile the worlds of the flesh and the spirit” (81-84).
From the February 1933 Notebook, Thomas’s use of Christian imagery starts to increase. This does not imply however that Thomas intended his poems to be Christian. Moreover his use of the imagery appears to serve merely to illustrate the processes of his organic cosmos out of which Thomas is developing a “personal religion” (Maud, *PitM* 25). This religion or philosophy perceives the cosmos from the body. The process of death that already takes place in life is therefore portrayed in the combination of physical imagery that represents the body and Christian imagery to represent the cosmic size and significance of it. Next to overtly physical and sexual poems, Thomas also developed a style of poetry that Maud describes as “Process Poems”:

> [The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
> Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
> Is my destroyer.
> And I am dumb to tell the eaten rose
> How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm
> And dumb to holla thunder in the skies
> How at my cloths flies the same central [storm].]
> My youth is bent by the same wintry fever. (Twenty Three, 249, 1-7)

These poems appear to focus solely on the topic of the universal process that drives life towards death by illustrating it in comparing its working in the body by ageing with the forces in nature. They appear to be intended as contemplations and morals rather than to be overtly grim and frightening (Maud 38). In effect, “How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm”—denoting both the literal worm in the winding sheet and the phallus between the sheets in
sexual intercourse— is not only intended to be a vulgar pun but also again emphasises the classic paradox: conceiving life is also conceiving death.

Even though Thomas approached and portrayed the theme of death in many ways in the process of imitating and experimenting within his Notebook poems, the concept of mutability came forward the most, and with the passing of time it gradually turned into his main theme. But over the course of the four years in which the Notebooks were composed, the manner in which he conveyed this theme underwent significant changes. Although Thomas started in using the theme of mutability in some of his contemplating Imagists’ appearing poems, in which he depicted it’s manifestation in the world, he soon changed the tone of his poems from being overtly meditative to increasingly sentimental. Next to this, he also put the emphasis within the theme of mutability on the notion that death is present in sex and conception, and together with the growing emphasis on this point of view, he developed a type of imagery that became increasingly organic. These poetic developments lead to Thomas’s characterising womb-tomb style, which he would continue to engage in his poems throughout his writing career.
Chapter 3

Since many of the poems in Thomas’s first two volumes 18 Poems and Twenty-five Poems are in fact reworked Notebook poems, their subject matter and underlying themes are consistent with one another. Their style and use of imagery to convey these themes, however, is often slightly different.

As I explained in chapter 1, Thomas only went back to the August 1933 Notebook when selecting and reworking his thirteen notebook poems for publication, and also wrote five new poems in the same style. For Twenty-Five poems, he reworked 18 notebook poems that he selected from the 1930-1932 Notebook, the February 1933 Notebook, and the August 1933 Notebook, and also wrote seven new ones. Most of the poems in his first and second volumes are therefore in essence alike. The main difference is that both his new poems as well as several of his reworked Notebook poems became increasingly complex as time progressed.

When comparing the notebook poems to the poems in 18 Poems (1934), I noticed that almost all the poems of the latter contain more physical and especially more sexual imagery, for which the poems appear either to have been selected for, or written or rewritten with. Next to this, his use of this physical and sexual imagery becomes more intricate as time passes. But even though his poems become more complex in their appearance, their underlying theme remains unchanged. The notion that death is present in sex, and the question whether sex is therefore either overcoming death or creating more death, are still the main topics. A good example of this is “When like a running grave” which was the last of the new poems that Thomas wrote for publication in 18 Poems:

When, like a running grave, time tracks you down,
Your calm and cuddled is a scythe of hairs,
Love in her gear is slowly through the house,
Up naked stairs, a turtle in a hearse,
Hauled to the dome,

[...]

Deliver me, my masters, head and heart,
Heart of Cadaver's candle waxes thin,
When blood, spade-handed, and the logic time
Drive children up like bruises to the thumb,
From maid and head, (CP 18, l. 1-15)

Time is personified and compared to a hounding (“running”) grave. It tracks us down and changes the one we love, either our baby or our lover, into the both terrifying and odd image of a “scythe of hairs”, which, as Maud implies, might symbolise death or father time. Whereas love first was a turtle dove, it has now changed into a “turtle in a hearse” – in having become old, unattractive, cold, and death - that is elevated to heaven (WHtOWGM? 288). Because of this, the speaker fears the love that both his heart and head also desire at the same time (Tindall, 64). Possibly parodying Psalm 59:1 “Deliver me from mine enemies” (King James Bible 670) he therefore asks to be delivered from this urge for (physical) love since “Cadaver’s candle waxes thin”, indicating that the phallus and possible offspring formed by its ejaculated semen are not only death-bringing, but also mortal themselves. Everything that is stated in this fragment has been stated in many earlier written poems before. It is, for example, the same “rub that tickles” in the August 1933 Notebook closing poem Forty One (Maud, PitM 272, l. 43) that Thomas also revised for 18 Poems as “If I were tickled by the
rub of love” (Tindall 64; Maud 334). The difference is that “When, like a running grave” has been enhanced with even more exceeding (and because of this also even more complicated) imagery that enables Thomas to add more puzzling layers onto his topic of inevitable mortality. The undeniable pun lies in the words “maid and head” which do not only separately represent maid and phallus, therefore denoting sexual intercourse when being combined, but which can also can be attached to one another to indicate ‘maidenhead’. Tindall states that the “calm and cuddled” that is “hauled to the dome” might also be another phallic symbol, either signifying sexual intercourse or masturbation, the dome in the initial interpretation being a vagina or womb (65), and in the latter possibly a depiction of ejaculation that is aroused by masturbation that is therefore not life bringing and goes straight up to heaven. The speaker thus also appears to ask his heart and head to be delivered from maidenhead, fearing that he never will be able to experience the sexual encounters that he both desires and dreads. Furthermore, the reason why he wants to be delivered of either sexual intercourse or his virginity is also ambiguous:

For, Sunday faced, with dusters in my glove,
Chaste and the chaser, man with the cockshut eye,
I, that time’s jacket or the coat of ice
May fail to fasten with a virgin o
In the straight grave,

Stride through Cadaver’s country in my force,
My pickbrain masters morsing on the stone
Despair of blood, faith in the maiden’s slime,
Halt among eunuchs, and the nitric stain
On fork and face, (CP 18, l. 16-25)

It is clear that Thomas probably intended his poem to be interpreted in various manners: On the one hand death, here portrayed as the “jacket” of time, might not be able to “fasten” itself when its buttons are “virgin o[s]” (Tindall 65), hereby possibly denoting that death might be unable to multiply itself when the speaker does not reproduce himself through sexual intercourse, whereas on the other hand the “o” might signify zero, implying a non-virgin or even no virgins at all, thus implying that death might not be able to conquer life as long as it reproduces itself. The speaker’s “force’ in which he strides through death’s domain might therefore be -and is probably also intended to be- both having sexual intercourse as well as not having sexual intercourse, which is of course a paradox. Despite its complicated imagery and its ambiguous layers of interpretation this poem is once more an example of the notion that conquering death by sex is nothing more than a vain attempt. The “nitric stain” that contaminates both phallus (“fork”) and face might therefore not only refer to the sin of having sex, as Tindal implies (66), but is probably also yet another denotation of what Thomas had also described as the “sour motion in the blood” that “buds in you” in poem 30 of his 1930 Notebook (PitM 85, l. 2-4), or as the deep running “puss” that leaves “[s]awdust beneath the skirts” in poem XLVIX of the 1930-1932 Notebook (44, l. 13-17), and in many other words. The underlying theme has remained unchanged since his early notebooks, but Thomas’s use of imagery to represent it has become dense with symbolism and ambiguity, although there also seems to be an increase in the tongue-in-cheek attitude that is projected onto it.

Thomas carried on this density when writing new poems for his second volume Twenty-five Poems (1936) until, as Fitzgibbon also points out, this reached its climax with his sonnet sequence “Altarwise by Owl-light” (The Life of Dylan Thomas 88), that he finished in September 1935 (Lycett 138-40):
Death is all metaphors, shape in one history;
The child that sucketh long is shooting up,
The planet-ducted pelican of circles
Weans on an artery the genders strip;
Child of the short spark in a shapeless country
Soon sets alight a long stick from the cradle;  (Sonnet II, CP 71, l. 1-6)

A yet unformed and short living child - in contrast to its coming eternal death- will soon reproduce life itself by setting “alight a long stick”, here again denoting an ejaculating phallus, and therefore also reproduce the inevitable death that is attached to it (l. 5-6). In lines 2-4, Thomas compares the child that sucks life and death out of his ancestors by receiving it from them to the pelican which, as Tindall explains, nurtures its young on its own blood and gets killed in doing so (140). By denoting the pelican as “planet-ducted” Thomas implies that the life and death giving process of sexual intercourse, that is the result of the stripping genders, is part of the cosmos’s eternal “circles”. Lycett is certainly correct when stating that at this point Thomas’s “bluff seventeenth-century metaphysics had given way to a more compassionate view of nature which attained its highest manifestation, a state akin to the innocence of childhood, in Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross” (139). In contrast to earlier poems that also spoke of the cosmic process of death that is already present in life, he now no longer confined his outlook on this process from out of the human physics, but went more outward again and also portrayed it in nature, in Biblical imagery, and in the contemporary world around him, as a fragment from sonnet III exemplifies:
First there was the lamb on knocking knees
and three dead seasons on a climbing grave
That Adam's wether in the flock of horns,
Butt of the tree-tailed worm that mounted Eve,
Horned down with skullfoot and the skull of toes
On thunderous pavements in the garden of time;
Rip of the vaults, I took my marrow-ladle
Out of the wrinkled undertaker's van, (CP 72, sonnet III, 1-8)

Thomas here uses sheep as metaphors for different phases in life. First we are young like the lamb after we have been formed in the womb (“a climbing grave”) for nine months (“three dead seasons”), Tindall implies that the “knocking knees” of the lamb might also indicate fear and furthermore indicate to its “knocking to get out [of the womb]” The wether that leads the flock is Adam’s, and Adam is man’s ancestor. Having the fertile (“horned”) flock lead by a castrated ancestor might therefore once again imply that we kill our ancestors by getting our lives and deaths from them (Tindall 141-42), as with the pelican and his offspring from sonnet II. This eternal process of life and death is the result (“butt”) of the sin of mankind, here portrayed as “the tree-tailed worm that mounted Eve” that again does not only bear the image of the snake but also has a phallic connotation, thus suggesting that sex, and therefore the inevitable process of life and death that is attached to it, has started with Eve’s sin. Coming out of the womb, the speaker takes his “marrow-ladle/ Out of the undertakers van”), which Maud suggests might indicate that the marrow that he is ladling is “thus at the same time an embalming implement” (WHtOWGM? 21), the life he is gaining, is therefore again also death-bringing. I would claim that that at this point the underlying topic almost appears to get lost in between the enhanced imagery that Thomas used to express it with, and that both Thomas’s
continuously recurring topic and his mode of conveying it had reached their limits and had started to become his personal clichés. Thomas was aware of this himself, as Lycett states when explaining Thomas’s reasons to break away from his overtly physical poems of *18 Poems* and approach his subject matter in a more cosmic and Christian manner: “He recognised his poetry sometimes teetered on the edge of self parody. As he later admitted, he made a conscious attempt to ‘get away from those rhythmic and thematic dead ends, that physical blank wall, those wombs, and full stop worms’”(140). Still, until 1937 brought him new subject matter to write about, as I will explain in my next chapter, Thomas appears to be unable to escape his own clichés.

When studying the poems that Thomas reworked from his notebooks after “Altarwise by Owl-light” one might get the impression that, having exhausted his own poetic style and subject matter, Thomas has therefore started to play with — or even to ridicule — them:

```
The seed-at-zero shall not storm
That town of ghosts, the trodden womb,
With her rampart to his tapping,
No god-in-hero tumble down
Like a tower on the town
Dumbly and divinely stumbling
Over the manwaging line.

The seed-at-zero shall not storm
That town of ghosts, the manwaged tomb
With her rampart to his tapping,
No god-in-hero tumble down
```
Like a tower on the town
Dumbly and divinely leaping
Over the warbearing line. (“The seed at zero”, CP 42, l. 1-14)

The poem starts in denying the conception of a new yet still unformed life that is portrayed as the “seed-at-zero” (in being at, or even before, its earliest stage) that has to invade the tomblike womb, thus being like a “town of ghosts” as if they were at war with one another. Thomas appears to use his own clichéd imagery to play with words and sounds. The repetitions that have small variations in them add to the poem’s playfulness and to its rhythmicality. This was clearly a poem that was intended to be read aloud. The importance of the image itself and of the sounds of the poem’s words now seems to have become more important than its possible underlying themes and interpretations.

Thomas’s womb-tomb thematics appear to have been worn out. According to Tindall, in February 1935 a reviewer in New Verse had stated that in 18 Poems, he found Thomas’s repetition of pattern and his monotony of theme and word tiresome (73). It might therefore be possible that, when reworking and writing poems for the publication of Twenty-five Poems, Thomas did not only select poems from his older notebooks because of lack of inspiration, but rather because of the slightly different tone they bore in contrast to his complicated recent poems. He did this for example by selecting “And death shall have no dominion” from his February 1933 Notebook that, as I explained in my first chapter, was the result of Thomas experimenting with the thesis that death has no dominion, and was therefore in sharp contrast to his other womb-tomb related poems.

His possible lack of new inspiration that eventually lead Thomas to overclichéing himself, might be explained by his failure to settle down in London in 1934 and 1935. After selecting and writing the poems for 18 Poems, Thomas moved there a month before the
publication of his first volume in search of new opportunities for both work in writing as well as for literary contacts, having been taught all his life that London was the literary centre of England towards he should aim his goals (Mathias 84-94). Living there, however, of did not prove to be successful and Thomas moved back to Swansea at the end of the summer of 1935 (Lycett 140). He finished “Altarwise by Owl-light” in September 1935 and with the exception of “Then was my neophyte” which Maud presumes to have been finished in April 1936 (WHtOWGM? 242) and which was also the last poem that he finished for Twenty-five Poems (published in September 1936), he only reworked former Notebook poems. Yet on the other hand, one could also argue that his self mocking could also be seen as the next step in his tongue in cheek approach to a classic theme. As his womb-tomb poems probably on a certain level were intended to be mock approaches to 17th century metaphysics poetry, eighteenth century graveyard poetry, and romantism, ridiculing his own mockings now took these to the level of absurdity. However whether this was done deliberately or was simply the result of a lack of inspiration for different subject matter remains to be disputed.

Whereas Dylan Thomas had to all probability intentionally selected and (re)written poems in his womb-tomb style that were overtly sexual for the publication of 18 Poems, it appears that he had trouble finding new subject matter for his ensuing poetry volume. As a result of this he approached his continuously repeated womb-tomb thematics with increasingly complicated use of imagery, and densely packed his words with ambiguities and puns. Although, as I explained in my first chapter, Thomas would later state that he simply loved working with words, that he enjoyed applying poetic techniques to his work, and that the underlying subject matter of his poems was therefore less important than their form, here his density and subsequent parody also appear to become a culminating effort to convey a different approach to subject matter that he was unable to break away from.
Chapter 4

Even though Thomas’s womb-tomb thematics started to decrease after 1936, they never fully disappeared from his poems. The manner in which he approached and applied his signature thematics to his poems, however, did change over time as Thomas not only entered new phases in life himself, but the world around him also underwent significant changes under the influence of the Second World War and its aftermath.

Many of the poems in The Map of Love (first published in August 1939), do not have the actual underlying topics that were significant of 18 Poems and Twenty-five Poems. Instead, Thomas now uses the theme of death and the signature imagery that he had developed to portray it in order to convey other topics. In “I make this in a warring absence” for example, Thomas uses his imagery of death and rebirth to convey and support the theme of declining and increasing feelings of love. In this fragment, the speaker is overwhelmed by feelings of doubt and fear after his beloved has departed:

[I] walk the warring sands by the dead town.

Cudgel great air, wreck east, and topple sundown,

Storm her sped heart, hang with beheaded veins

Its wringing shell, and let her eyelids fasten.

Destruction, picked by birds, brays through the jaw-bone,

And, for that murder's sake, dark with contagion

Like an approaching wave I sprawl to ruin

Ruin, the room of errors, one rood dropped

Down the stacked sea and water-pillared shade,
Weighed in rock shroud, is my proud pyramid;
Where, wound in emerald linen and sharp wind,
The hero's head lies scraped of every legend, (CP 79, l. 31-42)

The image of the “dead town” in this poem is not the tomblike womb from “The seed at zero” but the speaker’s love that has died because of his feelings of despair. And the verb “storm” that Thomas also used in “The seed at zero” now does not illustrate conception as the invasion of a womb with life and its subsequent death but depicts how the speaker in his despair attacks and murders her and what is left of her symbolical heart (“its wringing shell”) after she has left him (as her heart is “sped”) by hanging it by its beheaded veins, hereby possibly signifying the now cut off life giving flow of their love, and leaves it for dead as a corpse to be picked on by vultures. After having done so he “sprawl[s] to [his own] ruin” which is symbolised as a “proud pyramid”: a grave that he had formed through the pride that had resulted in the turmoil in his love and that had led to despair and ruin. His ruin is weighed in a shroud made of rock, hereby adding another image of cold and stony death. In his grave of ruin the speaker, who was once the hero of is loved one, has now lost any feeling of love and hope. Still, there is hope that his love can be revived. As Thomas himself explains in a letter to Hermann Peschmann, “the womb, the origin of love, forks his child down to the dark grave, dips it in dust, than forks it back to life again” (Maud, WHtOWGM? 141):

'His mother's womb had a tongue that lapped up mud,'
Cried the topless, inchtaped lips from hank and hood
In that bright anchorground where I lay linened,
'A lizard darting with black venom's thread
Doubled, to fork him back, through the lockjaw bed
And the breath-white, curtained mouth of seed.'

'See,' drummed the taut masks, 'how the dead ascend:
In the groin's endless coil a man is tangled.' (CP 79, l. 45-52)

The “dead”, symbolising his dying feelings of love, are revived again “in the groin’s endless coil”, here not only denoting the endless circle of producing life and death through sex, but also the speaker who is “tangled” by his feelings of lust and love and who therefore keeps coming back to his loved one despite his feelings of doubt and despair. Tindall is certainly right when remarking that here “tomb becomes womb” (160). Since this poem was initially titled “Poem (for Caitlin)” (Maud, WHiOWGM? 137), there is no doubt that Thomas’s inspiration was his marriage. He married Caitlin Macnamara on June 11, 1937 (Omnibus, ix). Their marriage was tempestuous and would remain so until Thomas’s death in 1953. Ferris suspects the feelings of despair that are the poem’s subject to be the result of the disputes in the young marriage that were caused by both Caitlin’s feelings of jealousy and Thomas’s insecurities about her former relationship with the painter Augustus John, whom she still kept in contact with at that time (161-62). Thomas presumably finished it in February 1938 (Maud, WHiOWGM? 137), at that time being married for eight months, and small number other poems on this subject would follow over the next seven years.7

From 1937-38 Thomas’s poetry also gradually started to go into a more realistic direction. In these poems he commemorated the deaths of others. In April 1938 he finished “After the funeral” a revision of February 1933 Notebook poem Six. (Maud 259) that depicted the funeral of his aunt Ann Jones, who had died on 7 February 1933:

7 “Unluckily for a death”, Thomas’s last poem about Caitlin, was finished in September 1945 (Maud, WHiOWGM? 270).
But I, Ann's bard on a raised hearth, call all
The seas to service that her wood-tongued virtue
Babble like a bellbuoy over the hymning heads,
Bow down the walls of the ferned and foxy woods
That her love sing and swing through a brown chapel, (CP 87, l. 21-25)

Thomas here takes on the role of the traditional Welsh poet as “Ann’s Bard” in commemorating her by praising her virtue, which she had always been too modest about herself, and elevating her into a saint-like being. When comparing this poem to its Notebook antecedent, it is very clear that it has undergone several changes. The poem’s original subject was the hypocrisy of the mourners on the funeral of an (in the poem) unanimous person.

“[a]nother well of rumours and cold lies/ Has died and one more [joke] has lost its point.” (PitM 168, l. 23-24). Thomas’s change in style and tone were probably inspired by the changes that his prose underwent around that same time. Since his surrealistic appearing and often incomprehensible stories did not sell very well, he had started to write realistic stories that were inspired by (and presented as) events from his childhood. These stories would later form Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog (Lycett 191-92). Strikingly, as Ackerman points out, “The Peaches”, a short story that was finished in the summer of 1938, not only features Aunt Ann as one of its leading characters, but also contains an almost identical description of her best room containing the same “stuffed fox” and “stale fern” (CP 87, l. 11; Portrait 10) (Ackerman 78). The question that rises when looking at the 1933 Notebook poem and its 1938 revision is which - if any - of the sentiments concerning the death of his aunt and her funeral that Thomas expresses in these poems are genuine. Since Thomas himself in his Notebook also referred to the scene as “[A]nother theme to play on” (l. 5) and in his 1938 poem referred to Ann as being “sculptured” into a subject of praise (l. 35), it might be that in both cases
Thomas simply grasped a scene that was convenient enough to work with and shaped it in a way that served his purpose. Still “After the funeral” was the first published poem in which, as Ackerman states, “Thomas’s emotional range was extended beyond his own subjective world (76). He had started to deviate from the highly sexual cosmos and the notion that life is death viewed from out of his own body, nature, and Christian imagery, towards narrating the deaths of others. This process, however, developed slowly and would apart from this poem not recur until he started writing poetry about the deaths of the Second World War.

The Second World War made a deep impact on Thomas and on his poetry and induced him to convert his former womb-tomb thematics of death and rebirth into personal and elegiac poetry that commemorated the deaths caused by the bombings of the Blitz. This change started with “Deaths and Entrances”:

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On almost the incendiary eve
    Of several near deaths,
When one at the great least of your best loved
    And always known must leave
Lions and fires of his flying breath,
    Of your immortal friends
Who’d raise the organs of the counted dust
    To shoot and sing your praise, (CP 117, l. 1-8)
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Even though at first reading this poem appears to bear little similarity to most of Thomas’s former poems, it does contain the underlying theme of death and rebirth when taking a closer look at it. According to Maud, its title was inspired by Donne’s “Death’s Duel”: “[T]his deliverance from that death, the death of the womb, is an entrance, a delivering over to
another death, the manifold deaths of this world” (Donne 1280). Maud points to Gwen Vernon Watkins’ *Portrait of a Friendship* in which Vernon Watkins recalls how Thomas recited the poem’s first two lines in May 1940 during a visit to the theatre and explained that “he was going to call his next book by the same title ‘because that is all I ever write about or want to write about’” (Watkins 88; Maud 72). When taking this into consideration, I would state that the first two lines probably were primarily intended to refer to the topic of either conceptions or births that are “near [their inevitable] deaths”, and therefore are in an “incendiary eve”, possibly denoting life coming to its end in a hell-like fashion. This poem, however, underwent a considerable change after the first Blitz. According to Lycett, Thomas happened to be in London during its first bombing on September 7 1940, and even though he remained unharmed, it left him with many anxieties. The bombings inspired him to finish the poem “into which he poured all his concerns about the threats around him” (Lycett 219-20). In doing so, the underlying meaning of the title changed as, as Maud explains, the “[d]eaths” have now become the deaths caused by war and the “[e]ntrances” are now the entering enemy soldiers. The poems first lines were taken into new use to denote a speaker who foresees the bombings that still have to take place and who anticipates that at least one of his best friends will perish in their flames. While his friend’s breath flies, probably away from his body as he is dying, he must leave the “lions and fires” that, as Maud suggests, might symbolise the roaring and burning of the bombings. After having done so, his eternal (“immortal”) friends will honour him through song (Maud 72-73). By glorifying him, the deceased is immortalised in the minds of those who commemorate him, as organs will rise up from his ashes to sing in his praise. Even though Thomas’s signature womb-tomb style seems to have disappeared, one can still find indications that signify its presence. Whereas the organs sing (l. 7-8) and therefore indicate church organs, Tindall suggests that the raising of organs might also insinuate the resurrection of a body. Next to this he also indicates that the fact that the organs
are not only raising, but also shooting, insinuates that they might bear a phallic connotation as well (218), thus implying the notion of creating new life out of death. Thomas now uses the underlying theme of death and rebirth to symbolise the notion that the memories of people who have died in the war can –and must- be revived through praising them by converting them into song and verse, hereby immortalising them. According to Maud, Thomas was unable to write poetry between July 1941 and April 1944 because of anxieties caused by the war (WHtOWGM? 89). Although, since Thomas worked as a screenwriter for propaganda films during the Second World War (Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts* xi), I assume that his occupancy in writing screenplays might have been another reason for this interruption. When he started writing poetry again, his work had also affected his poetry, which had now become even more commemorative and elegiac in tone, and also had developed a more Christian approach. But even though his poems had become more Christian, this might again have been more of a stylistic interest rather than a personal one. As Lycett explains: “There seems to have been no particular incident that sparked this [...] sentiment. Thomas did not have a conversion” (248). Visiting the bombed city of Coventry for a screenplay inspired him to write “Ceremony After a Fire Raid”. This poem describes the massive grieving that takes place in the street after a bombing. The speaker and the other grievers that are present commemorate the death of an infant that was found “[w]ith its kneeding mouth/ Charred on the black breast of the grave/ The mother dug” (*CP* 129, l. 6-8). In keeping with the traditional womb-tomb theme, by giving birth to the infant the mother’s body did not only give it its life, but also its death (Tindall 237). There is however a sharp contrast with Thomas’s original womb-tomb thematics from his Notebooks, *18 Poems*, and *Twenty-five Poems*, in which Thomas used the theme of death bearing life as his primary topic and contemplated over its theoretical notion in artificed wails that were full of puns, since he
now uses the same theme to illustrate the tragedy of the death of a child, whose life has ended only shortly after it had begun:

Forgive
Us forgive
Us your death that myselfs the believers
may hold it in a great flood
Till the blood shall spurt,
And the dust shall sing like a bird
As the grains blow, as your death grows, through our heart. (CP 129, 17-24)

The collective mourning for the child’s death is described in a ceremonic manner and therefore has the form of a prayer in which the grievers ask for forgiveness and renewal. In commemorating it, the child has been given the role of a martyr, being burned as a sacrifice. As Tindall suggests the “great flood” may incorporate the underlying notions of tears, of water used to extinguish the fire caused by the bombing, and of “Noah’s flood, that destroyed the guilty and saved mankind for this” (Tindall 237). Still, the infant is not only revived through the grievers’ praise and commemoration, it is also revived because it has been taken up in nature. In both nature and praise, the infant’s “blood shall spurt” again and the grains of dust will turn into seed, denoting again that life is created out of death. Even though, as Maud states, there is no evidence that Thomas had truly encountered the body of a burned child (PitM 69) he appears to have assigned himself the traditional role of the poet as a documenter and commemorator of the war and its casualties by putting them into verse. But although he documented the common feelings of grief around him, Thomas’s personal experiences during the war did not end up in his poems. A good example of this is the ‘Majoda shooting incident’
that occurred on 6 March 1945 in which Thomas, Caitlin, and several others were shortly held at shot (D.N. Thomas 119-27). Even though the incident undoubtly increased Thomas’s feelings of unease and anxiety that were already generated by the war, the poems that he wrote afterward did not change in tone or style, neither do they contain any reference to this incident.

After the war Thomas returned to the topic of death approaching with the passing of time, although his formerly highly stylised womb-tomb wails had now been replaced with feelings of nostalgia and lament for his passed childhood. Even though Thomas started writing in this style when the war was still fought, it became his predominant theme after August 1945. “Fern Hill” is one of his best known examples. In this poem, Thomas remembers his childhood and then refutes it as having passed, as he concludes:

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,

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8 According to David N. Thomas, Thomas and some of his colleagues from Gryphon Films, who had come to Wales to discuss a screenplay that he was working on, were in a pub when they got into a heavy dispute about the war with Captain William Killick, a friend of the family who had recently returned from almost eighteen months of fighting behind German lines. When Thomas and his colleagues had returned to the bungalow where Thomas and his wife at that time lived with their daughter Aeronwy, a presumably drunk Killick fired a machine gun at the house. The asbestos walls provided no protection, yet nobody got injured, although Aeronwy and the child of an acquaintance who were asleep in the bedroom were missed “‘by inches’”. After this, Killick stormed inside, held a hand grenade in front of them and fired a shot through the ceiling, hereafter stating that they were “‘a lot of egoists’” and put the gun down. After which one of the bystanders could rush outside and call the police (119-27).

9 “Once below a time” (finished 1939) “Poem in October” finished in August 1944, and “A Winter’s Tale” that he finished in March 1945 also share this theme.
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Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea. (CP 160-61, l. 46-54)

The highly physical imagery and the topic of death-bringing sex have now disappeared. And although the lament has stayed, Thomas’s former fears of death appear to have mellowed. When comparing the manner in which Thomas personifies time in this poem to that of “When like a running grave” from 18 Poems one can certainly see how they differ. In contrast to his earlier poem, in which time is portrayed as a ruthless chaser, it now appears that its characteristics have been softened as its takes the speaker by the hand and leads him to “sleep”, thus also symbolising death and the process of dying in a friendlier and more soothing manner than the former “scythe of hairs” that “hauled to the dome” (“When, like a running grave”, CP 18, l. 1-5). The speaker laments the time in which he was young and therefore not yet concerned with his approaching death as, despite the fact that he had always been held in “chains” of mortality, he used to enjoy his life and (“sing”) like the sea which, as Maud suggests, appears to roam free but is in fact bound to its tides and because of this also bound by the same time that bounds us (89). The notion that he has his younger self picture his older self as a shadow not only denotes that he has become a mere shadow of his former self in both having become older, but also the fact that after he has died, he will no longer have a body and only remains in his spiritual essence. Thomas again used nature to symbolise both different stages in life, in portraying his childhood days as “lamb white” in being both young and innocent, as well as the underlying theme that the passing of time, and subsequently death, are omnipresent. Part of this poem’s charm is that it is not clear whether it has the joyful tone of celebrating the memories of a careless youth or simply laments that this childhood has gone by. According to Lycet even Thomas himself could not decide between the two, as his explanations to people varied between them (261). Even though the notion of
happiness that is only experienced in retrospect is also a traditional topic (Dollimore xv), it appears that the feelings that he expressed in the poem might have been genuine. During his first American tour in 1950, Thomas told in an interview with the Times, that he lamented his lost youth and the endless energy, audacity, and inspiration that he had when writing poetry during his adolescent years: “‘Then (aged fifteen) I was arrogant and lost. Now I am humble and found. I prefer that other’” (Lycett 331).

In “Do not go gentle into that good night” written in May 1951, a year before his father’s death (Maud, WHtOWGM? 77), Thomas expresses the fear of dying without having accomplished anything:

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

[...]

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light. (CP 116, l. 4-19)

“[T]he dying of the light” is a well-known cliché that Thomas seems to play with in this poem. In “Becket and Dylan Thomas”, Andrew Hadfield even suggest that Thomas is stating something new when reversing the “existing cliché’s about being ready for death” and thus ‘seeing merit in a hopeless struggle for life rather than a peaceful acceptance of the inevitable” (n.pag.). This indeed makes sense when taking into consideration that the speaker
of the poem urges his father not to die peacefully until he has achieved something in his life. But even though Thomas never showed this poem to his father and also excluded it from Collected Poems (which was published the month before his father’s death), it might, as Maud suggests, state more about Thomas’s concerns about himself than those about his father (81). Thomas had at this point also reached the end of his career, finding it harder to write poems and possibly realising, once more, that he was clichéing himself. When perceiving the poem in this manner, it therefore appears to echo the poems of lament for gone by youth and approaching death that he wrote at that same time. Although this is the only poem in which Thomas evokes to “rage” against it.

In “Prologue”, the poem that he wrote as his introduction to Collected Poems, also he also indicates that his most fruitful days were coming to their end: “This day winding down now/ At God’s speeded summer’s end” (CP ix, l. 1-2) Since this was, strikingly, his last poem ever to be finished before his death a year later, the question that rises is whether this was a sincere statement or another poetic device reiterating the sentiments of the poems that he had written over the previous years. Furthermore, another question that rises is whether this poetic statement refers to his life in general, or to his poetic output that had considerably decreased during the last years of his life. Given the fact that poetry volumes were now bound into an omnibus, poetry might have felt like a closed chapter to him. He did indicate that he wanted to write more poems in the introductory note of Collected Poems: “if I went on revising everything that I now do not like in this book I would be so busy that I would have no time to try to write new poems” (vii). Still, he did not appear to succeed in doing so. As he told Charles Fry: “for a whole year I have been able to write nothing, nothing, nothing at all but one tangled sentimental poem as preface to a collection of poems written years ago” (Lycett 397). There are many possible factors that contributed to Thomas’s inability to write during the last year of his life. One of these was Thomas’s deteriorating health, which had worsened.
over the last years of his life due to his excessive drinking and bohemian lifestyle. According to Malcolm Brinnin, Thomas was already in bad physical shape at the beginning of the 1950’s (15). His frequent ailments might have prevented him to write. Furthermore, Thomas had frequently visited the United States between 1950 and 1953, and despite the fact that his lecturing tours there had provided him with sufficient payments, a new and larger audience, and had given him many new and useful contacts; they had also prevented him from working on his poetry. Next to this, Thomas had also largely been occupied with Under Milk Wood, which he finished shortly before his death.

The two poems that Thomas was in fact still working on when he died seem to focus on the theme of commemoration. “In Country Heaven” was part of a poem sequence that he had started in 1947. It included “In the White Giant’s Thigh”, “In Country Sleep” and “Under Sir John’s Hill”. Inspired by Hiroshima and the possible threat of a Third World War, the poems tell of the destruction of the world by atomic warfare (Hardy 122-25). There does not appear to be revival. As Hardy states:

[Thomas] intended to overcome the vastation, and to tell again through the dead storytellers [...] the celebrations, praises, and good news of the destroyed and remembered earth[.] [...] But the resurrection, through lyric and narrative, was to come about only after the black vision of destruction. (125-26)

Life has now fully ended and only the memory of life remains. Sex has now become death giving by not giving life at all, as for example in “In the White Giant’s Thigh”, that was written in May 1950 (Maud WHtOWGM? 157):

Through throats where many rivers meet, the women pray,
Pleading in the waded bay for the seed to flow
Though the names on their weed grown stones are rained away,

And alone in the night’s eternal, curving act
They yearn with the tongues of curlews for the unconcieved
And immemorial sons of the cudgelling, hacked Hill. (CP 176, l. 6-13)

The speaker commemorates the women who once pleaded for fertility, although even their names on the headstones have now begun to fade. They yearned for children who were never conceived and who, as they would therefore also never die, would never be remembered. This was a topic that Thomas had started to develop during the last years of his life but that had never reached its full potential. According to Lycett, Thomas also planned to write an opera about atomic catastrophe together with Igor Stravinsky (413). This does indicate that Thomas did make an effort develop a new manner to approach the theme of death with. Whether he would have succeeded, however, remains a question.

“Elegy”, a poem that commemorates the life and death of Thomas’s father, conveys a renewed interest in the theme of rebirth in nature:

On that darkest day, Oh, forever may
He lie lightly, at last, on the last, crossed
Hill, under the grass, in love, and there grow
Young among the long flocks, and never lie lost
Or still all the numberless days of his death,  

*Thomas contradicts the darkest day of his father’s death with the light days in which he is reborn in the grass that feeds the flocks of sheep. As Maud remarks, this poem is in sharp contrast with “Do not go gentle into that good night” because it states that one is allowed to die gently (86). The rage and fear appear to have been gone and replaced with the comforting idea that the deceased essence will eternally live on in nature. Even though commemoration was also an important feature in Thomas’s poems concerning the dead of the Second World War, a difference is that his later poems appear to be unpretentious and concentrate on the memory itself instead of on the act of elevating it. Next to this, “Elegy” is also overtly personal:

The sticks of the house where his; his books he owned.

Even as a baby he had never cried;

Nor did he know, save to his secret wound.

Out of his eyes I saw the last light glide.

Here among the light of the lording sky

An old man is with me where I go.  

*Thomas commemorates his father as he genuinely was. He remembers the long and painful sickbed and the often stubborn manner in which he lived and died. There are no memories of his virtues that have to be spread over Wales as with his aunt Ann. And although his death was sad it also does not have to be glorified as those in his former war poems. “Until I die he
will not leave my side” (CP 180, l. 40), Thomas concludes. The memory of his deceased father is a personal one that will stay with him exactly as it had been.

Even though over the years of his writing career, Thomas’s poems underwent several changes in their subject matter, style of writing, and their use of imagery, his underlying themes remained unchanged. Since Thomas had from the beginning of his career been known for his death thematics it is likely that he used them with the intentional purpose of them being his signature characteristics. But on the other hand it appears that he also applied them because he was unable to break away from them. As a result of this his work contains many examples in which Thomas, either unintentionally or deliberately, had turned his own thematics into clichés, thus turning himself and his writings into their own caricatures or parodies.
Conclusion

During his life Dylan Thomas wrote many poems that included the theme of death. In this dissertation I have tried to provide insight in how he approached it, how his manners of approach changed over the years and how these approaches corresponded to his personal life. In order to do so I also had to answer a number of questions: Why did he write about it in the manners that he did? What where his possible influences in doing so? And were the sentiments that he expressed within his death-related poems genuine? After having carefully studied both his life and work in chronological order, I have come to the conclusion that the reason why Dylan Thomas wrote about death might have been more of a stylistic interest rather than a personal one. Even though his approach to death develops itself over the years and undergoes a number of changes, and these changes themselves sometimes are inspired by his personal life, the approaches to death within these changes often appear to be highly stylised renderings of classic notions rather than depictions of actual occurrences and emotions.

Since Thomas was determined to become a poet while he was still very young and at that time already had much knowledge about poetry, he appears to have begun writing about death because he considered it to be one of the main themes in poetry. Because of this, many of poems concerning the theme of death contain classic subject matter that he conveys with frequently sexually denoting imagery that he had developed in his Notebooks over a four year long process of imitating and experimenting. His primary theme is mutability. In most of his poems, life is depicted as an inescapable process of decay that leads to death contrived by the passing of time. Within this theme, he emphasises the notion that since death is present in life, death is therefore also present in sex and illustrated this with organic and physical imagery that was frequently densely packed with meanings and puns. In later years he
frequently uses the imagery that he had developed to convey the underlying theme of death and rebirth as metaphors for other subject matters. A good example of this is the recurring topic of the dying and revival of feelings of love that was based on his tempestuous marriage. During the Second World War, he would take up the traditional role of the poet to commemorate the deaths caused by the Blitz. Again he made use of his traditional imagery of death and rebirth to now denote the deaths of the victims and their rebirths in the memories of those who praise them and in the eternal natural processes that take them up again after their deaths. After the war, he returned to his primary topic of mutability, in which he now focussed on the theme of lament for his youth that had passed. Next to this, he also worked on a new topic that denoted the death of the earth by atomic warfare, but his own death prevented him from accomplishing this.

What has proven insightful for me was the finding that even though Thomas’s approach to the theme of death changed over the years due to various possible reasons he never fully deviated from the womb-tomb thematics that he developed when he was still in his teens. Whether or not this was carried out intentionally is hard to determine. On the one hand he was known and praised as well as criticized for them, providing him with the media attention that he needed. Yet on the other hand Thomas also appeared to be consciously aware of the fact that he was clichéing himself in his overabundant use of them and tried to break away from them, but seemed unable to do so. I presume though that the reason for the continuous use of his womb-tomb thematics was to all probability a combination of these two premises, or even a conscious struggle between them.

Even though Thomas took himself quite serious as a poet, I am of opinion that many of his bewailings about death should not be taken too seriously. Although in his later poems it certainly becomes more difficult to determine whether his laments are artificial or sincere. In his earliest work however —and with this I mean his Notebook poems, 18 Poems and Twenty-
Five Poems — he packed too much ambiguity, puns, and tongue in cheek approaches onto the theme for it to be perceived as genuine. This is not much of a surprise when considering that at the time of writing these poems, Thomas was in his teens and early twenties, lived with his parents for the larger part of this period, and did not encounter many personal matters of loss. There simply were not many private matters for him to be inspired by. As he entered adult life, he gradually encountered new experiences that would serve as subject matters in his poems, like his marriage and child birth. Still, with the exception of “After the funeral”, Thomas did not any use any of his personal experiences with death in his poetry until he started to write about the deaths caused by the Blitz, and even then the depicted dead were strangers to him whose deaths he had encountered either when doing fieldwork for his job as a propaganda screenwriter or in the newspaper. Even though Thomas had lost many friends during and after the war we do not find their deaths in his poems. It is of course too preposterous to conclude that the feelings of grief expressed in his poems that concern the losses of war are not sincere at all. Many sources claim that Thomas was genuinely shocked and frightened by the war’s turmoil. He witnessed many bombings, was held at shot, and a number of areas in Swansea that he had been familiar with all his life had been destroyed. Still, his poems follow the traditional theme of commemoration rather than personal grief. A similar complication comes forward when looking at his later poems in which the speaker laments the loss of his childhood. Thomas has said to rue his former poetic energies, yet on the other hand he also skilfully conveyed a classic theme. It is therefore hard to determine whether Thomas deliberately used these classics method to express his feelings, whether he was unable to express his feelings in any other manner than in using these methods, or whether he deliberately used classic methods while exaggerating his feelings as part of his poetic act.
There are, in fact, only two persons from Thomas’s life whose deaths have served as direct subjects in Thomas’s poems: his aunt Ann Jones and his father. And the manners in which they serve as subject are different. When studying “After the funeral”, I got the impression that Thomas might have simply recalled that particular scene from his past because it could serve as a proper subject for the poem’s theme of praise. Particularly when noting that he describes his aunt Ann as being “sculptured” into a subject of praise. (CP 88, l. 35). Thomas’s father D. J. does appear to be approached in a more accurate and genuine manner. And both poems concerning him strikingly also slightly differ from the other poems that he wrote at that time. It is arguable that “Do not go gentle into that good night” does not only appear to break away from Thomas’s usual poetic style at its time of writing but that it also expresses sincere emotion. The same can be stated for “Elegy” which not only seems remarkably genuine, humble, and sad in comparison to Thomas’s earlier poems of praise, but also appears to deviate from Thomas’s latest poetic development in which he tried to portray the end of the world and thus the ultimate victory of death, since his father is reborn in nature.

I would claim that, when it comes to the theme of death, the poetry often rather appears to have influenced Thomas than the other way around. Since Thomas already decided to become a poet at a very young age, and was not only very talented but also had a great knowledge of the history of poetry and of its technic aspects, it is comprehensible that he was very conscious of his work and put a lot of pressure on himself to attain his self-implied high demands. Many of his poems therefore seem to be the result of what he expected a poet to write. Furthermore, he also adopted the characteristics that he assumed a poet should have, making an act of himself while doing so. He took on a morbid tone, told people that he had tuberculosis and that he only had a few months to live, which he later changed to cirrhosis of the liver, and behaved in a self-destructive manner, often drinking heavily and using drugs. It was also the act of being the poet that destroyed him as his self-destructive behaviour got out
of hand over the years, severely damaged his health, and interfered in his poetic output. He died in New York City on 9 November 1953 at the age of 39. According to Lycett, he had received several morphine injections over a small number of days to keep him able to perform despite his severe fatigues and lung problems that had worsened during his last American tour. The probable overdose of morphine together with his bad physical condition caused him to slip into an irreversible coma, in which he died of pneumonia (433-445). Dylan Thomas did thus not only write poetry about death, the poetry, sadly, also became his death.
Works Cited


