

Celebrating Death in Two Poems of Dylan Thomas and Bader Shaker Al-Sayyab: A Comparative Study

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**الاحتفال بالموت في قصيدتين
لدylan توماس وبدر شاكرا السياب:
دراسة مقارنة**

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Abstract

The idea of death is one of the predominant themes that makes all poets of different cultures try to investigate its essence; some of them stay perplexed and unable to understand it, while some others interpret it as a way of salvation. However; this study tries to delve deeply in the discussion of this theme through two poems of different cultures. In fact, it is not easy to find out the comparative features between two poets belonging to different cultures. Yet; the change in the texture of life and the huge development in the means of communication that the 20th century has witnessed facilitate the way of such influence between poets from different nations. The aim of this study is to cast light upon the impact that the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, particularly in his poem "Over Sir John's Hill", has left on the Iraqi poet, Bader Shaker Al-Sayyab in his poem "The River and Death". The study reveals that the two poems have a lot of common features including the structure of the two poems, the similar images, and the phonological aspects that they employ besides their treatment of similar meanings. In addition, the study discusses briefly the main stations of the two poets' lives and gives a brief outlook of their poetry and the opinions of critics about it.

Keywords: Bader Shaker Al-Sayyab, "The River and Death", Dylan Thomas, "Over Sir John's Hill", The theme of death, Common features.

المستخلص

ان فكرة الموت هي واحدة من المواضيع المهيمنة التي حاول الشعراء من مختلف الثقافات استكهان جوهرها فالبعض منهم بقي محتارا وغير قادر على فهمها بينما حاول البعض الاخر ان يفسروها على انها نوع من الخلاص ..هذه الدراسة تحول ان تناقش هذه الثيمة في قصيدتين تنتميان الى ثقافتين مختلفتين. لاشك ان من العسير ايجاد مشتركات المقارنة بين شاعرين ينتميان الى ثقافتين مختلفتين ولكن التغيرات والتطور الكبير في نسيج الحياة ووسائل الاتصال التي شهدها القرن العشرون جعل من السهولة ان يتم هكذا تأثير بين الشعراء من ثقافات مختلفة. ان هدف هذه الدراسة هو القاء الضوء على تأثير الشاعر الويلزي ديلان توماس وخاصة في قصيدته (فوق تل السير جون) على الشاعر العراقي بدر شاكلا السياب في قصيدته (النهر والموت). قد اظهرت هذه الدراسة ببن كلا القصيدين ان ثمة خصائص مشتركة فيهما من ضمنها البناء الفني والصور الشعرية والجوانب الصوتية التي استخدمها كلا الشعارين في معالجة المعاني المتشابهة وعلاوة على ذلك فان الدراسة قد ناقشت بإيجاز المحطات الرئيسية في حياة الشعارين والتي كانت متشابهة لحد ما وكذلك اراء النقاد بشعرهما.

الكلمات الافتتاحية : بدر شاكر السياب , النهر والموت, ديلان توماس . فوق

تل السير جون , ثيمة الموت . خصائص المقارنة



Dylan Thomas: Flamboyant & Rebel Soul

Dylan Marlais Thomas is one of the significant Welsh poets, and one of the most fascinating, literary figures of modern England. He was born on 27th October, 1914 and died tragically in New York in 1953. (Tilak, 4) His death in early age left deep sorrow in modern literary circles. At thirty-nine Thomas had endeared himself to the literary youth of England and America, to most of the poets who were his contemporaries, and to many who were his elders; he was the master of a public which he himself had made of nothingness; he was the icon of writers of every description and the darling of the press. The press recognized him early and chased him to the grave. (Shapiro, 171)

His sudden death produced elegies and an appreciation in extraordinary numbers on both sides of the Atlantic. Thomas was the most poetical poet of our time. He talked and dressed and behaved and lived like a poet; he was reckless, flamboyant, irreverent, innocent, bawdy and bibulous; and his verse, too, had a romantic wildness about it that even the reader who could make nothing of it recognized as "poetic". (Daiches, 20)

After his death and in the February Issue of the new London Magazine a 26-year-old British poet wrote a letter saying that Thomas represented the "archetypal picture of the poet" for his generation, and that death of this wild and generous character produced "something like a panic" in the world of letters. He was answered in the next issue of the magazine by a thirty-one-year-old poet who said that this was puerile nonsense and deplored what he called the "fulsome ballyhoo" which Thomas' death evoked in both England and America (ibid).



In a note to the collected edition of his poems, Thomas wrote: "these poems, with all their crudities, doubts, and confusions are written for the love of Man and in praise of God (Brinnin, 128).

Dylan Thomas, one of the most colorful poets in English language, is known throughout the world for his literary achievements as well as his notorious behavior. Thomas not only wrote poetry but lived a poetic life. Although he was irresponsible and his behavior was flagrant, most people fell in love with him. As William York Tindall explains "he was our bourgeois idea of what a poet should be". Wallace Stevens comments that Thomas "looked and acted like an insurance man". His words and explosive imagery intrigue his readers and challenge them to explore the depths of his poetry. Poetry is an exuberant expression of life and Dylan Thomas represents every aspect of it (Archer, 7).

Thomas's success in writing poetry was not mirrored by similar success in his personal life. Though he had immense craftsmanship and talent which made him a well-known poet, he was often disappointed on a personal level. Much of this frustration and breakdown could have come from his inability to tackle the extreme demands that came with sudden fame. His personality has been described: alternately as timid, shy, bewildered and insecure on one side, but outwardly reckless, bawdy and bibulous, yet, always, an extremely charming.

Al-Sayyab: The Floating Soul

Bader Shaker Al-Sayyab (1927-1964) is one of the most influential Iraqi poets that appeared in the middle of the twentieth century. His significance lies mainly in his introduction of the "free verse" into Arabic poetry, thereby



breaking for the first time in Arabic literary history the traditional Arabic verse traditions. His poetry has the ability to penetrate deep into the consciousness of his audience, making them mentally live the world he creates for them in his poems. He is so personal, so intimate and so melancholic. He was one of the romantic poets whose writing of free verse became a genuine part of his legend. Critics claim that he is the greatest lyrical poet, who is seen as a holder of symbolic heritage, and an epic poet of an apocalyptic vision. (Al-Abta, 31)

Al-Sayyab was born in Basrah province, Jikoor village on a small river called Buwaib, the river that frequently echoes in his poems. He lost his parents in early age so his grandfather raised him up. Being an orphan deepened in him the feelings of melancholy and loneliness. As a child, he was suffering from a weakness of muscles, the illness that was detected later when he visited London. (ibid, 22) After he graduated from college, he worked as a teacher of English but unfortunately, he was dismissed and banned from teaching because he was a member of the Iraqi Communist Party which he left later. All these incidents made him gloomy, and he expected his early death. He coexisted with the idea of dying in a premature age, a feeling that was obviously reflected in his poetry.

The name of Al-Sayyab rose to stardom at the end of the 1940s, a decade which opened the horizons of a new era in Arabic poetry, particularly in the Iraqi poetic arena. The Iraqi poets' eyes of this era, including Al-Sayyab's, who studied English in the Higher Teacher Training College in which he got acquainted with the experiences of the English poets, particularly T.S. Eliot's experiences in employing mythology, Christian symbols, and symbols of the medieval ages. The English poets avoided abstraction in poetic



performance resorting to concrete and embodied images, embroidering their poems with various quotations and Chinese aphorisms via citation and implied illustrations. (Ali, 82) They were influenced by the poetic changes in England and the USA, especially the use of psychology and symbolic anthropology. Knowing English, Al-Sayyab read and was influenced by the poetry of Cecil Day-Lewis, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, and Dylan Thomas. All this makes him the incarnate poet of the Arab "Free Verse Movement." (Al-Basri, 15)

Bader's first poem "Was It Love?" (1947) is considered by some critics the first poem that discarded the traditional prosody and employed the new form of "free verse," though there are many opinions proposing that Nazek Al-Malaika's poem "Cholera" (1947) is the first poem written in this new form while some others claim that poets such as the Iraqi Abdul Wahab Al-Bayati and the Egyptian Salah Abdul Saboor are the pioneers of this new form. The truth, however, is that each of these poets has contributed in his/her way to the development of this new poetic form. (Alloosh, 33)

Dylan Thomas's and Bader Shaker Al-Sayyab's Poems:

During his short life, Bader Shaker Al-Sayyab suffered a lot from various physical diseases, which made his life very painful and miserable. The political vicissitudes in Iraq worsened his suffering and quickened his death at the age of 37. He is similar in this point to the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas who died at the age of 38 due to heavy drinking. Al-Sayyab was well acquainted with Dylan's works and highly appreciated his poems. He even imitated him in various aspects. As a result, the two poets share a lot of artistic and thematic concerns. Their poems are characterized by extreme lyricism, emotional



tune and deepening things with excitement. Both poets have sharp burning talents that erode their ages and bodies. Both use symbols and borrow legends and myths. In their poems, there is extreme pessimism with rare bursts of joy and ecstasy and their main symbols are: death, birth, and love as man knows. In the background, there is God that may be not obvious but it is there. God is the creator whose eternal presence dominates our existence or at least justifies our existence, yet it does nothing to lessen the absurdity of rational human beings in an irrational universe, as well as it does nothing to interpret death in the language of supreme values. (Nowotny,157) It is the eternal merciful spectator that cries the state of man but introduces nothing of usual consolation.

Both poets have exaggeration in poetic colorfulness and magnificent crystallization, and the poetic aspects in their poems are somehow similar. The Iraqi critic and literary translator, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra states that he made al-Sayyab listen to some voice records recited by Dylan Thomas himself. (Jabra, Jumhuriaya Daily) Al-Sayyab, in his turn, imitated Thomas in the way of reciting when he later recorded some of his poems.

Celebrating death in Thomas's and Al-Sayyab's Poems:

The impact of Dylan Thomas on Al-Sayyab can be seen in many of his poems. Thomas, in his poem "Twenty-Four Years" says:

Twenty-four years remind the tears of my eyes.

Bury the dead for fear that they walk to the grave in labour.

(Thomas, 63)

While Al-Sayyab says in his poem "At the dark Village":

The dead awake there on the hills,

Walking to the grave tiredly wondering the date of Burial.



In his poems, Dylan Thomas celebrated primarily in death and the idea of womb-tomb and this is exactly what Al-Sayyab does in his poems. In fact, the major theme that Thomas was concerned with was birth, copulation, and death. He himself called his poetry, "the poetry of the womb and tomb," in other words, womb becomes equivalent to the grave. In his poem "the tombstone told when she died", he says:

**I died before bedtime came
But my womb was bellowing (Davis, 68).**

Ralf Maud writes: "the obsession with death, which is the most striking feature of his work, almost certainly went back to his childhood and became intensified in adolescence. His fascinated preoccupation with the process of birth and the monstrous excitement of sex are by products of his horror of it. Birth and copulation were for Thomas merely stages on the way to death. The child in the womb knows its destiny" (Maud, 128).

This idea obviously appeared in Thomas's poem "Twenty-Four Years":

**Twenty- four years remind the tears of my eyes
Bury the dead for fear that they walk to the grave in labour.
In the groin of the natural doorway,
I crouched like a tailor,
Sewing a shroud for a journey,
By the light of the meat-eating sun.
Dressed to die, the sensual strut begun.
With my red veins full of money.
In the final direction of the elementary town
I advance as long as forever is!! (Thomas, 63)**



In this poem, Dylan Thomas puts the embryo in the circle which extends from the womb to the tomb. This short-strange poem awakes the sense of life that lies in the old known idea "death begins with the moment of pregnancy." Dylan wrote this poem in his 24th birthday which means that this idea obsessed him early. He compares the embryo with a tailor sewing a shroud; both of them having the same sitting. The embryo prepares his shroud for his journey towards the elementary town which is the town of the dead (Ellmann et al, 921).

Thomas's art was a contemplation of his long dying as he expresses in his poem " if I were tickled by the rub of love" (1935):

I sit and watch the worm beneath my nail

Wearing the quick away

As he himself observed, his poems are a "statement on the way to the grave". Yet, death, or the unified process of birth, copulation and death is not the sole poetic theme in Thomas's poems. In poems such as "The Conversation of Prayer", " The Hunchback in the Park", "Poem in October", and "Over Sir John's Hill", the horror of death is transcended, a poem is made which has freed itself from the whirlpool of its author's obsessive fantasies. It is, of course, true that even these poems show an awareness of death. He celebrated the wonder of creation all the more splendidly because he knew that it would be swallowed up in universal doom. We find out that it is hard to believe in the booming rhetoric of "And Death Shall Have no Dominion", whereas we respond to the ambiguity, the total acceptance of mortality, implicit in; "After the first death, there is no other" (Stanford, 86).



Over Sir John's Hill: glorifying death

Thomas's poem "Over Sir John's Hill" is said to glorify the world of God written by a man who does not believe in God. Dylan symbolizes cosmetic lyricism in the view that he sees through his window overlooking the estuary of Altaf and Towy rivers in Llogharen –Wales and he mentions God twice in his poem. (Brinnin, 128) Thomas wrote this poem in stanzas of five pentameter lines, which have a mourning tone. Each line consists of five feet: the first, second, and third feet are (stressed-unstressed), while the fourth and fifth are (unstressed- stressed). This meter copes with the sorrow that prevails gradually on the psychological presentiment absorbing the theological sadness. (ibid, 134)

Dylan Thomas makes conversation with Towy river and interrogates it. he emphasizes the expression (we are doomed to death). Thomas's poem presents children who are fascinated with the strange world of death, though they know in advance the sufferings of death, where the dead are visible in their graves exposing their decadent limbs. The children are symbolized by the swallows that go blithely and unknowingly to Tyburn (a scaffold of execution in London); death is so obvious there as a buoyant bell taking us to a remote and strange area. Thomas describes Sir John's hill covered by swallows as a judge wearing a black cap that sentences us (swallow birds or children) with death and gives orders to the executioner to implement the orders. The executioner is symbolized by a hawk that orders the swallows to come for execution. Thomas glorifies death as a sort of salvation: (Tindall, 142)

"All praise of the hawk on fire in hawk-eyed dusk".



The call of the loft hawk is full of temptation:

"Come and be killed".

The answer of swallows comes blithely:

"come let us die" (Thomas, 31)

In the poem, there is a heron that tries in vain to console the swallows. Thomas confirms that swallows are our grieved lives and the heron (the saviour) cannot give us the usual consolation:

**"we grieve as the blithe birds, never again, leave shingle and elm",
(ibid)**

**"now the heron grieves in the weeded verge, through windows of
dusk and water I see the tilting whispering Heron mirrored, go".
(ibid)**

In this poem, death is not fair, Sir John's hill is the judge; birds are not guilty, the heron is not sacred, and God is merciful in the common sense that we know. We must remember that the common expression (we are doomed to death) does not mean that we are condemned by death as a punishment but it rather means that death is the normal way and that our destiny is death at the end. Thus, it means that we will die sooner or later and this is what makes us feel horrified when hearing the word "death". (Maud, 127)

We usually do not approve the poetry that is full of emotional abstracted articulations that does not limit their significances. Yet; the poet must be praised because he expresses honestly the basic belief of those who considered themselves impious or non-religious: that the mind is unable to deal with the reality of death. What is left to face this reality is rebellion, scowling, spite, self-pity, passion and mercy; among these feelings, Thomas trends to choose passion and mercy. (ibid)



Sacrifice finds its echo in Dylan Thomas's poem. In the Christian traditional sense people are doomed to death and salvation is personally realized through Jesus Christ himself; the use of words such as (blest, have mercy on, save) in the poem hints at the traditional religious approach. We expect preaching in the poem but we do not find it. The hawk/executioner, in particular, can give moral signification, yet, the purpose of the poet is not so. The hawk of Sir John's hill, in the beginning of poem, hangs over the hill where he can thoroughly see the birds while the hill of Sir John puts the black cap to sentence us with death, we the small birds: (ibid)

"And a black cap of jack-Daws Sir John's just dons, and again the gulled birds hare,

To the hawk on fire, the halter height, over Towy's fines" (Thomas 32)

These words are descriptive and symbolic together; the hawk on fire receives the last rays of the sun and this is an appropriate description, yet, it is also symbolic referring to the burst of the day of resurrection within the poem. The hawk is portrayed as blasting fuse ready to explode, so the hawk is a metaphor of hell. Thomas seeks deliberately a neutral adjective to the hawk/ executioner because he does not want death to be spiteful, hence, he chooses an appropriate word (halter) to describe the hawk which means the final short drop that is done by the executioner. It seems that Thomas wants to say that death has no connection with ethics and earthly values; it is a burden on everyone's shoulders. (Maud, 125)

While Thomas speaks in detail and ardent passions about the heron; there is a sense of elegy about this heron:

"There where the elegiac heron stabs and peddles in the pebbly dab-filled" (Thomas, 32)



The two words (there where) accord with the idea of elegy poems; the heron is full of agony wading in the sedge covered with water catching dabs. Thomas was so smart in using word (sedge) because it has the same meaning of the word (siege) which means the roost of heron waiting for his prey according to Oxford Dictionary. Thomas finds out that (siege) has two suitable meanings to the context and its sound is appropriate to his plan, so he uses (shallow and sedge) as a pun adding a new tone to the cosmic predation and it has signification and accord with the acoustic pattern that he likes. (Maud, 128)

From this perspective, his insistence on, and confirmation of specific sounds can be understood. In fact, he tries to ensure the investment of sounds as part of meaning to sustain the poetical meaning. He sometimes tries to make sound as a way to reach to our feelings; sometimes the meaning and sound meet in his poetry to create the feeling that there is something attacking us other than words. The tumult caused by words as significances not as things where the phenomenology of language revives together with the meaning can be seen in his separation of the word (jackdaws) and making it jack-daws to be compatible with the sound of the word (crack) at the end of the preceded line to confirm the atrocity of death. (Tindall, 143)

Thomas employs specific phonemes such as the unvoiced and whispered phoneme /s/ which makes the vowels before it shorter. This gives the state of extended tranquil sorrow which comes harmoniously, bringing the state of sympathy and consolation to the slain birds while they are flying toward the house of the dead in the elementary town. In fact, Thomas is apt in using the verb (sailing) instead of (flying) because the verb (sailing) has the meaning of departure and sailing toward the unknown and this is



appropriate to the departure of birds toward their inevitable destiny as in this verse line: (Murdy, 27)

"for the sake of the souls of the slain birds sailing" (Thomas, 33)

He also employs specific sound syllables such as /əv/ in the words (shallow, swallow, shadow, sparrow, gallows and willow) or repeats the unvoiced and voiced consonant sounds as he says:

"paddles in the pebbly dab-filled" (ibid)

His repetition of the vowel sounds comes to reveal interrupted sighs through using these sounds. Thomas wants to give the sense in words which elevates from the flow and ebb of consciousness. The uses of the aesthetic language, as Thomas knows, tend to be more complicated and need more vigilance and delicateness to be understood. As it works as a mirror to the trained self-consciousness, it always tries to expand this consciousness, and to move the unformed mass of abstracted consciousness under the thought toward the light of the articulated expression. The vividness of Thomas's descriptive language deepens the meaning in his poem that glorifies the mortality of life. (Maud, 133)

The River and Death: Celebrating Death

Al-Sayyab's poem "The River and Death" (1960) is one of his famous poems that makes him well-known in Arab literary circles. He wrote this poem based on the musicality of the meter that appropriates the emotional and psychological state of the poet in composing his poem. He wrote this poem when he was in hospital and told by the doctors of his critical health



state. He was obsessed that death will confine him sooner or later. In fact, this presentiment haunted him continually since early age but it invaded him now extravagantly. Al-Sayyab feels unconsciously the repetition and slow move of the first two feet and the fast move of the second feet of Arab meter (Rajiz) which has a mourning tone, so close to the meter used by Dylan in his poem above. The funeral musicality of Rajiz's meter evokes the psychological falling apart and the enormity of the coming death that the poet expected. It is worth mentioning that Arab poets of pre-Islamic era used this meter in the sorrowful events due to its mournful musicality. (Tawfeeq, 54) As in most of his poems, Buwaib river is the objective correlative of death in his poem. As Thomas did in his poem, Al-Sayyab makes conversation with Buwaib river and interrogates it:

Are you a forest of tears?

Or bells of the dead penetrate my veins.

As Thomas did above in his poem, Al-Sayyab employs the phoneme /r/ in his poem as an external rhyme. Though this phoneme is the external rhyme, the poet inserts it as internal one more than 42 in 28 verses to give the state of oblivion that he suffers in facing the terrible destiny. Actually, this phoneme in Arabic poetry is compatible with the state of the poet who feels lost or sorrowful. Being well-acknowledged of Arab traditional poetry, Al-Sayyab finds out that this phoneme used by ancient Arab poets in writing elegies due to its elegiac musicality. Actually, sound as a part of meaning is used always by poets to sustain the poetical meaning. (Abdul-Jabbar 63)

As Dylan Thomas does in his poem, Al-Sayyab repeats the common expression (we are all sentenced or doomed to death). In the traditional Christian sense, people are doomed to death because of the original sin of



Adam and they are redeemed by Jesus, while when the Muslim individual sacrifices himself, he believes strongly that there is a divine rule that must be applied to the life on earth and this sacrifice is positive and active to make the wheel of life go in the right path. Therefore; Al-Sayyab is overwhelmed with peace of mind and comfort and ends his poem with this line:

"My death is victory".

Buwaib is similar to Towy in many common things; it is, just like Towy, shallow in some seasons where thousands of sparrows can be seen on tress and the heron catches small fish and oysters. It is worth mentioning that the "heron" in Arabic is called (Malik Al-Hazeen) which means the sad heron. As in Thomas's, the two words (there where) in Al-Sayyab's poem accord with the elegiac state of the poet; the heron is also full of agony wading in the sedge and shadow with catching small fish. Thomas portrayed the hawk as an executioner; in a similar way, Al-Sayyab depicted himself as one of the swallows, who is waiting helplessly for the hawk to reap his soul. Despite the fact that he is unable to deal with the reality of death, he faces it blithely due to the fact that his death will revive life:

**I catch sight of the heron wading sorrowfully
Between shallow sedge and planting shadow
Fills baskets with fish, water and flowers
I wish to wade following moon
Hearing thousands swallows on trees
Waiting for death at the hand of hawk
Drowning with blood to revive life**

It is needless to say that both poems of Thomas and Al-Sayyab expose identically the same prospective of children. Thomas's children are fascinated



with the strange world of death, Al-Sayyab's children are also fascinated with the invisible world of death. Al-Sayyab shows that the hidden door of death is Buwaib itself. He makes his river as an objective correlative to death though it is the source of life. As Thomas does in his poem, Al-Sayyab employs the hoorays with specific sounds that draw attention to the elegiac and sorrowful ambience of his poem. He returns to the first bringing, to his river, to the visions of childhood that will also be connected to his death. Al-Sayyab manages skillfully to make the reader feel the state of sorrow that he suffers from by molding the abstract images to concrete ones. The vividness of Al-Sayyab's language reveals depression in his poem that glorifies the futility of life. (Thamer, 292)

Conclusion

Thousands of poèmes or more by poètes of different nationalités tackle the theme of death in different ways. This study deals with poèmes written by an English poète and an Arabic poète to find out the similar features between them in tackling the theme of death. The first poème is "Over Sir John's Hill" written by the Welsh renowned poète, Dylan Thomas and the second is "The River and Death" by the Iraqi well-known poète, Bader Shaker Al-Sayyab. The most significant thing in these two poèmes that are so similar as if Al-Sayyab's poème was a replica to Thomas's one. The study analyzes the two poèmes to find out the common features that the two poèmes have. The study also gives an outlook of the lives of the two poètes and shows their status in the literary circles and evaluates the opinions that they have received from the critics.



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