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Keywords

Dylan Thomas, Sigmund Freud, psychoanalytic theory

**Freud's "On the Universal Tendency to
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In criticism on Dylan Thomas's poetry, especially that which discusses his early work, the consensus seems to be that Dylan Thomas is "obscure." As C.B. Cox explains in his introduction to *Dylan Thomas: A Collection of Critical Essays*, "[t]here is evidence that as he [Thomas] revised his poems their obscurity increased. It is also true that for twenty years, he proved incomprehensible to some of the most perceptive critics and poets of his time" (4). One such critic, as Cox notes, is David Holbrook, who accuses Thomas of inventing a "babble-language which concealed the nature of himself and his readers" (qtd. in Cox 4). However, as Cox counter-argues, "Thomas had acquired a popular knowledge of Freud and Jung, and it can be argued that his understanding of

the power sex holds over human life is decidedly realistic” (5). Although Cox fails to develop this particular counter-argument, Thomas’s own words reinforce the idea that he was significantly influenced by “popular” psychology, especially that of Freud: “Freud cast light on a little darkness he had exposed. Benefiting by the sight of the light and the knowledge of the hidden nakedness, poetry must drag further into the clean nakedness of light more even of the hidden causes than Freud could realize” (qtd. in Ackerman 25). Implicit in this statement is the notion that Thomas’s intent was not to be obscure; rather, he was trying to expound upon Freudian psychology in order to shed more light on the complex processes of the psyche. Therefore, many of Thomas’s poems consist of “babble language” only in the sense that our psyches are garbled to us; in translating the psyche into poetry, Thomas actually rendered an extremely accurate portrayal of how the psyche appears to human understanding. Thomas did, in fact, what he set out to do, expounding upon Freudian psychology by adding layers that were particular to his own personal understanding. In effect, Dylan Thomas takes Freudian analysis, which is dry and bereft of emotion, and infuses it with the intense emotion of the sufferer; the subjects of Thomas’s poems often suffer their conditions and analyze them simultaneously.

Being clear on one of Thomas’s poetic intentions does not, in itself, simplify Thomas’s admittedly difficult poetry. Fortunately, because Freud’s work functions as one of many structures for

Thomas to build upon, Freud's work can serve as a lens through which Thomas's readers can better understand his poetry. Freud's essay "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love" serves as such a lens for many of Thomas's early poems, of which "When, Like a Running Grave" is a representative example. This poem effectively expands upon what Freud's essay calls "psychical impotence" and its consequences.

According to Freud, psychical impotence occurs when "the two currents whose union is necessary to ensure a completely normal attitude in love"—the "affectionate" and "sensual" currents—have failed to combine in a man in a way that causes him to "seek only objects which do not recall the incestuous figures forbidden to" him (182). Here, the "affectionate current" consists of affectionate feelings a man has learned in childhood—these affections have an erotic dimension of course, but that dimension is "diverted from its sexual aims" (181). The "sensual current," which comes about during puberty, "no longer mistakes its aims" and "never fails [. . .] to follow the earlier paths and to cathect the objects of the primary infantile with quotas of libido that are now far stronger" (181); in other words, the "sensual current" is a sort of conscious sexual desire for the people for whom the subject has felt affection in childhood, i.e., parents and siblings. The "sensual current," because it is at first an incestuous current, must "make efforts to pass on from" the objects of affection and "find a way as soon as possible to other, extraneous objects with which a real

sexual life may be carried on” (181). Thus, when a man seeks “only objects which do not recall incestuous figures forbidden” to him, he is essentially avoiding sex with those for whom he feels affection because those people will inevitably have characteristics he learned to love as a child; the association with the “object” and the family is so strong that he rejects the idea of sex with such an object (182-3) and resorts to seeking objects he does not “need to love, in order to keep” his “sensuality away from the objects” he loves (183). For Freud, the “main protective measure against such a disturbance which men have recourse to in this split in their love consists in a psychological *debasement* of the sexual object, the over-valuation that normally attaches to the sexual object being reserved for the incestuous object and its representatives” (183). In other words, a man suffering from psychological impotence will debase the “object” so that that person cannot have the affection-status of a family member; thus, such a man will seek prostitutes or other women he deems unworthy of real affection.

In “When, Like a Running Grave,” actual and psychological impotence are overwhelmingly present and are very similar, in process, to the impotence Freud describes in “On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love.” The one key difference between Freud and Thomas is that, for Thomas, psychological impotence does not result from a dread of incest but from a dread of the death he associates with birth and, consequently, with sex. As George Weick affirms in his essay on the poem, ““When,

Like a Running Grave' tends to be read as presenting a rather commonplace theme: namely, that love, particularly in its explicitly erotic manifestations, and death are inextricably connected" (par 1). In "When, Like a Running Grave," Thomas—if we can assume the speaker is Thomas himself—tries to resist the onset of the sensual current but is eventually unable to resist; he thus moves from actual impotence to a brief period of psychological impotence in which he debases the sexual object and then finally to a psychological impotence in which he cannot enjoy the sexual act.

Thomas begins by translating Freud's description of the transition from childhood, when only the "affectionate current" exists, to puberty where the "sensual current" begins to take control. Aware as he is of his own mortality, Thomas recalls resisting the onset of the "sensual current" with a sort of hopeless tenacity. In the first stanza, Thomas accurately describes the onset of the "sensual current" as something that subverts a man's control over his desires: "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" (lines 1-4). Time, in the sense of the affectionate and sensual currents, is the time of the coming of age, the onset of manhood that hits a man violently—"like a running grave"—and sullies him with the "sensual current" and its taint of death. In the second line, Thomas is describing how something innocently developed from the "affectionate current" has suddenly

become something potentially harmful; “Your calm and cuddled” describes perfectly the sort of protection and comfort the affectionate current brings the pre-pubescent child: “The affectionate current [. . .] springs from the earliest years of childhood; it is formed on the basis of the interests of the self-preserved instinct and is directed to the members of the family” (Freud 180). This “calm and cuddled” morphs into something else entirely once the coming of age has taken hold; it becomes a “scythe of hairs,” a lethal reaper sharp enough, as George Weick conjectures, to “split hairs” (par 5). “Love in her gear” is the “sensual current,” and she is moving through the “house” of Thomas’s body. The “naked stairs” of this “house” suggest both a child’s vulnerability and his innocence—the “stairs” have not been tread before and are thus naked. If the house is the body, then the “dome” is the mind where all of the psychological processes occur. In essence, what Thomas is saying is that the sensual current has invaded his mind.

In the second stanza, as Thomas attempts to resist the onset of the sensual current, he describes the actual impotence that precedes merely psychological impotence in his particular case. He writes, “Comes, like a scissoring stalking, tailor age, / Deliver me who, timid in my tribe, / Of love am barer than Cadaver’s trap / Robbed of the foxy tongue, his footed tape, / Of the bone inch” (6-10). Here, we can assume that “Comes” is yet another verb for the subject “Love” (the sensual current) from the previous stanza. That

the sensual current “Comes, like a scissors stalking” reaffirms the notion that sexual love will lead to birth, which will only lead to death; as Elder Olson writes in his essay “The Universe of the Early Poems, “Scissors or knives are symbols of birth (on the ground that the birth-caul is cut open, the birth-string cut) or of death (on the ground that the thread of life is cut, the branch lopped)” (51); of course, in this case, the scissors signal both birth *and* death. In the second line, Thomas asks for deliverance from the taint of death that comes from the sensual current on the grounds that he is “timid in” his “tribe.” If we take the word “tribe” to be synonymous with “family,” Thomas’s being “timid in” his “tribe” suggests that the others of his family are not timid in comparison and thus exercise dominance over him. As David Holbrook notes in his essay “The Code of Night: The ‘Schizoid Diagnosis’ and Dylan Thomas,” Thomas did indeed have such difficulties with his family: “We learn from Constantine FitzGibbon that Dylan Thomas could not take the top off an egg unaided by his mother at seventeen. Obviously, too, his father wanted him to be the successful poet he had never become” (169). In Freudian terms, this timidity would result in an inability to shift desire from familial objects to other objects “with which a real sexual life may be carried on” (181). Thomas is also timid, of course, because of the inevitable taint of death that comes with the sensual current. Thus, when Thomas writes, “Of love am barer than Cadaver’s trap / Robbed of the foxy tongue, his footed tape / Of the bone inch” (8-10), he is basically saying that he has

been rendered physically impotent. He cannot accept the “normal” sensual current—“the Cadaver’s trap”—because of its connection to death. With family members, what Freud calls the “barrier against incest” (181) makes having affection for his family safe; he cannot pursue sexual connections with them and will therefore never cause the birth that leads to death. According to Freud, a man who allows the affectionate current to hide the sensual current in this way “becomes tied to incestuous objects in the unconscious, or, to put it another way, becomes fixated to unconscious incestuous fantasies” (181-2). The result of these fantasies is “total impotence, which is perhaps further ensured by the simultaneous onset of an actual weakening of the organs that perform the sexual act” (182). This is, in effect, what has happened to Thomas in “When, Like a Running Grave”; he has been “Robbed of the foxy tongue” and “footed tape / Of the bone inch,” all of which are possible references to a functioning phallus. As William York Tindall writes in *A Reader’s Guide to Dylan Thomas*, the speaker of the poem is “lacking ‘the bone inch’ of phallic death” (55). Indeed, that the “tongue” is “foxy” suggests that it is sexually alluring, and although Thomas could be referring to seductive speech, the other images suggest otherwise.

In the third stanza, Thomas expands on Freud by portraying a transitional stage between actual impotence and the onset of a merely psychological impotence—Freud himself does not account for such a transitional phase. Thomas pleads, “Deliver me, my maters, head and heart, / Heart of Cadaver’s candle waxes thin” (11-12).

Here the “head” refers to what is currently going on in his mind: the “unconscious incestuous fantasies” of the second stanza; of course they are conscious for Thomas, as he is both sufferer and analyst all at once. The “heart, / Heart of Cadaver’s candle” is, of course, the sensual current once again—Thomas is teetering on the boundary between the affectionate current’s total dominance and the sensual current’s complete onset. That the “Heart of Cadaver’s candle waxes thin” suggests that the sensual current is gaining some measure of sway: the “Cadaver’s candle”—the phallus—“waxes,” or grows as in an erection, but only just barely so—it only “waxes thin.” All of this occurs “When blood, spade-handed, and the logic time / Drive children up like bruises to the thumb, / From maid and head” (13-15). In other words, the miniscule gain in the sensual current’s sway occurs when one’s “blood” (desire) and “the logic time” (the inevitable, logical onset of manhood) “Drive children up” from both “maid” and “head” (both the objects to whom the sensual current should drive him and the incestuous fantasies that currently dominate his mind). In other words, Thomas is driven away from both “unacceptable” extremities of his sexuality.

In the fourth and fifth stanzas, Thomas experiences the onset of psychological impotence in which sexual activity is “forced to avoid the affectionate current”: “Where they [men experiencing psychological impotence] love they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love” (Freud 183). In the first two lines of the fourth stanza, Thomas attempts to merge the sensual and affectionate

currents so as to have a “normal” sexual relationship, but he is still clinging to the innocence of childhood, still trying to hold on to that affectionate current as a solitary entity: “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” (16-18). That Thomas is “sunday faced” suggests that he is at least maintaining a mask of innocence, but his having “dusters” in his glove suggests that he is planning to have sex. According to the *OED*, a “duster” is, a “light cloak or wrap worn to keep off dust” (4:1138); because the “dusters” in Thomas’s glove could not possibly be whole cloaks, it is safe to assume that Thomas might be referring to another type of protective “clothing”—condoms. In this sense, “time’s jacket” or “the coat of ice” both refer again to condoms; since “time” is the onset of manhood, the condom would be “time’s jacket” if intercourse were successfully carried out, and the condom would be a “coat of ice” if impotence were to take hold instead. That Thomas is both “Chaste and the chaser” reinforces the notion that he is trying to merge the innocence of the affectionate current with corruption of the sensual current, and his description of his eye as “cockshut,” a word which refers to “twilight” (*OED* 3: 421), further suggests that he is still experiencing transition; just as twilight is the threshold of night, Thomas’s current state serves as a threshold of sexual experience.

Despite his brief attempt to merge the two currents, Thomas experiences only the onset of psychological impotence. Taken together,

the last three lines of the fourth stanza and the first line of the fifth stanza illustrate the typically psychically impotent man who avoids a potential object of the affectionate current: “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” (18-21). Here, the verb that goes with the subject “I” can be none other than “Stride”; thus, it becomes clear that the “that” in line eighteen means “in order that.” Since the cadaver is a symbol for the sensual current and its taint of death, “Cadaver’s country” would be a physical place where the sensual current would be allowed to run rampant apart from the affectionate current—thus, this “country,” in Freudian terms, is a “debased” place. That Thomas strides “in my force” confirms that he is no longer actually impotent; the word “force” here most likely implies virility. Striding through “Cadaver’s country in my force” is thus a euphemism for the actual sexual act with one or more lowly women. Thus, lines eighteen through twenty-one basically translate to “I, in order that my phallus will not come in contact with a virgin’s vagina (“o”), join with debased objects instead.” Therefore, by the beginning of stanza five, Thomas has successfully moved from actual impotence to a merely psychological impotence.

Accordingly, the last four lines of the fifth stanza describe the sexual act. Thomas writes, “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” (22-25).

Because “morsing” is the “action of priming (a gun)” (*OED* 9:1098), the “pickbrain masters”—the incestuous fantasies and the sensual current of stanza three—have essentially “primed” the “stone” (i.e., the phallus) for sexual readiness; they have driven the speaker to sexual activity at last. In the context of the rest of the poem, “Despair of blood” is most likely the despair Thomas felt because of unfulfilled desire; “faith in the maiden’s slime” is most likely Thomas’s belief that tainting a maiden (a virgin) with the taint of the sensual current would lead to birth and thus to death.

Because of the union with a debased object, feelings like “Despair of blood” and “faith in the maiden’s slime” are temporarily suspended; they “Halt among eunuchs”—those who are psychologically impotent—so that sexual activity can proceed; the “nitric stain / On fork and face” results from this halting. As Tindall suggests, this “nitric stain” is the “acid stain of sin and shame on ‘fork’ (crotch) and ‘face’” (55); in other words, the “nitric” stain is the physical evidence of sex—it is the ejaculate. And although Weick suggests that the period after “face,” which is the first period of the entire poem, is merely the end of one long and involved sentence (par 5), what Weick calls Thomas’s “torturous syntax” (par 6) does not, in fact, translate into an intelligible sentence; instead, Thomas’s use of a period here suggests the release of sexual tension that has been building since the beginning of the poem.

Thus, despite the brief suspension of inhibitory feelings, stanza six catalogues the regret that Thomas feels after the sexual

act; he is now experiencing the type of psychological impotence in which he can no longer enjoy the sexual act. As Freud writes, “[i]f the concept of psychological impotence is broadened and is not restricted to failure to perform the act of coitus [. . .] we may in the first place add all those men who [. . .] never fail in the act but who carry it out without getting any particular pleasure from it” (184). Thomas experiences this second type of psychological impotence, but his lack of pleasure in the act begins with painful regret. He writes, “Time is a foolish fancy, time and fool. / No, no, you lover skull, descending hammer / Descends, my masters on the entered honour. / You hero skull, Cadaver in the hanger / Tells the stick, ‘fail.’” (21-25). While this stanza may seem to suggest actual impotence since the “Cadaver / Tells the stick, ‘fail,’” this command represents a return to an “impotence” that is self-inflicted; Thomas returns to it willingly after the “nitric stain” of the previous stanza. Because “nitric” suggests “nitric acid,” which is “a highly corrosive and caustic acid” so potent that it can be used for “dissolving metals” (*OED* 10.439), the “stain” of ejaculation has proven to be corrosive rather than generative, and all of Thomas’s anxieties about sex have proven to be well-founded. “Time,” the coming of age, has “been a foolish fancy” that has made a “fool” of the poet. The “lover skull”—the taint of death that comes with sexual love—has descended like a “hammer” on the “entered honour,” i.e., sexual intercourse. That the “honour” has already been “entered” into reaffirms the notion that Thomas is expressing regret rather than foreboding. Indeed,

the “skull” in line twenty-nine is a “hero” because it has triumphed; the sensual current has found expression. Once again, the consistent use of periods suggests the finality, now terrible and frightening, that accompanies the sexual act.

Beginning in the seventh stanza, Thomas ceases to be the sufferer and analyst, becoming instead a cautionary voice for the rest of the world. Unlike Freud, whose idea of healthy sexuality involves fusing the affectionate and sensual currents (180), Thomas believes that the only solution to problematic sexuality is to scrap the entire sensual current. In his new role as cautionary voice, the poet promotes this solution by warning men and women about the dangers of sex: “Joy is no knocking nation, sir and madam, / The cancer’s fusion, or the summer feather / Lit on the cuddled tree, the cross of fever, / Nor tar and subway bored to foster / Man through macadam” (31-35). The line “Joy is no knocking nation, sir and madam” suggests, once again, that joy (i.e., sexual pleasure or orgasm) is not generative. Although sexual intercourse can generate human life, the things that come with human life—“the cancer’s fusion,” “the cross of fever” and the “city tar and subway”—are all worthless because they are unable “to foster / Man through macadam.” Here, the word “macadam” *can* indicate “a kind of roadway” (*OED* 9: 148); however, the word can also be broken down into “mac,” a “Gaelic word for ‘son’” (*OED* 9:148), and Adam, the biblical father of all men. Thus, “macadam” refers both to a road or path and also to the world in general, since the world is made of all

the sons of Adam. Essentially, what Thomas is saying is that the products of sexual intercourse are worthless because they do not really help each other through the world—human beings in general only inflict death and disease upon one another.

In the eighth stanza, Thomas, speaking now only to the men of civilization, reiterates his somber message and argues that his solution to the problem of sexuality is indeed the only viable solution. Thomas writes, “Joy is the knock of dust, Cadaver’s shoot / Of bud of Adam through his boxy shift / Love’s twilight nation and the skull of state, / Sir, is your doom” (36-40). “Joy,” instead of being a “knocking nation,” is the “knock of dust” or death. When he writes, “Cadaver’s shoot / Of bud of Adam through his boxy shift,” Thomas is basically telling us where the whole destructive power of the sensual current began; “Cadaver’s shoot” is suggestive of a nascent happening that perpetuates itself through the “bud of Adam,” a phrase which could refer to those that “budded” from Adam—Adam’s children. Because the destructive sensual current began with Adam, much like original sin, “Love’s twilit nation and the skull of state” will be mankind’s doom as well; the sensual current cannot be purged of its taint of death and therefore must be extinguished altogether. Thus, when Thomas says, “I damp the waxlights in your tower dome,” he is hoping to extinguish the sensual current, represented by “the Cadaver’s candle” in stanza three, that has invaded civilization’s collective mind—“your tower dome.” If the dome is now the collective mind, then the “tower” of

that dome is the collective body that acts out the whims of the sensual current.

Once these bodily whims are eradicated and the sensual current becomes powerless, the vicious cycle of birth, death, and decay will be over: as Thomas asserts in stanza nine, “Everything ends, the tower ending” (41). This end yields a finality unlike sexual finality—it does not result in further destructive activity: “(Have with the house of wind), the leaning scene, / Ball of the foot depending from the sun, / (Give, summer, over), the cemented skin, / The action’s end.” (42-5). The “tower,” which is synonymous to the “house” of the body from stanza one (line 3), falls. Tindall compares the “Ball of the foot depending from the sun” to a “masterbuilder, his feet up as down he comes” (105). If the falling man is indeed a “masterbuilder,” then it is likely that he is Death personified; Death tumbles from his seat of control in the tower once the sensual current is eliminated. In the final stanza, Thomas argues that this elimination will enable men to take control of their lives. In the final two lines, he writes, “Happy Cadaver’s hunger as you take / The kissproof world” (49-50). The “Cadaver’s hunger” is “Happy” or fortuitous because men are now able to “take” the uncorrupt “kissproof world” (49-50) for themselves. In other words, as long as the tainted sensual current is unsatisfied (“Hungry”), men cannot fall under its control and are consequently able to maintain autonomy.

With the final stanzas of “When, Like a Running Grave,” Thomas accomplishes what he set out to do by building on Freud: he has benefited “by the sight of the light and the knowledge of the hidden nakedness” and has dragged “further into the clean nakedness of light more even of the hidden causes than Freud could realize” (qtd. in Ackerman 25). And although Thomas diverges from Freud’s analysis by condemning the sensual current altogether, Freud’s influence is perceptible even in this disagreement between the poet and the analyst; after all, Thomas, like Freud, sees problematic sexuality as a universal malaise. Indeed, Thomas’s addressing the entirety of civilization reflects the same sense of universality as Freud’s assertion that “we cannot escape the conclusion that the behavior in love of men in the civilized world today bears the stamp altogether of psychical impotence” (185). Thus, despite some major differences between Thomas’s view and Freud’s, viewing Dylan Thomas through the lens of Freudian analysis sheds a good deal of light on a poet who is all too often condemned for his convoluted syntax, his complex imagery, and his “obscurity.”

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