

«When Once the Twilight Locks No Longer»: Levels of Semantic Relationship

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ABSTRACT

The way a poetic text carries meaning poses a fundamental question concerning literary appreciation. The aim of this paper is a coherent interpretation of Dylan Thomas's «When Once the Twilight Locks No Longer». My procedure will be to clarify the different levels at which semantic relationship takes place in the poem in order to convey meaning. Analysis and close study of lexical-semantic fields and the way they relate and sometimes overlap because of the prevalence of metaphoric associations will render valuable help to the understanding of subtle but relevant implications of sense within the context of the poem itself.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The approach taken in this paper wishes to follow modestly the steps of two previous superb linguistic analyses of Dylan Thomas's poetry developed by Leech (1965) and Killingley (1974).

Geoffrey Leech seeks to differentiate sharply between linguistic description and critical interpretation as distinct but complementary ways of explaining a literary text. In his analysis of Dylan Thomas's poem «This Bread I Break», he emphasizes *cohesion*, i.e. the lexical and grammatical means which the poet draws from standard language to unify the poem. His discussion of cohesion leads to consideration of how different cohesive patterns are related to

foregrounded elements in the poem (Mukarovsky, 1964: 19). Elements that are foregrounded in cohesive patterns lead finally to consideration of context and interpretation of the entire poem. Lexical cohesion, Leech asserts (1970: 121), is even more marked than grammatical cohesion in Dylan Thomas's poem.

Siew-yue Killingley studies the poetry of Dylan Thomas from a stylistic viewpoint in terms of lexical patterning, semantic patterning and grammatical patterning. Lexical patterning is discussed within the general theory of *collocation*, i.e. the habitual association of a word in a language with other particular words in sentences (Firth, 1957: 194; 195; Robins, 1964: 67). Semantic patterning is discussed in terms of the use of recurrent words and imagery which for Thomas had religious significance (*blood*, *worm* and *green*); grammatical patterning is discussed in terms of developments in theories of grammar in those days (McIntosh, 1961; Chomsky, 1965). Killingley reaches the interesting conclusion that Dylan Thomas prefers unusual lexical collocations within normal syntactic order.

Both linguists therefore suggest that the poetry of Dylan Thomas is most fruitfully studied from a stylistic point of view in terms of the semantic relationship of the lexicon, and this has been my starting point for further study, since it has been commonly unregarded in later interpretations of Thomas's poetry.

In Semantics, the idea of *semantic* or *conceptual fields* derives chiefly from the work of German and Swiss scholars in the 1920s and 1930s. The vocabulary of a language is seen not as a vast number of simple lexical items, but as comprising groups of items which realize or give structure to areas or domains of reference in the real world. So the semantic field of colour, for instance, is reflected in English by the *lexical field*, i.e. the lexical set of items of colour terms (Lyons, 1977: 253-254).

Focusing on the lexical units of the poem, the main aim of my paper will be to establish these lexical-semantic fields, and to analyze the way they articulate and interrelate among each other. These lexical-semantic fields may work autonomously and at the same time interrelate at levels that the reader's experience of the world does not identify with, but immediately recognizes once they have been proposed. «In poetic language particularly, semantic and lexical fields may overlap because of the prevalence of metaphoric associations» (Wales, 1990: 175).

My procedure will be to establish and delimit these lexical-semantic fields in the poem taking into account that, from them, all the possible levels of semantic relationship will probably render valuable help to the understanding of how the poet constructs his own world.

The poetic text shows itself as a dynamic whole, however finished it is, as it has a written form, but never fulfilled in its countless possibilities: «... the energy of a poem never stops shaping...» (Corti, 1978: 77). The poem creates its own world where its elements acquire sense, where striking associations and similarities can be discovered from the only support and reality of language, and where the basic reference is the *context* of the poem itself. «The poetic word has a density of signification or an ingrained polysemy which belongs to it only in the poetic context» (Corti, 1978: 71).

When trying to appreciate a poetic text from an aesthetic point of view, one should not be interested so much in how the semantic levels are present, but mainly in the way they are articulated, their cohesion and internal coherence. Close analysis will show in which way different motifs arise departing from levels or constellations of meaning relationship which are established among the lexical-semantic fields described above.

Talking about different levels in a semantic relationship could make us think that they are independent, uniform and heterogeneous. Nonetheless, as we shall later see, they gravitate around different levels of sense experience. From there, they articulate and interrelate among each other, composing a coherent whole that we probably cannot appreciate in a first reading of the poem.

As this paper is more concerned with the analysis and interpretation of Thomas's «Where Once the Twilight Locks No Longer» than with theoretical approaches to Semantics, the subject matter of the poem will occupy a central role in the linguistic comments about the language used by the poet.

Although a literary critic may sometimes be quite justified in concentrating only on points of literary interest when dealing with a written text such as a poem, a literary analysis of a text, i.e. a poem, is always enhanced and completed by a thorough linguistic analysis of it. I have deliberately omitted in my interpretation of the poem any aspect of the poet's background and the literary context in which his work evolves, relying almost exclusively for my considerations on the context of the poem, in order to show up to what point Linguistics and common sense have proved themselves of great value for the unprejudiced literary scholar.

I have chosen for my discussion one of the early poems of Dylan M. Thomas (1914-1953), written on the 11th November, 1933 (Maud, 1963: 127), which appeared as one of the poems in Thomas's first volume *Eighteen Poems* (1934). Its verbal exuberance and density of meaning fits the type of analysis proposed.

WHEN ONCE THE TWILIGHT LOCKS NO LONGER¹

When once the twilight locks no longer
Locked in the long worm of my finger
Nor damned the sea that sped about my fist,
The mouth of time sucked, like a sponge,
The milky acid on each hinge,
And swallowed dry the waters of the breast.

When the galactic sea was sucked
And all the dry seabed unlocked,
I sent my creature scouting on the globe,
That globe itself of hair and bone
That, sewn to me by nerve and brain,
Had stringed my flask of matter to his rib.

My fuses timed to charge his heart,
He blew like powder to the light
And held a little sabbath with the sun,
But when the stars, assuming shape,
Drew in his eyes the straws of sleep,
He drowned his father's magics in a dream.

All issue armoured, of the grave,
The redhaired cancer still alive,
The cataracted eyes that filmed their cloth;
Some dead undid their bushy jaws,
And bags of blood let out their flies;
He had by heart the Christ-cross-row of death.

Sleep navigates the tides of time;
The dry Sargasso of the tomb
Gives up its dead to such a working sea;
And sleep rolls mute above the beds
Where fishes' food is fed the shades
Who periscope through flowers to the sky.

When once the twilight screws were turned,
And mother milk was stiff as sand,
I sent my own ambassador to light;
By trick or chance he fell asleep
And conjured up a carcass shape
To rob me of my fluids in his heart.

Awake, my sleeper, to the sun,
A worker in the morning town,
And leave the popped pickthank where he lies;
The fences of the light are down,
All but the brisket riders thrown,
And worlds hang on the trees.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

The first stanza introduces the idea of some liquid element being held. This idea is stressed and reinforced by the alliteration of *lo-* alternating with final *-ck*, *-ng* of the first two lines *locks... longer... locked... long...* and by the verbs *lock* and *dam* ². This liquid element is suddenly released... *no longer/Locked... unlocked* as the ex abrupto starting of the poem with a time clause *when once...* and the quick movement the verb *speed* suggest, to be later *sucked* and *swallowed dry*. The presence of the liquid element and what could be called the phenomenology of dryness and stiffness is related to the sea, as the aquatic element and what could be called the phenomenology of dryness and stiffness is related to the sea, as the aquatic element par excellence. There is an important lexical field around the sea: *sea, seabed, navigates, tides, sponge, Sargasso, fishes, drowned, periscope*.

The phenomenology of dryness is present in the poem through some terms related to breast-feeding: *mouth, sucked, swallowed, the waters of the breast, milky acid, mother milk, galactic sea*. The concept of dryness, a symbol of sterility and death, *the dry Sargasso of the tomb*, is enriched insofar as it is associated to weaning, the period in which a baby stops being breast-fed with its mother's milk and starts eating solid food; at the same time, it is one of the first steps when acquiring independence from one's mother.

Suckling and breast-feeding, on the other hand, make us think about the fact of giving birth to a *creature*, but the poet seems to go further back to show us conception and gestation of a new human being. From this, we would have an axis articulated through the motifs: *conception - gestation - birth - suckling - weaning*. The poet establishes a comparison between the worlds of poetic creation and the conception of a new human being. The Romantic organicist theory —I am thinking of Shelley— largely thought of the parallelism between the process of creation and embryonic development (cf. Adams, 1971: 192).

The poem originates as an embryo developing slowly until it comes out of its mother. *Hair and bone, nerve and brain*, refer to the physical condition of the *creature* while *rib*, also belonging to this field of words related to human anatomy, reminds us of Adam's biblical rib (Genesis, 2: 22), reinforcing the idea of inseparability and interdependence between the creator and his creation; paternity enters on this environment of maternity.

On the other hand, *stringed* points out the dependence of the embryo from its mother through the umbilical cord. The embryo is a *flask of matter*. «Life is a container» (cf. Lakoff, 1980: 51). Life is an explosion originating at the moment of creation, one of the key metaphors pointed out by Korg (1957: 6) in Thomas's *18 Poems*. If we trace back the origins of this word (cf. Room, 1986: 113-114),

a flask was either a leather or metal container for gunpowder (a powder-flask) or a wooden or skin container usually attached to the hip for wine or other liquid (a hip flask). Both entires seem suitable and complementary in the context of the poem. The fact that the *rib* is the part of the body mentioned instead of the hip provokes a semantic glide focusing the reader's attention towards *rib*, closer to the concept of creation which is so important in this poem.

Up to this point, the reader has not questioned yet who the speaker might be, a question which many critics have been wondering and arguing about for long (Emery, 1971: 103):

Plainly, the speaker is a creator: any father, God, the poet —probably all together. As in Joyce, the artist is God of creation, father of everything and everyone. His creature, therefore, can be Adam, a son, the Son, a poem, the creative instrument (word or phallus), or the projected self, his «ambassador» (Tindall, 1979: 32).

The theme here is genesis and birth and, in this sense, the presence of an upward movement towards light: *I sent my own ambassador to light, He blew like powder to the light*, can easily be noticed in the poem. This seems to be a search for light which is connected with the fact of giving birth. The poem, i.e. what is created, comes out seeking the light the same as a creature when it is given birth. The poet personifies this creature and gives him a craving for having its existence. The creature is at the same time its creator's self projected, *ambassador*, emphasizing its exploratory essence, *scouting on the globe*. Moreover, the liquid element is also seen as in an upward movement whose sound is evoked by alliteration *fishes' food is fed the shades* (F-SH-S F-D -S F-D SH-D-S) / *Who periscope through flowers to the sky*.

There is also a series of verbs: *locked, unlocked, turned*, and nouns: *locks, screws, hinge*, which make reference to the mechanical idea of doors, hinges and locks that can either be opened or closed, and which can be characterized by the marked feature (+metal), carrying clear references not only to birth but also to sexual intercourse. The are related to human physiology of sexuality and the obstetric aspect of birth.

The poet, from the level expressed before and which was termed liquids being held and suddenly released, supported by an important lexical field based on the sea, refers to the lexical field comprising human liquids which take part in the process of reproduction: *the waters of the breast, mother milk*, probably the liquids in the woman's womb, *such a working sea*, and the sperm, *milky acid*, spouted out in the ejaculation, *the sea that sped about my fist*.

It may not be out of place here to say that Dylan Thomas, a teenager when he wrote this poem —the very young poet's awakening to sexuality must not be forgotten—, is also comparing the creative act to ejaculation. Instead of ambiguity,

one should talk about the plurisignificative characteristic of the deep symbol, one of its main properties worth mentioning, since plurisignification can be understood as a correlation «both... and...» while ambiguity, as William Empson (1965) defines it, presupposes a correlation of the type «either... or...». *The long worm of my finger* refers both to the male sexual organ and to the poet's hand while writing a poem; the fact that the sea sped about his fist suggests that the sea is both the seminal liquid and the words as they are coming out of the writer's pen. In a way, the creative act, the creative imagination, may resemble a fluid movement, and this movement is not controlled except by the writer's hand when writing, shaping the images living in the poet's imagination.

The motifs so far encountered can now be summarized as follows:

- conception-gestation-birth-suckling-weaning,
- the awakening of sexuality in a young man,
- the setting out of the problem of poetic creation, and
- paternity and maternity.

All these motifs, as have been seen, interrelate through common lexical fields such as the ones referring to the liquid element, especially the sea, metals, the coming out towards light, and terms related to suckling and to the physiology of reproduction.

Parallel to these set of motifs there are others introduced by three key-words: *time - sleep - death*.

The effort after the creative act, also after working, a word which appears in the poem twice: *a working sea*, *a worker*, produces tiredness which leads to rest and sleep, *and held a little sabbath*. Sleep is described as a silent movement, *sleeps rolls mute*, occurring through time, *sleep navigates the tides of time*. The creature also falls asleep *drew in his eyes the straws of sleep*, eventually becoming *my sleeper*. Derek Stanford (1954: 46) offers a curious and in some way striking interpretation of *propped pickthank*, saying it refers to the male organ after ejaculation. Sleep could therefore also refer to the aftermath of procreation.

This *sleep*, a consequence of physical effort, is different from *a dream*, i.e. a series of scenes or events one fancies while sleeping. In Spanish, they are distinguished as two different verbs, *dormir* and *soñar*, but this is not the case as nouns. *Dream* comes into the realms of illusion (Lat. *illusio*, *-onis* from *illudere*), to where magic and prestidigitation belong: *magics*, an uncountable noun which does not accept the plural form but, following the suffixation *-ics* common in English, becomes *magics* in the poem, *conjured*, *trick*. Creation is seen as a mysterious phenomenon close to supernatural forces, however there is the reference to cheating and illusory effect, *trick*, included.

Equally relevant is the concept of time as expressed in the poem. Time is seen as a huge mouth devouring life from its beginnings, from birth. In *the mouth of time sucked*, the verb *sucked* introduces the semantic level of suckling. The same as a baby-child, time sucks the fluid element, therefore vitality: «... Vitality is a substance» (cf. Lakoff, 1980: 51).

Furthermore, the concept of time, *the tides of time*, and death, *the dry Sargasso of the tomb*, are stated explicitly through a lexical field of items connected with the sea. In his rise and fall, in the never-ending movement forwards and backwards of the tide ruled by the phases of the moon, the sea is subdued to time. This element of nature is analogous to man; the sea is the enclave of a domain mastered from the exterior. The sea, as life, seems to be conditioned by a cyclic doom following the same treatment as the whole of mankind, constantly languishing and being reborn. Thomas is very often describing things by reference to other things which are their representatives or surrogates. In this sense, the tomb is to life as the Sargasso is to the sea, and bearing in mind the old notion that all lost ships drifted at last to the Sargasso, so the tomb takes all (cf. Olson, 100).

Time leads inexorably to death —the dread of which is depicted especially in the fourth stanza— but one realizes that death installs itself in the creature's heart; it is its own centre *he had by heart the Christ-cross row of death*, where suffering is present in the allusion of the triple compound *Christ-cross-row* to either the Calvary or the crosses of a graveyard. What is taking shape —as an embryo takes shape— has the shape of death, *conjured up a carcass shape*, and takes possession of its creator, sucking its liquid element, *to rob me of my fluids in his heart*, or drowning it, also related to liquid, *he drowned his father's magics in a dream*.

The concept of life as an explosion, *my flask of matter, he blew like powder to the light*, is found again in *my fuses timed to charge his heart*, where *fuse* can refer to the clockwork mechanism of a bomb, a sense which is also conveyed by the verb *timed*. Otherwise, *fuse* as a verb can also refer to physical union or to two metallic pieces joined by the effect of heat. *Timed* supports the idea of the clockwork mechanism of a bomb, also present in the disintegration of matter suggested in the line *he blew like powder to the light*, but the reader must not forget that, within the context of the poem, time as the measure of life is very important. From this set of elements, it could be expected to find *time* as a noun and *fuse* as a verb (time fused) where in fact the opposite is found (my fuses timed). The poet suggests different acceptances of the words and plays with their syntactic functions, making use of the innumerable possibilities that the English language offers to him, in order to express the deep-rooted inter-connectedness of things.

Related to death there are, in addition to words like *dead*, *grave*, *tomb*, other words and expressions which delimit what could be called the phenomenology of corruption, decomposition and physical degeneration. These are *cancer*, *acid*, *cataracted eyes*, *flies* and *worm*. These words and expressions provoke an emotive reaction in the reader, since their *evocative values* (Ullmann, 1976: 149) are associated with the real anguish of physical death, which is even more dreadful because it is slow, *cancer*, a corrosive substance, *acid*, physical decay as the result of the passing of time, *cataracted eyes* and animals who live on rotten organic matter, *flies*, *worm*.

The emotive shock is a harsh one for the reader; from a context of gestation, birth and suckling images, s/he is roughly carried to the brutal presence of lethal images which these words evoke. Paying close attention to the immediate context in which these words are introduced, a striking juxtaposition of opposed concepts is found. In *milky acid*, there is a reference to the mother's milk and also probably to the seminal liquid: both substances are associated with life. On the other hand, *acid* can refer either to sour taste or sharp smell, though in this case it would function as an adjective and *acid milk* would be the right phrase to be found, or it can refer to a liquid with a pH inferior to seven used in chemical processes, with a corrosive action and which can burn skin. Therefore we have two words which will be marked as positive *milky* (+) and negative, *acid* (—), identifying the positive concept with life, and the negative one with death. In *the redhaired cancer* (—) *still alive* (+), the same juxtaposition is found again.

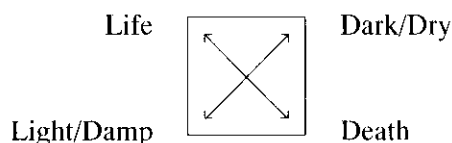
The *cataracted eyes*, though referring to a sickness which manifests itself with age, also suggest, especially in the context of this poem since there are liquid elements present, that *cataract* could refer to a great waterfall, a symbol of life, establishing in this way a contrast with dryness. Finally, and if the process of birth—as has been seen—shows itself as a coming out, this juxtaposition of positive and negative terms is also present in *let out* (+) and *flies* (—).

When trying to understand the possible sense of the line *All issue armoured of the grave*, one must mention the double but in both cases suitable acceptance of the word *issue*, which refers both to liberation of liquids and to the results or outcome of something. Returning to the lexical field composed by metals, a word like *armoured* can be understood. The embryo builds up its own body, but this body also relates to death: *all issue armoured, of the grave*.

The motif of death is interwoven in this way and as has been shown with these different examples, with the motif of creation-gestation. This complex inter-relationship of two cognitively opposed levels is also present in other passages in the poem as in *mother milk was stiff as sand*. The sand, because of its association with multiplicity of cells from the fertilized ovum, nevertheless serves as a

framework for comparison with the process of dryness of a nourishing liquid. In this way, the juxtaposition of two clearly opposed ideas is found in the same line.

I have integrated these opposed concepts to fit into the model of semiotic square proposed by Greimas (1966) in which an opposition of contraries is established between the concepts horizontally expressed; diagonally we have contradictory concepts, and complementariness between the vertical concepts or ideas:



Twilight, which appears in the first line in the first and sixth stanzas in a noun phrase premodifying *locks* and *screws* is a very suggestive term, because it comprises the dynamic of light-darkness in the poem and, from there, it refers to the Death-Life dichotomy present in the poem. *Twilight* refers to a moment between darkness and light; it can be both dusk and dawn, the beginning and the end of light, of life, what comes before and after sleep. But there is another possible sense referring to that state in which one is neither asleep nor awake, a moment in which consciousness is neither alive nor dead. Dreams belong to this twilight period.

This moment between obscurity and light which is associated with sleep/dream is the link between prenatal world and birth on the one hand, and between life and death on the other. It thus interrelates the concepts of conception-gestation-birth and death in the following way:

| | | | | |
|------------------------|---|------------------------------|---|-------------------|
| <i>Darkness/Sleep</i> | – | <i>Lack of consciousness</i> | – | <i>Conception</i> |
| <i>Light/Awakening</i> | – | <i>Consciousness</i> | – | <i>Birth</i> |
| <i>Darkness/Sleep</i> | – | <i>Lack of consciousness</i> | – | <i>Death</i> |

Conception will therefore be a state close to death of the human being, the moment from which the development of life will start, but also the development of death, its contrary. Time, during conception and death, is abolished, because, there is no consciousness. Procreation, from this point of views, is initiating, starting time, individualizing it in a particular human being.

Dylan Thomas, in all this dialectic process of contradictory concepts—creation vs. destruction, life vs. death— does however not restrict himself only to the life of a human being, but tries to introduce a universe to us where «... anthropomorphic imagination relates to the genesis, the origins of man: the ovum, the embryo, the homunculus...» (cf. Stanford, 1954: 39). This universe is subject to the inescapable

processes of life and death, of creation and destruction at the same time. In this way, the energy, the essence fueling these processes is the same.

The word *globe*, which appears twice in a structurally ambiguous sentence where its syntactic function is not clear enough—whether it is a noun or a verb—has two possible interpretations, referring either to the macrocosmos (the earth) or to the microcosmos (any object round in shape, the embryo). Bearing these two possibilities in mind, *globe* reminds us of the *worlds* in the last line of the poem (macrocosmos), where man belongs and which he creates. The worlds hanging from the trees suggest the image of the hanged man from a tree, a character who relates to death and who, tied to a rope, evokes the relationship of dependence of the embryo on its mother by means of the umbilical cord, *stringed, sewn*, after the interpretation of death inserted in the process of birth that the poet develops.

In *the stars... assuming shape*, we also have the universe present in the stars, assuming shape, the same as the embryo does. This juxtaposition of cosmic elements and human anatomy and physiology occurs again in *galactic*, a portmanteau word (Leech, 1969: 212), from *galaxy* (macrocosmos), which reminds us of our galaxy, the Milky Way, and *lactic* (microcosmos), evoking mother's milk.

The poet twists, makes words, sounds and syntax work, in an attempt to express poetically what can hardly be expressed; the perplexity and anguish every man and woman feels when facing topics which affect them directly such as life, death, procreation, which are paralleled in the experience of the world they have. The exposition of them is mainly tragic: life and death as two overlaid processes. However, concluding with this intricate net of interrelationships which may seem startling, the poet finishes with an invocation to birth, to creation, to light and life: *Awake, my sleeper, to the sun*. It is as if, after having been immersed in a harsh, dark and confusing world, we would eventually emerge, and all this reading experience had made us think more deeply about the paradoxical complexity and simplicity of all the external phenomena of the world we live, and the parallel in our own existence.

3. CONCLUSION

To me this seems a satisfactory reading of the poem since no line has been tortured to make its contribution to a plausible interpretation of it, and the usual grotesquerie of peripatetic interpretations of Dylan Thoma's poetry has been avoided. An attempt has been made to provide an analysis which may be acceptable to both the linguist and the literary critic.

Although I have by far not exhausted the entire possibilities of the poem, I

hope that I have succeeded in showing that the poetry of Dylan Thomas is rather complex, and therefore deserves serious consideration.

It is clear that Thomas's images are not formed by free association or the psychic automatism of the surrealists, ideas which have often been attributed by scholars, specially to his first books of verse. On the contrary, Thomas's peculiar imagery refers in an intricate and systematic manner to his particular view of the universe.

NOTES

¹ Thomas, Dylan (1971). *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas (1934-1952)*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation (1st ed. 1962), pp. 4-5, with the permission of Dent Publishers.

² «Dammed» appeared in the first publication of the poem in *New Verse*, in *Eighteen Poems* and in *Selected Writings*. «The "damned" of *Collected Poems* is a pun that one would wish to save Thomas from. Unfortunately it exists in the Notebook version 11 November 1933». Maud, R. (1963). *Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry*. New York: Scorpion Press, p. 150.

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