Dylan Thomas Essay, Research Paper

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Dylan Thomas’ Final Trip to America

Dylan Marlais Thomas was born in Swansea, Wales on October 27, 1914. He died November 9th, 1953 in New York City. In only 39 years, Dylan Thomas left an indelible mark on history. Thomas published numerous books of his poetry, plays, short stories, and various other works. He first toured America in early 1950, reading at a variety of public forums. This tour was very successful and Thomas fell in love with America, a romance that would bring his end just more than three years later.

“This first lecture tour of three months was a roaring success, or roaring and a success” (Sinclair, 166). Thomas gave great lectures on this tour, but more importantly, he discovered New York City. “New York seemed to egg him on” (Ferris, 232). Dylan grew fond of “some of the seedier Irish bars of Third Avenue and particularly?the White Horse Tavern” (Sinclair, 164). Dylan was even forced to leave his hotel because of “drunkenness” (Ferris, 232). Thomas had gained a reputation of being a heavy drinker and he wasn’t ready to disappoint his American followers. “Dylan lived up to his roistering and shocking reputation, while turning in some of his greatest performances as a lecturer” (Sinclair, 166). “He was loudly applauded,” Ferris wrote, “His rich voice overcame any problems of meaning. People frequently said that Thomas’ way of reading made them understand poems for the first time; but it may be under the influence of his voice, the literal meaning of a poem became irrelevant” (233). After only two readings in New York, Dylan moved on to tour the rest of the country.

Thomas moved west stopping in major cities all over America to lecture by day and drink by night. Tales of his growing dependence on alcohol preceded him. The quality of Dylan’s lectures deteriorated as he moved west on his tour of American bars. For the final five weeks of his visit to America, Thomas returned to New York (Ferris, 248). Dylan described his last two weeks in New York as a “liquid, libidinous fortnight” (Ferris, 250). Thomas admitted to having three affairs during the trips (Ferris, 250). He left for home on June 1st, 1950.

When Thomas arrived at his home in Laugharne, Wales he discovered that his trip to America did not prove to be lucrative enough to support his poetry for any extended period of time (Ferris, 252). Being at home, with his wife, Dylan recuperated from the wear and tear of his first tour (Sinclair, 173). “He wrote that he had to ruin his health again because he felt so preposterously well. Such were the healing powers of Laugharne – and of love” (Sinclair, 175). During this period at home, Dylan’s father became ill and “Dylan was shocked into his last fertile period of writing poetry” (Sinclair, 175).

By the end of 1951, Thomas had agreed to take another lecture tour of America, This time however, his wife Caitlin, having received news of his love affairs on his last tour, insisted on going (Sinclair, 176). This tour went on with moderate drinking by Thomas. Caitlin assisted by spending whatever money Dylan earned. The second and the first trips were very similar in form. Dylan left For Wales on May 15, 1952.

Thomas returned to Laugharne and his Father’s condition worsened. DJ Thomas died on December 16; Dylan’s own health was beginning to deteriorate. Years of heavy drinking, heavy smoking, and hard living were beginning to take their toll just two months after his 38th birthday (Ferris, 287). Thomas was suffering from many ailments, several pulmonary in nature (Ferris, 287). Despite all of this, needing money, Thomas agreed to tour America for a third time (Ferris, 288). He left on April 21, 1953.

Thomas soon began an affair with a woman he was working with named Liz Reitell (Ferris, 289). Dylan was receiving opportunities in America, but was “finding it difficult to produce anything at all” (Ferris, 291). Reitell and Thomas fell in love and Liz soon became worried about his drinking problem. He fell down a staircase while drunk and broke his arm. Reitell took him to see Dr. Milton Feltenstein who set his broken bone and treated him for illnesses held over from England (Ferris, 292). Thomas returned to England, as scheduled, a few days later.

Dylan’s condition quickly deteriorated. He decided to return to America shortly after coming home. Many feel that this was an attempt at self-destruction. His body could not take another trip to America, but Thomas was determined. Caitlin did not approve of this trip, but was not going to accompany him (Ferris, 297). Dylan took off for America on October 19th.

Reitell met Thomas on his arrival in New York (Ferris, 299). The next few days, Thomas kept from drinking (Ferris, 299). Reitell said the were “the loveliest days I had with him. He wanted to take walks. He wanted to eat. But he also was frightened” (Ferris, 299). After this period, Thomas began drinking heavily (Ferris, 300). Thomas’ health appeared to be continuing to deteriorate by the day. Reitell took him to see Dr. Feltenstein On October 23, he treated Dylan and told him not to drink so much (Ferris, 300). Thomas’ drinking only accelerated after this. Reitell, convinced that Dylan wished to die, accompanied him on Monday the 26th and watched him as he slipped into a temporary madness (Ferris, 301). The 27th, Thomas’ birthday, was more of the same. He was forced to leave his own birthday party because he felt ill; he returned to his hotel (Ferris, 301). Dylan spoke without any problems on the 28th and 29th (Ferris, 301). He spent the 30th with Reitell and another woman. On the 31st, Thomas resumed drinking heavily and began telling stories of his childhood and professing his love for his wife (Ferris, 302). Sunday, November 1st passed without any significant happenings. November 2nd started with Thomas drinking beer in the morning, the meeting Reitell and going to dinner with her (Ferris, 303). Tuesday the 3rd started with Thomas drinking in his room. He kept some previous meetings for drinks with Reitell and returned to the Hotel in the evening. That evening, he admitted to Reitell that he wanted to die (Ferris, 303). The next morning at 2:00, he left his room for a drink. He was gone for an hour and a half (Ferris, 303). Upon his return to the hotel room, Thomas said, “I’ve had eighteen straight whiskies. I think that’s the record” (Ferris, 304). Eighteen whiskies was probably an exaggeration (Thomas was known to embellish his drinking stories). Thomas woke up on the 4th and walked with Reitell to the White Horse to drink two beers. They returned to the hotel, Thomas sick (Ferris, 304). Reitell called Dr. Feltenstein again. He came to the hotel and medicated Thomas to ease his pain (Ferris, 304). After sleeping for a while, Thomas woke up and complained of hallucinations. Reitell called Feltenstein again. When he arrived, he injected Thomas with a half grain of morphine sulfate (Ferris, 304). Thomas’ breathing was depressed enough from his asthma, smoking, and a case of pneumonia that a half-grain of morphine could have been enough to limit the oxygen to his brain (Ferris, 306). Thomas slipped into a coma and was taken to St. Vincent’s Hospital. He lived on in a coma until November 9th. Thomas’ cause of death was under two headings, “acute and chronic ethylism” (alcoholism), and “hypostatic bronchopneumonia” (Ferris, 308).

Debate still surrounds Thomas’ death. The newest theory blames Feltenstein. Feltenstein failed to recognize that Thomas was a diabetic. The new theory claims that Feltenstein not only administered morphine, but also cortisone and benzedrine which would have propelled Thomas into a diabetic coma. The new theory also states that Thomas was not an especially heavy drinker, he simply drank enough to inebriate him every night. Nashold and Tremlett say, “It can be said with certainty that Dylan Thomas did not die of an acute alcoholic intoxication of the brain.”

These theories do not overshadow the fact that people around Dylan Thomas felt that he was going to die before the events in New York in the fall of 1953. Thomas did not want to live to the age of forty. He was a young poet and will stay perpetually young. Thomas says this in his own word in part of ‘Poem on His Birthday’:

?Oh, let me midlife mourn by the shrined

And druid herons’ vows

The voyage to ruin I must run,

Dawn ships clouted aground,

Yet, though I cry with tumbledown tongue,

Count my blessings aloud?

..And this last blessing most,

That the closer I move

To death, one man through his sundered hulks,

The louder the sun blooms

And the tusked, ramshackling sea exults?

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