



POEM ANALYSIS

“The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” by Dylan Thomas

Essay by Jonathan L. Price

Author: Dylan Thomas

Born: October 27, 1914; Swansea, Wales

Died: November 9, 1953; New York, New York

Country: United Kingdom; United States

Culture: British; American

ABSTRACT

“The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” is a carefully sculptured poem of four stanzas and a coda, its twenty-two lines scrupulously crafted for maximum power and, to some extent, maximum puzzlement. The poem, as the title echoing the first line suggests, is about a mysterious force, which the poet proceeds to define, qualify, and examine in a variety of ways. This force, presumably the force behind all nature and reality—maybe even a divine force—paradoxically combines life and death and links the poet—the “I” of the poem—to the universe.

KEYWORDS

- Death or Dying
- Flowers
- Life and Death
- Life, Philosophy of
- Nature
- Reincarnation
- Worms

TYPE OF POEM

Lyric; Meditation

APPEARS IN

Eighteen Poems by Dylan Thomas

Collected Poems by Dylan Thomas

The Longman Anthology of British Literature by David Damrosch (editor)

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Each stanza identifies the force in a slightly different way, defining a different aspect of its operation. The effect of the stanzas is cumulative and progressive; each definition qualifies and amplifies the last. Each stanza ends by establishing the poet’s relation to the force.

In the first stanza, the force is the “life” force or growth force that drives flowers through the soil into bloom. Death, however, is also a part of natural growth, and this same force destroys the roots of trees. After all, photosynthesis (one natural process) enables flowers to increase in size and bloom; worms, wind, or disease (other natural processes) can dramatically eat away at the roots of trees and cause them to topple suddenly. Simultaneously, the poet has linked the force of life/death

to himself, for it both drives his youth and will eventually lead to his death. Nevertheless, the poet is unable to communicate with nature ("the crooked rose") and express or articulate his kinship with growing things in life and death.

The second stanza sees the same generative/destructive power in the force but now extends it to an inanimate, though powerful, natural element: water. Again, the poet states that the force both produces flow and activity and dries up streams. Gravity "pulls" water down from mountains, creating rivers; when all the water (for the time being) has been "pulled," the streams disappear. As before, the poet sees the same force at work in himself, for the blood in the human body is itself a form of sustaining water—and biohistorically was once sea water. As a stream may dry up, so may a human being die and the blood cease to flow. Yet Dylan Thomas cannot mouth this truth to his own veins, to his own body.

The third stanza defines the force in the anthropomorphic metaphor of an unseen hand, suggesting a quasi-divine or at least a mystical being. Such a force sets life-giving water in motion but also creates quicksand, usually associated with death. Similarly, like a human hand that pulls in a line on a sailboat to control the wind and make the boat go faster, the trimmed sail simply pushes the boat farther toward its ultimate destination—which is the "shroud sail" associated with death and often seen as an allusion to the lover's death in Tristan and Isolde (twelfth century). The intertwining of all life and death is imaginatively startling but incommunicable because the poet cannot explain this universal kinship of all human beings to one another. Though the decaying flesh of the poet may turn into quicklime, used by a hangman to speed the decomposition of a hanged man, Thomas cannot articulate this spiritual-chemical unity to the person hanging from the rope.

The fourth stanza suggests a countermovement to the ultimate destructive power of the force with images of time, love, and heaven. Here the destructive process, seen as fallen blood and time itself, appears to lead to healing, resolution, renewal, and hope. In the final coda, the poet, echoing the recently announced theme of love, reminds the reader that although he cannot

communicate with dead lovers, his living body shares the full panoply of love's experiences.

The key devices in the poem are paradoxical metaphor, oxymoron, and pun—all interwoven. The central metaphor is that life and death are interlinked, inextricable, part and parcel of the same force. Thomas keeps this striking paradox constantly before the reader in a number of ways. For example, "fuse" and "flower" both appear in the poem's first line, though the destructive fuse of military ordnance seems completely opposed to the beauty of nature's flower. Yet, the "green fuse" is the stem of the plant through which, in Thomas's image, the flower bursts into bloom. The paradoxical image is carried further in the verb "blasts," for the destructive energy implicit in a fuse gives way to the demise of trees.

One form of paradox is oxymoron, a strategy Dylan Thomas employs repeatedly, yoking seemingly unlike qualities together in a single phrase that seems at first self-contradictory; "green" is young and growing, and "age" is old. Thus the phrase "green age" echoes the "green fuse" of the earlier line and suggests that though Thomas may be young, he is also aging: The force that is working in him to make his youthful exuberance (he was eighteen when he wrote this poem) is also the force that keeps adding years and experience that bring him ultimately to death.

A similar pattern to the paradox and oxymoron is that of punning, which occurs in a variety of forms. The near-rhymes characteristic of poetry are also puns that play on the similarities in words, suggesting the unity of the all-encompassing force that creates both life and death. Thus the verb "drives" of the first seven lines, with its suggestions of force, power, energy, and life, is transformed into "dries" in the seventh line: Life and death are virtually the same, almost contained in the same word. The driving force has now become the drying force, the one that eliminates water, the source of life.

There is a powerful triple pun in the words "sheet" and "worm" of the poem's final line: "How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm." In the most immediate sense, the worm is the slightly sinister, snakelike creature that eats decaying flesh in the grave, that has eaten the flesh of previous lovers in tombs, and that will

eat the poet's flesh when he dies and is ensconced in a winding sheet. The worm, however, is also a penis on a bedsheet, reminding one of the life-giving sexual force of love—this is also a force and a body part the poet has in common with previous lovers. Finally, the "crooked worm" going at the sheet is Thomas's finger writing this poem on a sheet of paper, as previous lovers have, though dead, immortalized their feelings about love in literature—giving the force a kind of immortality that transcends the decay of death.

The primary theme of this poem is the mysterious paradoxical "force," puzzling in its unity of nature, life, and humans. It is a unity between nature and humans, between the individual poet and all other human beings. It is a unity that ties together all things living and dead and that culminates in love. The unity is also that of creation and destruction, however, and in that sense, it is sobering and painful. In addition, the unity is incommunicable. Growth and death, creation and destruction, the blooming of the merest flower, the tumbling of large trees, the law-abiding citizen, the hanging man, and the man who hangs him—all are bound into one by the poem with its complex pattern of interlocking paradoxes, oxymorons, and puns.

Thomas reiterates his comment of incommunicability at the end of each stanza and in the poem's two-line coda: "And I am dumb to tell." He is "dumb" because, in slang occasionally characteristic of Thomas's love of play with language, it is stupid for him to talk to roses or to the veins in his own body or to the hanged man. He knows and the readers know these cannot hear and do not understand. He is also dumb in the literal sense, unable to speak, as a poet is constantly frustrated by words in trying to articulate feelings. So the deep, painful irony of the poem is that, though he is bound to the total physical universe, he is unable to express this unity, except by writing this poem, placing the "crooked worm" of his finger on the sheet of paper on his desk.

The "crooked worm" of the last line ironically unites with the paradoxical echo of the line from the first stanza, the "crooked rose," a traditional image of beauty and romance from medieval and romantic poetry. Roses and worms thus go together; they are part

of the same unity, even though one is usually identified with beauty and love, and the other with ugliness and death. The rose is literally crooked, bent by the same force (life-death) as the poet: Roses grow in spurts, and each spurt tends to bend the stem slightly. The worm is also crooked because it is alive: It is wriggling to move. Therefore, though "crooked" also suggests cheating and something amiss, it is finally a sign of life and vitality, as is the poem that the poet's crooked finger writes.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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