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Unit - VII Twentieth Century Literature

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7. Dylan Thomas's *The Hunchback in the Park*

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)

Life:

- ❖ Dylan Marlais Thomas was one of the most important Welsh poets of the 20th century.
- ❖ He was born on October 27, 1914, in Swansea, South Wales.
- ❖ His father was an English literature professor at the local grammar school.
- ❖ Thomas dropped out of school at sixteen to become a junior reporter for *the South Wales Daily Post*.
- ❖ By December 1932, he left his job at the Post and decided to concentrate on his poetry full-time.
- ❖ He greatly admired Thomas Hardy and regarded him as an influence.
- ❖ Thomas met Caitlin Macnamara in London and they married in 1937 and had three children: Llewelyn, Aeronwy, and Colm.
- ❖ He had served as an anti-aircraft gunner.
- ❖ During his fourth trip to New York in 1953, Thomas became gravely ill and fell into a coma.
- ❖ He died on 9 November 1953 and his body was returned to Wales.

Career:

- ❖ Thomas recorded radio shows and worked as a scriptwriter for the BBC.
- ❖ In 1934, when Thomas was twenty, he moved to London, won *the Poets' Corner Prize*, and published his first book, *18 Poems*.
- ❖ His original style was further developed in *Twenty-Five Poems* (1936) and *The Map of Love* (1939).
- ❖ He wrote film scripts during World War II.
- ❖ His last collection 'Collected Poems, 1934–1952' won **the Foyle poetry prize**.
- ❖ Thomas described his technique in a letter: *"I make one image—though 'make' is not the right word; I let, perhaps, an image be 'made' emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual & critical forces I possess—let it breed another, let that image*

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contradict the first, make, of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image, and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict.’’

Works:

Poetry:

- ❖ *And death shall have no dominion (1933)*
- ❖ *Eighteen Poems (1934)*
- ❖ *Twenty-five Poems (1936)*
- ❖ *Do not go gentle into that good night (1937)*
- ❖ *The Map of Love (1939)*
- ❖ *The Hunchback in the Park (1941)*
- ❖ *Deaths and Entrances (1946)*
- ❖ *Fern Hill (1937)*

Prose:

- ❖ *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog (1940)*
- ❖ A collection of short prose stories.

Radio drama:

- ❖ *Under Milk Wood*: A Play for Voices (1954)
 - ❖ A film version of *Under Milk Wood* directed by Andrew Sinclair, was released in 1972.

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About the poem:

- ❖ *The Hunchback in the Park* was originally written on **9 May 1932** when Dylan was seventeen years old.
 - ❖ He had revised it and first published in his '*Life and Letters Today*' on **October 1941**.
 - ❖ Later reprised it and included in his *Deaths and Entrances* (1946).
- **Title:** *The Hunchback in the Park*
 - **No of stanzas:** Seven
 - **No of lines in each stanza:** Six
 - **Total no of lines:** 42
 - **Published in:** 1941
 - **Tone:** Sombre and melancholic

Text:

The Hunchback in the Park

*The hunchback in the park
 A solitary mister
 Propped between trees and water
 From the opening of the garden lock
 That lets the trees and water enter
 Until the Sunday sombre bell at dark

 Eating bread from a newspaper
 Drinking water from the chained cup
 That the children filled with gravel
 In the fountain basin where I sailed my ship
 Slept at night in a dog kennel
 But nobody chained him up.*

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*Like the park birds he came early
Like the water he sat down
And Mister they called Hey mister
The truant boys from the town
Running when he had heard them clearly
On out of sound*

*Past lake and rockery
Laughing when he shook his paper
Hunchbacked in mockery
Through the loud zoo of the willow groves
Dodging the park keeper
With his stick that picked up leaves.*

*And the old dog sleeper
Alone between nurses and swans
While the boys among willows
Made the tigers jump out of their eyes
To roar on the rockery stones
And the groves were blue with sailors*

*Made all day until bell time
A woman figure without fault
Straight as a young elm
Straight and tall from his crooked bones
That she might stand in the night
After the locks and chains*

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*All night in the unmade park
After the railings and shrubberies
The birds the grass the trees the lake
And the wild boys innocent as strawberries
Had followed the hunchback
To his kennel in the dark.*

Introduction:**Summary:**

The speaker of the poem is an adult poet who depicts the pathetic life of the hunchback and at the same time recaptures his treasured childhood memories. The park mentioned in the poem is Cwmdonkin Park of Swansea where Dylan had spent his joyous childhood days.

As the poem begins, the poet gives a vivid picture of the park along with pathetic depiction of the hunchback. The solitary hunchback comes to the park quite early with its opening and stays there seeking to enjoy the beauty in the park till it gets locked. The hunchback experiences melancholic calmness in the park where he feels at one with the elements of nature until the taunts and mimicry of the town boys interrupt his musings. He is insulted, teased and chased by the truant boys. The town boys, leaving the hunchback alone, enjoy themselves having played differently. On the other hand, the hunchback being alone without any disturbances takes advantage of the boys' going away; he begins to have day dreams. He creates a fantasy image of a young woman who is tall and straight as elm tree. The perfectly formed woman is, however, only a vision, an ideal counterpart for the man's crooked body. But the reality begins as the park shuts the hunchback out and the boys chase him to his kennel abode. Cwmdonkin park in Swansea is memory's centre here. The poem is written in the memory of a hunchback in that very park where the poet spent many of his happiest childhood days. The poet having spent much of his childhood at the park has at this moment special childhood memories:

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Eating bread from a newspaper
 Drinking water from the chained cups
 That the children filled with gravel
 In the fountain basin where I sailed my ship. (7-10)

The poet in these lines depicts the activities done by the hunchback - eating bread from a newspaper and drinking water from the chained cups. All of a sudden, there is dramatic shift in the narration of the poem — objective description of the hunchback shifts to the first-person narrator. While describing the activities of the hunchback, the poet happens to recall his own childhood days when he used to sail the ship in the fountain basin.

The hunchback that the poet describes is simply a nameless person. He is lonely and looked down by others. Even the truant boys disrespect him. The hunchback is an adult person living with many anxieties of life as contrasted to the happy-go-lucky children in the poem:

And the old dog sleeper
 Along between nurses and swans
 While the boys among willows
 Made the tigers jump out of their eyes
 To roar on the rockery stones
 And the groves were blue with sailors. (25-30)

The poet here depicts the pathetic condition of the hunchback. He is 'the old dog sleeper' who is alone in the midst of the beauty of the park. The young boys on the other are doing different activities. They enjoy by making the tigers jump on the rockery stones. Along with the depiction of pathetic condition of the hunchback and playful activities of the boys, the poet happens to recall memory of Cwmdonkin Park. The chained cups in the fountain basin, the rockery and willow groves are still to be seen there. The willow groves, recaptured are still blue with sailors.