Deadly Desire
A Psychoanalytical Reading of Desire and Death in the Poetry of Dylan Thomas

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1. Introduction

Dylan Thomas is infamous for his flamboyant lifestyle, excessive drinking, and bawdy behaviour. Critics have for years focussed on this rather than his works. David Daiches describes Thomas as someone who “talked and dressed and behaved and lived like a poet” (1), a somewhat romanticised image. Others have condemned the roaring boy image Thomas sustained throughout his life (Moylan, 70). There is no point in denying that Thomas was eccentric, or that his eccentricity influenced his work. He is a personal poet rather than a political or social one, writing from his own observations (Werry, 250). His style is distinct to the point that his poetry is sometimes considered cryptic and confusing. His experiments with form and meaning are a “violation of expected continuities” (Bradbury & McFarlane, 24), something which is considered a trademark of the modernist era as well as of Thomas’ poetry. Another trademark of his poetry is the two constantly recurring foci in his works: sex and death. The two are locked in a never-ending cycle of life and death, wherein coitus and death are interlinked. Thomas approaches, with few exceptions, this leitmotif through a juvenile perspective of women and men.

Sex and death within a triadic family structure, from a psychoanalytical perspective, form the framework of the Oedipus complex. The Oedipus complex refers to a child’s desire to replace the Father in the position of power and thus act out its incestuous desire for the Mother (Simon & Blatt, 163). The child’s repression of this desire stems from a fear of castration imposed by the Father, which in other words refers to a fear of death (as the penis is a symbol of life). The desire itself stems from libido, occasionally known as the life-drive or Eros. It refers to the desire for coitus, survival,
and other life-creating/preserving instincts. The libido is contained in the unconscious part of the psyche called the id, wherein all primal instincts dwell (Barry, 92). It is opposed by the other main drive important within the Oedipus complex; the death drive, also known as Thanatos. It refers to self-destruction, a drive towards death. Within the Oedipus complex these two create an emotional turmoil within the child, and are as instincts equal. The child’s desire to sexually possess the Mother is then merged with the desire to die, as that is the consequence if the sexual desire is acted upon. However, the child also harbours a desire to survive and therein lies the struggle, between the desire for sex/death and the will to survive. In order to survive, the child creates prohibitions to hinder itself from acting on its incestuous desire.

The main prohibition, stated by Freud, is visible in the construction of the Mother-object as sexually “taboo” (21) for the child. As sexually taboo the Mother is sanctified, beyond reach for the child. Luce Irigaray calls her the “virgin-mother” (416), characterised by silence and anonymity. She is a passive recipient who “must remain forbidden” (Irigaray, 418). The virgin-mother is a clarifying development of the Mother-object conceptualised by Freud, as Irigaray has centred Freud’s Mother-concept rather than continuing with Freud’s focus on the male roles. The idea of the virginal Mother-object also reflects back on the position of the Father who is given a position of power, as the taboo does not apply to him. Freud’s concept of the Father is that he is the law by which the child must abide. Julia Kristeva develops Freud’s argument in stating the poetic use of the sun as the main paternal image: an image that is feared, murderous, but also desired (211). The poetic voice is doomed to struggle with the Father-sun, mainly
because the sun carries the “paternal law” (Kristeva, 212) but also because the Father is the base of “Freud’s theory of sexuality” (Chodorow, 244).

The aim of this thesis is to explore Dylan Thomas’ corpus of poetry from a psychoanalytical perspective focussing on the Oedipal desire and death. Contrary to most other critics this paper will not take into account Thomas’ biography, but will instead focus on the poetry itself. Four poems representative of his corpus of poetry have been selected for the analysis; “If I Were Tickled by the Rub of Love”, “The Tombstone Told”, “Unluckily for a Death”, and “On the Marriage of a Virgin”. These are representative of his work as they are from different times, of varying length and structure, and deal with seemingly different topics. Nevertheless, as the analysis will show, all the poems have the Oedipal family triad in common and therefore indicate the importance of death and desire in Thomas’ work. The centrality of these foci points to a strong Freudian influence on Thomas and his work, and that would place Thomas amongst the modernist literati, as Freud was a strong influence on modernism.

2. Analysis

The analysis is divided into three separate parts of analysis dealing with the maternal, the paternal, and the child’s characteristics respectively. In each section, there will be a more thorough explication of the relevant theory briefly mentioned in the introduction, followed by a close analysis of the selected poems in order to highlight the previously mentioned Oedipal tendencies in Thomas’ poetry.

2.1 Virginal Mothers
Women are slightly overlooked in Freud’s analyses as he often has only one position for them, as the function of a passive Mother-object of the child’s desire (Chodorow, 239). In order to not act on the desire to sexually possess the Mother (to avoid castration-death) the child has to turn her into something unapproachable. Now, Freud defines taboo as “sacred”, “forbidden”, and “unclean” (21). All three definitions can be considered in connection to the relationship between the Mother and the child; the Mother in her function is sacred, forbidden sexually for the child, and the child would become tainted and unclean if the taboo were to be “transgressed” (Freud, 25). Hence, a symbolic “virgin-mother” (Irigaray, 416) is put in place, as a hindrance for acting on behalf of the desire the child unconsciously wants to enact. The virginal attribute is there to accentuate the Mother’s forbidden Oedipal-object status.

The virgin-mother is imminently visible in the poem “Unluckily for a Death” where the object of desire is described as both a “nun saint” (Thomas, 34) as well as being attributed with children (Thomas, 42 & 56). Thus she is given religious, virginal, and maternal connotations all at once. However, the depiction is slightly ambiguous as she is also described as desirable and deadly; e.g. “symbol of desire” (Thomas, 35), and “death in the carved nunnery” (Thomas, 46) wherein the child-voice directly points to her as the object of its desire as well as annotating her with death. The death aspect is furthered by the recurring “wintry” (Thomas, 12) depictions of the Mother-object, wherein the emphasis is on her coldness and unresponsiveness. Consequently, the word “carved” (Thomas, 5) is repeatedly used in the depictions of the saintly nun and she is also described as having a “clay cold mouth” (Thomas, 8) – this imagery in combination with the earlier ‘wintry’ carries connotations of cold and unresponsive statues. In other
words, there is a strong will to turn the Mother-object not just into a virgin-mother but even further into an inanimate object of virginity. This gives her a passive position as she then is unable to act on her own accord, and even when she is depicted in connection with death she is still fairly passive as she is more of a death bringer rather than an executioner of death. Death bringer in the sense that she is more of a bait meant to tempt the child into transgressing the taboo. The executioner should instead be seen as the Father, as the child describes him as a personification of “death” (Thomas, 28) whereas the Mother-object is merely depicted in connection to death. The Mother-object is thus given the passive role of the Mother-object as well as the role of a dangerous temptress, as she is described as “sensual” (Thomas, 5) in combination with death. This duality of the Mother-object points to a certain struggle with keeping the desire for the Mother-object at bay as she then is seen as sexually accessible but with horrendous consequences (i.e. death) if the desire to sexually possess her is acted on. Hence the child’s depiction of her as “[l]ucklessly” (Thomas, 53) lying patient refers to her incapability to respond to a sexual approach and thus the prospect of trespassing on, for the child, sacred grounds is limited even further (as is then the risk of being castrated).

The idea of an inanimate, dead virgin-mother is followed up in “The Tombstone Told” where the virgin is dead and “at rest” (Thomas, 3) in a grave. Again, the Mother-object and death are connected but this time around she is not a bringer of death. Instead death is what comes to the virgin through the actions of someone/something else. The child-voice relates how the virgin “lay on a stranger’s bed” (Thomas, 11) which narrates how she first was possessed by the Father in the consummation of their marriage. The depiction of her as crying and weeping “in pain”
(Thomas, 19) even though “her eyes” (Thomas, 20) are smiling underlines this interpretation. These lines (17-20) could be seen as a violent depiction of the pain in giving up her virginity at the same time as she does it willingly. However, later when the poetic voice switches to the virgin-mother (and thus changes the point of view) she implies that she might still be a virgin as she “died before bedtime came” (Thomas, 26). However, it changes yet again to continuing with a description of her “womb” (Thomas, 27) bellowing, which refers to violent involuntary convulsions. This could refer to coitus, labour, and dying; i.e. muscular contractions during orgasms, labour contractions, and death throes. This three-headed image gives an interesting insight into the child’s position; the child is conceived through the union of the Mother-object and the Father, and in giving birth to the child she dies. Again the idea of the prohibited desire can be distinguished, as death is present as soon as the child comes into contact with the Mother-object’s genitalia (during labour). This means that death is unavoidable as soon as the taboo is transgressed, but since the child is in a rather passive role during labour the Mother-object is forced to die instead. Also, because it is implied she might still be a virgin the child is able to maintain the idea of the Mother-object as the virgin-mother. Therefore female virginity is in one sense equalled with life, as it needs to die for another type of life to exist. Thus, it lends virginity a sense of preciousness; something to guard as the “stone bird” (Thomas, 25) is guarding the virgin in the poem. The stone guard is the child’s joint visualisation of the Father and the child’s wish to repress its incestuous desire. This is because the Father is the reason for the child’s desire to repress its emotions, as he is the one imposing the taboo, and thus the child wishes to guard itself from acting on the desire so as to avoid dying.
Similarly, the idea of female virginity is depicted as sacred in “On the Marriage of a Virgin” where the state of virginity is described as “miraculous” (Thomas, 5), and as such is equalled to “unending lightning” (Thomas, 6). The sense of the poem is that virginity is serene and that through coitus this serenity is lost. Again, the discussion of taboo arises, but now in a different shape. If in “Unluckily for Death” the consequences of disregarding the prohibition were severe for the child, then in “On the Marriage of a Virgin” the key consequence of the transgression is the Mother-object’s loss of sacredness. The transformation of the Mother-object into a virgin-mother seems successful in this poem in comparison to the other poems, as the child seems to be able to quench its libidinal desire for her. However, the play of words suggests differently, the Father can be seen as equal to “the sun” (Thomas, 4) and the child is then the “other sun” (Thomas, 14). The sun is a powerful metaphor due to its life-giving connotations in nature; hence the Father-sun is a potent figure, but the lexeme sun is also close in proximity to son, which then could be linked to the child’s position in regard to its parents. Important to note is that the child-sun is distinguished from the Father-sun by the descriptive “other” (Thomas, 14) and with the arrival of another sun, the first sun disappears. What then can be deduced is that the child has not managed to turn the Mother into a virgin-mother, but that the child is in sole charge of the Mother as there is no Father to oppose now the child has appeared on the scene. Within the Oedipus complex this means that the child has no need to repress its desire for the Mother-object, as the Father who normally imposes the taboo is gone. This furthermore means that the sexual desire for the Mother-object is not relevant as the point with it is to gain control, and here the child is already in the supreme power position as the Father left as soon as
the Mother-object’s serene virginity was lost. This is evidenced in the child’s depiction of the Mother-object as experiencing the “jealous coursing of the unrivalled blood” (Thomas, 14), wherein the ‘unrivalled blood’ refers to the child. In other words, the child is acting out its desire rather than liberating itself from the complex.

The fear of the consequences of the Mother-object’s loss of serenity is highly relevant if the Father is still present as in “If I Were Tickled by the Rub of Love”. The loss of this fear is the key aspect in the poem, though it should be noted that this means only the loss of fear – not the loss of consequences. This fear is visible as even when women are referred to in loving tones they are still depicted together with death; e.g. “dead on the sweethearts’ toes” (Thomas, 28). Women and death are thus presented conjointly, and again the Mother-object is presented as a death bringer rather than an executioner of death. The Mother-object is personified by a “rooking girl” (Thomas, 2) carrying connotations of furtiveness and death. The death-aspect of the Mother-object is especially apparent in “lover, mother, lovers, or his six / Feet in the rubbing dust” (Thomas, 41-42), where the Mother-object is inserted in between ‘lover’ and ‘lovers’, immediately followed by a depiction of death in the dust. What can be asserted from these lines is that the Mother-object and coitus with her, is equal to death: ‘six feet’ refers to six feet under (a common colloquial expression of being dead and buried), and ‘the rubbing dust’ refers to sexual intercourse. The latter is due to the lexical connection to the ‘rub of love’ in the title of the poem, but also because of the sexual connotations of rub. The rub is furthermore, in the same stanza, described in connection to “the knobbly ape that swings along his sex” (Thomas, 37) and a “damp love-darkness” (Thomas, 38). The former can be seen as a metaphor for the penis, and the latter as representing the
vagina due to the addressing of the Mother-object as love and sweetheart at different points in the poem. Altogether, coitus with the Mother-object is depicted as deadly for the child. The child’s fear of death is imminent throughout the poem, and in the poem it is made clear that this fear would not exist if it “were ticked by the rub of love” (Thomas, 1). Towards the end the child seems to come to the realisation that the only solution to this problem is to achieve equal power status with the Father, e.g. “[m]an be my metaphor” (Thomas, 49). A metaphor is used to equal one thing with another using an implicit comparison. It is noteworthy that the child asks the Father to be its metaphor – it does not ask to become like the Father but the Father to become like the child. In other words, the child wishes for the Father to degrade himself from his superior position and thus allow the child access to the Mother-object.

To summarise, all of the poems depict the child’s view of the Mother-object within the Oedipus complex in various stages. The females in the poems are all depicted as passive Mother-objects attributed with death and virginity. In some instances she is the receiver of death but more often she is the bringer of death. That said, she is the bringer of death in the same way a weapon is – without someone else’s active involvement it cannot do anything. Thus, the Mother personifies the consequences but the Father is the real threat as he imposes the taboo of the Mother. Therefore the child’s depiction of female virginity as something sacred is symbolic of the child’s continuous attempts at turning the Mother-object into a virgin-mother, as that would decrease the risk of transgressing the taboo imposed by the Father. The Mother-object in the poems mirrors Freud’s Oedipal Mother-object as well as Irigaray’s virgin-mother, as they all possess the same passive objectified role in which taboo and virginity are core attributes. The
constant focus on the Mother’s sexual status is actually a focus on the child’s incestuous
desire for her, just as the constant focus on death is a focus on the child’s fear of dying.

2.2 Paternal Suns

Many of Freud’s theories focus exclusively on men and as such their positions are often
much more nuanced than the female object-position (Chodorow, 244). The male position
is a more active symbol of power with desires and actions of its own. That is to say, the
opposite of the virginal Mother-object is the castrating Father, the wielder of power
capable of removing the child’s own potential to power. The Father is placed in the
position of “the sun”, a position that renders him a status “coveted but also feared”
(Kristeva, 211). The child’s rivalry with the Father stems from their mutual desire for the
Mother-object, as the child’s first Mother-object of desire is the same as the Father’s
replacement of his own first Mother-object. The Father is thus seen as a sexual rival but
also as a figure the child tries to identify with, as such identification would give it access
to the virgin-mother (Simon & Blass, 166). This leaves the child in an emotionally
ambiguous state as it, in wanting to identify with the Father, displays affection for him,
but in seeing him as a rival, it also resents him.

In “If I Were Tickled by the Rub of Love” the status of the Father is related
to resentment and bitterness. The Father is described in terms of “sick old manhood”
(Thomas, 24) and “old man’s shank” (Thomas, 32); the child’s aversion towards the
Father is clearly visible in these depictions. There is no ambiguity in the Father’s status,
he is the Father-death and the child voices its fear of castration in light of the Father-
death; e.g. “the words of death are dryer” (Thomas, 46) than the child’s erection. The
potency and the power of the Father are this way enforced and strengthened in relation to the child, as the Father is depicted with stronger adjectives and adverbs, e.g. when “[t]he words of death are dryer” (Thomas, 46) than the child’s erection which then presumably is not as dry. In using the comparative form of the adjective, Thomas states that the Father possesses more of whatever trait the child has - thus making him stronger. Another example of the Father being imbued with power is when the child equals itself to “Christ” (Thomas, 45). In Christian belief Christ is the Son of God, a powerful position but still not as powerful as God who possesses almighty powers. Hence, if the child is assuming the position of Jesus Christ then the Father is by the same token referred to as God, as their positions in their respective parent-child relationship are the same. The parent-child relationship is furthered by the notion of God as the creator; the Father is the creator of the child and its environment as God is the creator of everything including Jesus Christ. This interpretation is further supported since the Father alone is allowed to enter the sacred grounds of the virgin-mother.

The Father’s God-like status is much more developed in “On the Marriage of a Virgin” where the “sun” (Thomas, 8) is used as a metaphor for the Father. As mentioned earlier in the analysis, the sun carries life-giving connotations in nature – thus lending the Father similar attributes of power and potency. Further, he is also assigned imagery implying he is old and belonging to the “golden yesterday” (Thomas, 3). In other words, he is depicted as the Father-sun with all the notions of life-giving intact but since he is also yesterday’s sun he is merely a shadow of what he once was in terms of power. To underline the Father-sun’s loss of power he is depicted as a “golden ghost” (Thomas, 11), which again carries connotations of faded and bleached out strength, as a ghost is
supposedly a mirrored shadow of what one was before dying. That said, the ghost can also be a religious reference to the Holy Ghost – perhaps more commonly known as the Holy Spirit. This Christian reference lends the Father-sun connotations of supreme power that then counters the weak and faded ghost-version of him. This points to the Father-sun’s absence rather than him being weakened in power as such. Altogether, he is desirous of virginity but as soon as the virgin-mother is impregnated (i.e. loses her virginal status) he disappears, i.e. “no longer will the vibrations of the sun desire on / her deepsea pillow” (Thomas, 8-9). This points to the Father-sun’s loss of interest in the Mother-object as soon as he has carried out whatever desire he had in connection with her. His place is then taken by the “other sun” (Thomas, 14), the male child. This in turn, again reinforces the life-giving notions of the Father-sun, as the child-sun is the result of the Father-sun’s sexual possession of the Mother-object in the first place. This means that the Father is the creator of the child, and as the creator, he is still powerful but as he has chosen to take his powers elsewhere the threat to the child is gone. This in turn means that the child harbours neither resentment nor ill will against the Father, as the supreme position is now available.

However, the Father is not just seen as a life-giver – he is also seen as a life-taker, as an executioner of death in other words. In “The Tombstone Told” the Father is depicted as a stranger executing the virginal Mother-object. This interpretation is strengthened by the phrase “sun killed in her face” (Thomas, 9). Sun refers, as earlier argued, to the Father due to its life-giving connotations and power potency. Here it stands in combination with ‘killed’ that gives the line a paradoxical sense, as that would refer to life-taking as opposed to the life-giving sun. In other words, the Father-sun removes life
from the virgin-mother’s face and as such she dies at the hands of the Father-death. Later on it is described how she “died before bedtime” (Thomas, 26), implying a retained virginity and more explicitly death: the former because bedtime can refer to sexual intercourse and the latter because it can refer to going to sleep, that is, everlasting sleep. The violence in the consecutive lines contradict this, however, as they paint a picture of the virgin being almost raped by the Father-death. This is underlined by “a blazing red harsh head” (Thomas, 29), which could be seen as a metaphor for a penis as well as a child, and the “dear floods of his hair” (Thomas, 30) can refer to both pubic hair and the hair on a child’s head. Bedtime might, furthermore, relate how the Father-death killed the virgin-mother before her time, as bedtime also refers to death – in which case the actual meaning would be that she died before she was supposed to. This then refers to the Father-death’ active killing of the virgin, as bedtime then is a reference to a natural death. Also, the death points to the loss of physical virginity, as it is described with imagery relating to coitus. The imagery is at the same time relating to giving birth and then the Father-death flew the coop as soon as the child makes it appearance, just as the Father-sun did in “On the Marriage of a Virgin”. The Father-death is just as potent as the Father-sun even though their respective attributes are counter to each other. Thus, the Father is given a rather ambiguous and paradoxical position of power. In terms of the Oedipus complex this is the Father’s position in a nutshell as perceived by the child; he is the creator of the child but he is also the one who is posing the threat of retributions if the child transgresses the taboo of the Mother. The Father acts as the creator in giving life to the child, but in imposing a prohibition on the child he refuses the child the same position.
This two-sided power status is visible in “Unluckily for a Death” wherein the Father-sun appears again, but this time around his notion of death is depicted as less powerful compared to other poems. The child speaks of a “communion between suns” (Thomas, 24), which could refer to the accomplished identification between the child and the Father. This is, however, countered later on with “the death biding two lie lonely” (Thomas, 28) and “the tigron in tears” (Thomas, 29) that also could be considered as metaphors for the Father. The former quote points to a certain distance between the child and the Father, as the two the Father-death is waiting for are representative of the child and the Mother-object. In the latter there is first of all a combination of the lexemes tiger and lion, both of which are powerful and strong symbols, and second of all it contains a notion of sadness. Both of these consecutive lines can be considered as a distancing between the child and the Father. On one hand this is because the child is successful in keeping itself from acting on its desire for the Mother-object; on the other hand it might not depict a distance at all but instead be a reference to a successful identification with the Father. The loss of power in the imagery surrounding the Father, i.e. the lonely death and the sad tigron, could mean a loss of the taboo of the Mother-object and that in turn points to the child’s accomplished identification with the Father. This latter interpretation is only possible if one disregards the Mother-object, however. Considering her role in this poem it is unlikely that the child has managed to identify with the Father and instead it is expressing a desire to identify with the Father. This would then explain the combination of tiger and lion into tigron as even though both are potent symbols the lion is viewed as the more powerful due to the often-annotated description of it as the king of the jungle. The Father would then carry the more powerful notions of the lion, and the child the
notions of the tiger – which is also powerful but not in the same league as the lion. Within the tigron combination both the Father-lion and the child-tiger lose something, the former’s power declines and the latter disperses the fear it has. For the child this is a winning situation whereas for the Father this is a pure loss of potency and power.

To summarise, the poems visualise the child’s view of the Father within the Oedipus complex in various scenarios. The Father is presented as extremely powerful in being both the creator and the executioner. The child exhibits a wish to identify with the Father as that would help in gaining sexual access to the Mother but at the same time fears and resents the Father as he represents death. In several instances he is also explicitly depicted as the sun or God, thus marking the powerful position he holds in contrast to the child’s low status position. In all instances, the Father is presented holding an active position with very powerful attributes – all corresponding well to Kristeva’s paternal sun as well as Freud’s positioning of the Father in the family triad. The Father’s position accentuates the child’s as they are in a constant comparison due to the child’s perception of them as sexual rivals.

2.3 The Infantile Voice

As explained earlier, the male position is the focus in most of Freud’s theories. The male position does not necessarily mean the Father though; it can for example also refer to a child (a male child). The child’s position in the Oedipus complex is characterised by its “incestuous longings” (Freud, 20) wherein the object of desire is taboo due to the Father being there as a counterweight. The child shows a love and desire for both its parents in wanting to sexually possess the Mother and in wanting to identify with the Father. Both
of these desires display a wish to gain a power status equal to the Father, as he is the only one with sexual access to the Mother-object. However, the child also fears both of its parents, the Mother because she brings death to the child if it sexually approaches her and the Father because he is the one who will execute the child if it acts on said desire for the Mother-object. Death can refer to both a literal death but also to a figurative death wherein the child’s sexual power is killed, i.e. the child is castrated. This emotional ambiguity in relation to the parents creates a turmoil of fear and desire within the child.

In “Unluckily for a Death” the child displays the ambiguity of its position, and its resentment of the twilight zone it persists in. The poem displays both the wish to turn the Mother-object into a virgin-mother and the wish to identify with the Father. In the midst of this the child laments its position, as it states “never shall my self chant” (Thomas, 25) about the Mother-object. Chanting is a sort of singing, and here the child states that it can never ‘sing’ or admit its incestuous desire for the Mother. This is because she is taboo due to the ever-present Father. This implies that the child does not actually want to repress its feelings for the Mother but as the Father-death is too powerful to contend with, the child is forced to. The child continues to explain how love/desire is either “monstrous or immortal” (Thomas, 41) if not carried out sexually which furthers the interpretation of the child as resentful of its position. This is because the child considers its desire and the Father’s desire for the Mother-object as essentially equal, as they want the same woman. That said, as the child and the Father are ranked differently they are also viewed differently; the child’s desire being monstrous and socially unacceptable whereas the Father has obtained a position where his desire is not only socially acceptable but also almost glorified. The child resents these notions, as in the
child’s eyes their respective desire are one and the same and ought therefore not be judged differently. To further enforce the resentment, the child repetitively states its dream of a different order wherein the child’s “fate go luckily” (Thomas, 43), rather than the present situation where its incestuous desire leads to death. This in turn is a display of its desire to be equal with the Father. Later on, the child continues to lament its position by stating that it can never be allowed to live if it does not walk “in the cool […] / with immortality at my side” (Thomas, 48-49). Basically, the child has to walk next to its parents, repressing the desire for the Mother-object as the immortal Father is just beside it. Also, as the Father is depicted as immortal the child (and the Mother to some extent) is forced to carry the notion of mortality, thus again demonstrating the low status of the child compared to the Father.

The high status of the Father-death is, in “The Tombstone Told”, both weakened and reinforced in relation to the child. Weakened because the child in the poem depicts death as something the Mother-object (not the child) is forced to suffer and reinforced as the Father at the same time demonstrates his grip on the power position in killing the virgin. There is no obvious sense of death-fear on the child’s behalf, though the Father is still annotated with the notion of death. The child-voice begins by depicting itself as positioned “in the mother’s side” (Thomas, 6), which could be interpreted in two ways; either the child is sexually possessing the Mother and thus in her side, or the child is giving itself the position of a foetus. The former is a voicing of the child’s desire as well as fear as the entire poem is about death (albeit not the child’s but the Mother’s). The latter is the more prominent one however as the child in the next stanza moves on to being a “secret child” (Thomas, 15). Both the foetus- and the secret child-descriptions
lend the child a sense of security, protected by the Mother in her womb. This sense of security is slightly false, as the Mother-voice will relate later in the depiction of her bellowing “womb” (Thomas, 27). This is due to the violence and ambiguity of this particular image, which as argued earlier, can be interpreted as the Mother during labour, violent coitus, or as dying. The child’s position in these interpretations varies from becoming an embryo to being forced out of its protective surrounding. If the first and the last interpretation of the womb are considered together, then death is immediately present as soon as the child comes into any close contact with the Mother-object’s genitalia. If then also the connotation of violent coitus is brought into the equation, there is a complete cause-effect chain from the child’s point of view. In other words, the child-embryo is created when the Father possesses the Mother-object, followed by the child being forced out of its safe haven with the Mother’s death as the result. As such it is also possible to see death as connected with the child as the world it has known up until then has to be sacrificed for the new world outside of the Mother’s womb to exist. There is a strong sense of death as necessary for new life to be able to form. That said, the executioner is still the Father as he is the one who sexually possesses the Mother-object, thus being the cause of the pregnancy that results in the child and her death.

The idea of death as the precursor to the child’s life is further developed in “On the Marriage of a Virgin”. In this poem this is evidenced by the figurative death of the Mother-object’s virginal status. As stated earlier, the Father has been given the position of the Father-sun and in leaving the Mother when she is pregnant he lends the child the position of the “other sun” (Thomas, 14). The child-sun has then to a certain extent inherited the Father-sun’s connotations of power and potency. This interpretation
is further substantiated in the stanza wherein “a man sleeps where fire leapt down” (Thomas, 13). The fire equals both the Father-sun’s desire and the life-giving abilities attributed to him, and the sleeping man is a metaphor for a male foetus in the womb – as a foetus’ rather passive position can be referred to as sleeping. The child expresses no fear, neither of death nor of anything else, and this is because there is no Father present to castrate the child. Hence, if the Father is not there to pose a threat the child has no need to make the Mother-object taboo. In other words, as the Father is absent the child has no need to repress its desire for the Mother-object. This means that the child is stuck in its incestuous desire, as there is no one (i.e. the Father) there to prevent it from acting out instead of liberating itself from its incestuous longing for its Mother.

The Father is, however, not absent in “If I Were Tickled by the Rub of Love” and this is very apparent due to the fear the child exhibits. The child’s fear is exhibited throughout the poem though perhaps no more clearly than when it tells of “the devil in the loin” (Thomas, 20), a metaphor for the child’s desire for the Mother-object. Later on, the child continues to describe how “[t]his world is half the devil’s and my own” (Thomas, 29). Hence, the earlier devil-interpretation can be slightly modified as in this latter instance it can be seen as representative of the child’s and the Father’s joint desire for the Mother-object. Also, the Father can also be seen as personified by the devil in this instance as he and the child are sharing a figurative world of desire for the Mother-object. In one sense, the child is fighting against the libidinal desire for the Mother-object and it is an equal match as the child is fighting itself in a manner of speaking. However, it can also be seen as fighting the Father in which case it is a highly unequal match as the Father maintains his supreme power position (whether it is as God, the devil, or the sun).
The child’s frustration over the situation is visible throughout the poem as this would not be a problem if it “were tickled by the rub of love” (Thomas, 1). The child’s relates the present situation as one where it watches itself wear “the quick away” (Thomas, 35), i.e. masturbation, when what it wants is sexual intercourse with the Mother-object. The solution to the problem is to gain equal status with the Father, as he has sexual access to the virgin-mother. This wish to identify with the Father is expressed in the very last line of the poem, “[m]an be my metaphor” (Thomas, 49), wherein the child defines the rub as identification with the Father. This way the child has equalled identification with the Father and coitus with the Mother-object, saying that essentially they are inseparable.

To summarise, all of the poems depict the child’s view of its position in the Oedipus complex albeit played out in different situations. The child is preoccupied with death and the threat thereof emanating from the Father. The level of death-fear exhibited by the child visualises the level of difficulty the child experiences with its desire and the wish to repress it. The child depicts its low status with resentment, as it perceives certain similar traits between itself and the Father. This points to a wish to level with the Father, whose high status (as earlier mentioned) is accentuating the child’s low status. The child in the poems corresponds well with Freud’s positioning of the child in the Oedipus triad, as the child struggles to repress its incestuous desire due to the threat imposed by the Father as well as trying to achieve an equal status with the Father. The ambiguity of the child’s emotional state in the poems is representative of the child’s position within the Oedipus complex.

3. Conclusion
The aim of this thesis was to highlight the Oedipal tendencies of desire and death in Dylan Thomas’ poetry with textual evidence from four poems representative of his poetry. Before the analysis, the key terms of the Oedipus complex were defined according to Freud’s explanation of the family triad with the additional use of Irigaray’s virgin-mother and Kristeva’s paternal sun, as both of those concepts correspond well to Freud’s Mother-object and Father-subject.

The first part in the analysis discussed the maternal depiction, and the virgin-mother is apparent in all of the poems. The Mother-object is consistently presented as equal with death and virginity. Particularly the former is developed, which points to the child’s continuous attempts to repress its desire to sexually possess the Mother. Sometimes the Mother is the recipient of death but she is more often the bait/tool used by the Father to execute the child. Female virginity is revered in the child’s depiction of it, and how scared the child is of death depends on how well this sacred virginity is enforced upon the Mother-object. In the only poem that does not explicitly mention virginity, “If I Were Tickled by the Rub of Love”, the child’s fear of death is highly visible. It is also in this poem that the child’s resentment of its position in regard to the Father is most visible.

The subsequent part of the analysis worked with the depiction of the Father in the poems. He is, in all instances, presented as holding a position of high status with powerful attributes, very much in line with Kristeva’s paternal sun. The child identifies him as its Father and as such he is equated with life, whilst at the same time he is a killer and as such equated with death. The Father is, in this respect, much more active than the Mother whose connection to death is passive. The child recognises him both as its creator and as death personified, and as such he is perceived as omnipotent. This way, he
fluctuates between positive and negative positions, which can be considered a sign of the child’s turmoil of emotions regarding him. The child exhibits a wish to identify with him as that would help in gaining sexual access to the Mother but at the same time fears and resents the Father as he represents death.

The final part of the analysis explores the child’s view of itself. The child views itself in relation to the Father and the Mother, and as it exhibits both fear and desire in relation to both of them its position is ambiguous to say the least. The child consistently presents itself as of a lower status than the Father and shows resentment towards the Father because of it. However, at the same time it recognises the similarities between them and thus tries to identify with him. Also, the child is obsessed with death, as it fears this from the Father, and consequently death is ever-present. In the one poem, “On the Marriage of a Virgin”, where the Father is depicted as absent, the child exhibits no fear but is still preoccupied with death – albeit this time the Father’s.

In conclusion, the poems display a repetitive pattern of the family triad wherein the child never completely manages to repress its desire to sexually possess the Mother-object despite the omnipotent Father’s threatening presence. Different poems depict different stages of the Oedipus complex but the child has not in any of them managed to liberate itself from the complex, as in all of the poems desire and death are interlinked to such an extent that they are practically interchangeable. This holds true of Dylan Thomas’ corpus of poetry in totality as these poems can be considered as representative. The centrality of desire and death in Thomas’ poetry shows, furthermore, a substantial Freudian influence, which is not unlikely considering the constant occurrence of the Oedipus triad surrounding these central foci in the poetry. As
mentioned in the introduction, the importance of Freud’s theories as well as the complexity of the poetry assert Thomas placement in the modernist literary intelligentsia, as Freud was one of the major influential forces at the time.
Works Cited


Irigaray, Luce. “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother”. Lodge and Wood. 413-423.


---. “The Tombstone Told”. Thomas. 67-68.

---. “Unluckily for a Death”. Thomas. 78-79.

Appendix

“If I were tickled by the rub of love” by Dylan Thomas.

If I were tickled by the rub of love,
A rooking girl who stole me for her side,
Broke through her straws, breaking my bandaged string,
If the red tickle as the cattle calve
Still set to scratch a laughter from my lung,
I would not fear the apple nor the flood
Nor the bad blood of spring. 5
If I were tickled by the hatching hair,
The winging bone that sprouted in the heels,
The itch of man upon the baby's thigh,
I would not fear the gallow's nor the axe
Nor the crossed sticks of war. 10

Shall it be male or female? say the cells,
And drop the plum like fire from the flesh.
If I were tickled by the hatching hair,
The winging bone that sprouted in the heels,
The itch of man upon the baby's thigh,
I would not fear the gallow's nor the axe
Nor the crossed sticks of war. 15

That chalk the walls with greet girls and their men.
I would not fear the muscling-in of love
If I were tickled by the urchin hungers
Rehearsing heat upon a raw-edged nerve.
I would not fear the devil in the loin
Nor the outspoken grave. 20

If I were tickled by the lovers’ rub
That wipes away not crow's-foot nor the lock
Of sick old manhood on the fallen jaws,
Time and the crabs and the sweethearting crib
Would leave me cold as butter for the flies
The sea of scums could drown me as it broke
Dead on the sweethearts' toes.

This world is half the devil's and my own,
Daft with the drug that's smoking in a girl
And curling round the bud that forks her eye.
An old man's shank one-marrowed with my bone,
I sit and watch the worm beneath my nail
Wearing the quick away. 25

And that's the rub, the only rub that tickles.
The knobbly ape that swings along his sex
From damp love-darkness and the nurse's twist
Can never raise the midnight of a chuckle,
Nor when he finds a beauty in the breast
Feet in the rubbing dust. 30

And what's the rub? Death's feather on the nerve?
Your mouth, my love, the thistle in the kiss?
My Jack of Christ born thorny on the tree? 40
The words of death are dryer than his stiff,
My wordy wounds are printed with your hair.
I would be tickled by the rub that is:
Man be my metaphor.

“On the Marriage of a Virgin” by Dylan Thomas.

Waking alone in a multitude of loves when morning's light
Surprised in the opening of her nightlong eyes
His golden yesterday asleep upon the iris
And this day's sun leapt up the sky out of her thighs
Was miraculous virginity old as loaves and fishes, 5
Though the moment of a miracle is unending lightning
And the shipyards of Galilee's footprints hide a navy of doves.

No longer will the vibrations of the sun desire on
Her deepsea pillow where once she married alone,
Her heart all ears and eyes, lips catching the avalanche
Of the golden ghost who ringed with his streams her mercury bone,
Who under the lids of her windows hoisted his golden luggage,
For a man sleeps where fire leapt down and she learns through his arm
That other sun, the jealous coursing of the unrivalled blood.

“No tombstone told” by Dylan Thomas.

The tombstone told when she died. 25
Her two surnames stopped me still.
A virgin married at rest.
She married in this pouring place,
That I struck one day by luck,
Before I heard in my mother's side
Or saw in the looking-glass shell
The rain through her cold heart speak
And the sun killed in her face.
More the thick stone cannot tell.

Before she lay on a stranger's bed
With a hand plunged through her hair,
Or that rainy tongue beat back
Through the devilish years and innocent deaths
To the room of a secret child,

Among men later I heard it said
She cried her white-dressed limbs were bare

“Unluckily for a death” by Dylan Thomas.

Unluckily for a death
Waiting with phoenix under
The pyre yet to be lighted of my sins and days,
And for the woman in shades
Saint carved and sensual among the scudding
Dead and gone, dedicate forever to my self
Though the brawl of the kiss has not occurred
On the clay cold mouth, on the fire
Branded forehead, that could bind
Her constant, nor the winds of love broken wide
To the wind the choir and cloister
Of the wintry nunnery of the order of lust
Beneath my life, that sighs for the seducer's coming
In the sun strokes of summer,

Loving on this sea banged guilt
My holy lucky body
Under the cloud against love is caught and held and kissed
In the mill of the midst
Of the descending day, the dark our folly,
Cut to the still star in the order of the quick
But blessed by such heroic hosts in your every Inch and glance that the wound
Is certain god, and the ceremony of souls
Is celebrated there, and communion between suns.
Never shall my self chant
About the saint in shades while the endless breviary
Turns of your prayed flesh, nor shall I shoo the bird below me:
The death biding two lie lonely.

And her red lips were kissed black,
She wept in her pain and made mouths,
Talked and tore though her eyes smiled.

I who saw in a hurried film
Death and this mad heroine
Meet once on a mortal wall
Heard her speak through the chipped beak
Of the stone bird guarding her:
I died before bedtime came
But my womb was bellowing
And I felt with my bare fall
A blazing red harsh head tear up
And the dear floods of his hair.

I see the tigron in tears
In the androgynous dark,
His striped and noon maned tribe striding to holocaust,
The she mules bear their minotaurs,
The duck-billed platypus broody in a milk of birds.
I see the wanting nun saint carved in a garb
Of shades, symbol of desire beyond my hours
And guilt, great crotch and giant Continence. I see the unfired phoenix, herald
And heaven crier, arrow now of aspiring
And the renouncing of islands.
All love but for the full assemblage in flower
Of the living flesh is monstrous or immortal,
And the grave its daughters.

Love, my fate got luckily,
Teaches with no telling
That the phoenix' bid for heaven and the desire after
Death in the carved nunnery
Both shall fail if I bow not to your blessing
Nor walk in the cool of your mortal garden
With immortality at my side like Christ the sky.
This I know from the native
Tongue of your translating eyes. The young stars told me,
Hurling into beginning like Christ the child.
Lucklessly she must lie patient
And the vaulting bird be still. O my true love, hold me.
In your every inch and glance is the globe of genesis spun,
And the living earth your sons.