

Universal Humanity and the Divisions of Identity in the literature of in Radio of the 1950s

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This essay explores the proposition that within the context of two plays: Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* and Samuel Beckett's *All That Fall*, that 'Universal humanity rather than the divisions of identity is the theme of English literature texts of the 1950s and 1960s'. The position taken here is that literary works are inevitably influenced by factors such as the historical, social, economic, political and moral context within which the author produces the work, and in which the reader or audience experiences the work. These contexts can be widely different, particularly if the lives of the author and reader do not overlap chronologically. Although this does mean that the historical context of both author and audience must be considered when reading texts, it will be argued here that the notion of humanity transcends these contexts and as a consequence, at least some literary works can and do have a universal meaning.

The word humanity describes the innate qualities that define what it is to be a human being (Oxford English Dictionary [OED], 2023a). These qualities include such things as kindness, fairness, tolerance, compassion, respect, selflessness, empathy, concern, honesty, courage, wholeheartedness, intelligence and a capacity for love and self-sacrifice. Humanity is often used to summarise the goodness of humans (OED, 2023b), as in President Carter's Nobel Prize acceptance speech: "The body of our common humanity is stronger than the divisiveness of our fears and prejudices" (Carter, J., 2002).

There are, however, other less admirable human attributes including hate, arrogance, delusion, dishonesty, deception, ego, envy, greed, selfishness, unreliability and cowardice and if humanity is taken to be the totality of what it is to be human, then these negative aspects of human behaviour should also be considered. Choosing how we balance this duality of good or bad is what makes us human or inhuman: "... all human beings, as we

meet them, are commingled out of good and evil” (Stevenson, R. L., 1904, p. 64).

While the term ‘humanity’ concerns itself with characterising the totality of the human nature, ‘identity’ is the concept that is concerned with differentiating a particular individual or group or individuals. Attributes such as gender, race, religion, hair or skin colour, nationality, culture, economic or social and educational background, age and many others can be used to distinguish between particular individuals within a collective humanity: “We may have different religions, different languages, different colored skin, but we all belong to one human race. We all share the same basic values” (Annan K., 2016).

How then does universal humanity and the concept of identity relate to literature? Barry states, as part of his enumeration of the Ten Tenets of Human Liberalism that “good literature is of timeless significance; it somehow transcends the limitations and peculiarities of the age it was written in, and thereby speaks to what is constant in human nature” (2009, pp. 17-18). Implicit in this argument is that the nature of humanity is essentially unchanging, and consequently literature of any period is equally applicable to commentary on the human condition. This viewpoint has been supported by such authors as Ben Jonson (when speaking about the universality of Shakespeare): “not for an age, but for all time (Jonson, 1623, p. 7) and Ezra Pound: “news which stays news”. (Pound, 1961, p. 22).

Eagleton (2008, p. 170) however takes a different view:

“For any body of theory concerned with human meaning, value, language, feeling and experience will inevitably engage with broader, deeper beliefs about the nature of human individuals and societies, problems of power and sexuality, interpretations of past history, versions of the present and hopes for the future.” (Eagleton, 2008, p. 170)

This essay will show that this second view is most applicable to the two works considered here.

Under Milk Wood and *All That Fall* are both spoken works. Both works include

elements of modernism and postmodernism. Both works encompass a single day but also subvert the idea of chronological time (e.g., with elements of dream, as in Captain Cat's recall of his dead sea mates) or physical location (e.g., with Maddie Rooney's journey to and from the station that occurs without physical movement in the radio medium as it is conveyed by voices that stay fixed in the same place in front of the microphone). Both works examine the notion of personal identity in relation to the cycle of birth/childhood/adulthood/death, but never achieve narrative closure, with the implication that each day is a similar repetition of the previous one. Both texts recall the authors' upbringings and explore the humanity of communities in which cultural and national identity is highly important to the individuals within - Beckett looks to the religious divisions of County Dublin and Thomas presents his own personal, stylised, exaggerated Welshness. In the sense that neither work establishes an absolute meaning, nor provides an all-illuminating epiphany, but instead offers alternatives and ambiguities in interpretation, they can both be said to be thoroughly post-modern. (Lytord, 1979).

In *Under Milk Wood*, Thomas finds expression not only for an introspection on his personal identity, but also the nature of communal identity. Thomas grew up in Swansea at a time when interest in the Welsh culture was at a low ebb. In his early letters Thomas "nearly always spoke derisively of his land, denying any admiration for the country of his origin" (Miralles Pérez, 2011, p. 66). Neither did Thomas, who once vehemently expressed the view: "F- Welsh Nationalism" (Moore, 1995, p. 264), support Welsh Nationalism.

Why then did he choose to set *Under Milk Wood* in the context of an apparently deeply Welsh town? Certainly, after living in Laugharne, "Thomas developed more intimate bonds with the house and the town that he had chosen for a new stage or state in his life" (Miralles Pérez, 2011, p. 66) but he remained "hostile to the forms of nationalism which they expressed" (ibid).

Yet, paradoxically, Thomas did appear to love his hometown Swansea. One of his closest friends, Bert Trick said “Dylan loved people and loved Swansea.” (Thomas M. W., 2014, p. 89). Evidence to support this can be found in his radio play, *Return Journey*, which foreshadows much of the emotional intent of *Under Milk Wood*. On a brief return to Swansea in 1941, just after three days of intense bombing of the city, Thomas saw that many of the streets he had known as a youth had been reduced to rubble and said to Bert Trick “Bert, our Swansea has died” (p. 94). In 1947, commissioned by the BBC, Thomas used this experience to write *Return Journey*, a play in which “the narrator walks through Swansea seeking his younger selves, while attempting to piece together the Swansea he knew, now shattered by the Three Nights’ Blitz” (Williams, 2021), a narrative structure he would re-use in *Under Milk Wood*.

Under Milk Wood has been seen as continuing the thread of the writer’s response to the horror of World War Two and in particular to the inhumanity of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Although Pérez (2011) states that “*Under Milk Wood* was written, as the author himself states, as “a response to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima”” citing Tedlock (1965, p. 60-66) as the source of this quotation, examination of Tedlock (1965) shows no evidence that Thomas did it indeed speak these words. In fact, it is hard to find any explicit statements by Thomas on the specific topic of atomic war in the documentary record. In 1946 he read his poem, “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London” on BBC’s “Welsh Children’s Hour”. Although this is a response to the bombing of London rather than the atomic bombing of Japan it does explore a more general theme of death and mourning, suggesting all deaths everywhere at any time are connected and should be mourned equally. Walford Thomas (2011, citing Maud (1992) as his source) notes that:

[Dylan Thomas] despaired of the implications for ‘this apparently hell-bent world’ in the plan he outlined for his series of projected poems to be called collectively *In*

Country Heaven. “The earth,” [Thomas] said, in a 1950 broadcast, “has killed itself. It is black, petrified, wizened, poisoned, burst; insanity has blown it rotten.”

The pastoral isolation and natural beauty of Llareggub can thus be seen as Thomas’s response to replace atrocities of the war years with something more uplifting, to rebirth a place of love, desire, joy and grief, of balanced humanity.

An alternative, or perhaps, concurrent interpretation is that Thomas is offering a dream world, one in which the radio audience can set aside their own personal identities and experience a new identity, that can fulfil the unrealisable desires of the real world:

FIRST VOICE: ...Only you can hear and see, behind the eyes of the sleepers, the movements and countries and mazes and colours and dismays and rainbows and tunes and wishes and flight and fall and despairs and big seas of their dreams. (Thomas, 2014, p. 52)

Thomas’s Llareggub is far from the stereotype of a quaint Welsh community of impeccable morality and behaviour. Thomas chooses to place a wide range of identities in the town - bigamists, nymphomaniacs, satanists, cannibals, necrophiliacs, alcoholics and xenophobics. Even the townsfolk recognise this depravity: “FOURTH WOMAN: there’s a nasty lot live here when you come to think” (p. 85). Paradoxically Llareggub is place where love is nurtured, sin is forgiven, and eccentricity is tolerated. This is Thomas’s humanist message - one that is undoubtedly anti-war, but also one that sees life as filled with the universal human qualities of kindness, tolerance, compassion, empathy, courage, desire, a capacity for sex, love and procreation as well as arrogance, delusion, dishonesty, deception, envy, greed, selfishness, unreliability and depravity. Each character in *Under Milk Wood* display a different mix of these properties. Polly Garter expresses love and sexual desire in her longing for babies and sings all day of her lost love, Little Willy Wee. Mrs Ogmores-Pritchard shows her selfishness, arrogance and delusion since the only husband she can tolerate is a dead one. Mr Pugh dreams of poisoning his wife with imagined evil. Dylan saw men and women locked in their identities, moving through the cycle of life, from birth to death again. “Aware of the

essential cycle, he found comfort in the unity of humankind and nature, of past and present” (Pérez, 2011, p. 68).

Underlying all of this is Dylan Thomas’s attitude of unjudging love:

which sought to understand the self of his characters and pretended to reveal traits of innocence beneath their all-too-common human weaknesses and strange idiosyncrasies, is a moral stand of debatable appropriateness, too lax and permissive, perhaps, for a writer who intended to scrutinise the man who had made and dropped the bomb.” (Pérez, 2011, p. 67).

Pérez takes the view that “Thomas’ views on the inhabitants of Llareggub lack reproach or admonition. Despite all their flaws, they are part of divine creation, and none of them should be denied forgiveness, acceptance, laughter and love” (Pérez, 2011, p. 68). Thomas directly reflects this view in Reverend Eli Jenkins prayer to his Creator:

We are not wholly bad or good
Who live our lives under Milk Wood,
And Thou, I know, wilt be the first
To see our best side, not our worst. (Thomas, 2014, p. 109)

In this way Thomas’s reminds us that amongst the sin and despair there is hope and beauty in the world. Thomas shows us the unadulterated truth of life, with its rich variation of good and bad, and presents this with humour and tolerance and thus Thomas describes a humanity that all his listeners can recognise and relate to. As Pérez (2011, p. 68) says: “The writer forges more bonds of identity between them and his readers than many of the latter are ready to acknowledge.”

Samuel Beckett’s *All That Fall* (Beckett, 2009), first broadcast by the BBC Third programme in 1957, reflects some of the familiar modernist concerns of individualism, experimentation, absurdity and symbolism but also contains strong elements of post modernism: a rejection of the idea of absolute meaning, an acceptance of disorder, the use of uncertainty and ambiguity within the narrative style, an embrace and experimentation of new forms. While unusually foregrounding female identity in the representation of the main character, Maddy Rooney, Beckett highlights the defects of humanity, providing a “spectacle

of ruin” (Beckett, 2009, p. 1) for the listener.

Written in 1956, Beckett sets *All That Fall* several decades earlier, in the village of Boghill - an enclave of declining Protestantism, in the predominantly Catholic and Nationalist Dublin (Gibson, 2010, p. 1-2). Critics commonly (e.g., Zilliagus, 1999, chapter 17) associate the various forms of infertility throughout the play with the decline of the Protestant population in the community (Edwards, 1981, p. 244). Many of the women in the play, including Mrs Rooney, are childless. Mrs Rooney sees her identity to be “destroyed with sorrow and pining and gentility and churchgoing and fat and rheumatism and childlessness” (Beckett, 2009, p. 7). Mrs Rooney’s language also seems to be losing its vitality, leading her husband to comment that “Do you know, Maddy, sometimes one would think you were struggling with a dead language” (p. 26). But despite the sense that the characters are sterile identities whose life force is fading away into nothingness (something particularly apt in a radio play, where the audience has no sight of the performers), the characters continue to seek to hold their identity in life (and the audience’s minds): “MRS ROONEY: Do not imagine, because I am silent, that I am not present, and alive, to all that is going on” (p. 17). Here Beckett is using the radio medium to play with the idea of identity and existence. When mute, Mrs Rooney does not really exist for the listeners, but when speaking she re-establishes her identity. As she moves between silence and speaking, Beckett questions the notion of identity by suggesting she can be both dead and alive within the play. Indeed, he even gives her the paradoxical statement: “MRS ROONEY: Don’t mind me. Don’t take any notice of me. I do not exist. The fact is well known” (p. 11).

Illness too is pervasive throughout the play, as each character struggles to continue on in life. For example, the obese Maddy enquires the health of Christy’s family who says of his wife and daughter, they are “No better” or “No worse” (Beckett, 2009, p. 3), implying a stasis of existence. But, lurking in the background there is the inevitability and unpredictability of

death, as in the case of Maddie's child Minnie who, according to her doctor, "had never been really born" (p. 28). The nature of identity is also questioned by the mention of the little child who falls from the train under the wheel. The audience never knows for sure who the child is, or whether or not Mr Rooney murdered her. Or maybe if she even existed, as we only have the boy Jerry's second hand account of the event. Thus, Beckett highlights

"...the precariousness of identity when the only means of asserting it, such as an innately ambiguous and dying language, are so unreliable ... and the general meaninglessness of existence given the seeming desertion of humanity by God".
(van Laan, 1985, p.39)

Indeed, this desertion is echoed in the title of the play, a reference to the Psalms: "The Lord upholdeth all that fall and raiseth up all those that be bowed down" (p. 30). As suggested by Knowlson, the idea that, in the midst of their misery and suffering, the Rooney's view of their self and identity is defined by any religious framework draws is entirely false since "it is greeted by the lame, seventy-year-old Maddy Rooney and her blind husband, Dan, with wild laughter at its bitter irony" (Knowlson, 1996 (in Uchman (2013)), p. 38). Steward however sees this differently:

The wish to fall, never to rise again, is consistently expressed throughout the play. . . . Maddy and Dan's world is so arranged that the final fall is not an option. The Lord, if one must be posited, insists on holding them up. . . . there is the annoyingly stubborn presence of the continuation of meaningless life, of precisely not falling. . . . [and] While this generation pants on, the hope might remain that the suffering can end through an end of regeneration.

(Steward, 2011, p. 137-8, quoted in Uchman, 2013, p. 118).

Nevertheless, there is a hint of the goodness of humanity in at least one critical reading, as at the very end of the play, as Maddie and Dan struggle to return home:

[Silence. JERRY runs off. His steps die away. Tempest of wind and rain. It abates. They move on. Dragging steps, etc. They halt. Tempest of wind and rain.]
END. (p. 30)

Mrs Rooney "lovingly accompanies her unloving husband and continues living on despite the death which awaits her at the end of the journey" (Uchman, 2013, p. 118). In this sense, the

Rooney's do not fall - they remain in some stasis like state, continuing, without arriving, sharing their compassion and their antagonism, expressing their humanity in their ongoing existence.

What conclusions can be drawn from this brief analysis of these two works? Both show the listener characters whose identities contain the defining qualities of the individual human such as love, hate, desire, sex, the need for procreation, fear of God, greed and respect. Thomas's view of humanity is that the "harmony between his divergent selves are analogous to man's spiritual pursuit [and] the greatness of man's desire is impeded by his humanity" (Knauber, 1955, p52). This is essentially a conflict between the sentimental and the spiritual. In other words, in *Under Milk Wood* Thomas is a depiction of the struggle between the human expression of sentimental desires (such as sexual desire, fear of death) and his spiritual humanity (such as altruistic actions, mutual respect, compassion and love), rather than a statement of a philosophical argument that separates humanity and individuality into two unrelated concepts. Gami says:

Beckett remains a writer and not a philosopher and therefore he does not set out to elucidate and to solve these fundamental philosophical riddles but rather to aesthetically represent them in their complexity.

(Gami, 2022, p. 50).

This statement supports reinforces the view that is not the author's job to separate concepts such as universal humanity or identity in the audiences' minds. Gami argues that "[Beckett] does not propose solutions to philosophical problems but artistically portrays the human condition, which he sees as fraught with meaninglessness and absurdity" (ibid). Again, this emphasises that it is the author's primary responsibility to produce a work of aesthetics rather than a treatise of philosophy.

The discussion presented here has shown that dramatic works are inevitably influenced by factors such as the historical, social, economic, political and moral context within which the author produces the work as well as the context in which the reader or audience

experiences the work. *Under Milk Wood* offers the audience a world in which the human condition is depicted by the variety of identities inhabiting the town and which allows the audience the greatest opportunity to ponder the universal nature of humanity and its response to the trauma of the preceding war years and the emerging social and national changes of Wales in the 1950s. Similarly, in *All That Fall* Beckett presents a community where themes of infertility, deterioration and death suggest the declining Protestant community of 1920s Ireland but also depicts a community where an underlying blind drive to live and reproduce universalises the distinct identities of the characters.

[3277 words]

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