

92. A material ecocritical approach to the poetry of Dylan Thomas

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Abstract

Material ecocriticism, representing a material turn in ecocritical studies, is faithfully committed to undermine the anthropocentric ideology of humans' superiority over the natural environment and reconfigures human and nonhuman beings as materially entangled entities whose stories as well as physical bodies are interwoven together. What essentially emphasized by the material ecocritical theory is the indistinguishable relatedness and the coexistence of the physical universe and the textuality, the matter and the language, human and nature. Demolishing human's exceptional status over nature and rejecting any kind of human guardianship of nature, material ecocriticism unshackles nature from human representations, definitions or meanings and attributes vitality and agency to natural elements that are capable of producing meaningful stories of their own. Accordingly, Dylan Thomas (1924-1953) reinforces man's situatedness within the earth throughout his poetry, instead of constructing impermeable discrepancies between human and nature. Thomas develops material ecological understanding of the universe in which human and nonhuman entities are biologically connected to each other. Therefore, the aim of this study is to analyze Dylan Thomas' poetry from the perspective of material ecocriticism to provide an insight to Thomas' depiction of nature as a dynamic entity rather than as a passive object.

Keywords: Dylan Thomas, poetry, material ecocriticism, nature

Dylan Thomas'ın řiirlerine maddesel ekoeleřtirel bir yaklařım

Öz

Anahtar kelimeler: Dylan Thomas, řiir, doęa, maddesel ekoeleřtiri

Dylan Thomas, writing during a time when poets are forced to reconcile with the harsh realities of life between two world wars, turns away from Ekoeleřtirel alıřmalarda, maddeci donüşü temsil eden maddesel ekoeleřtiri kuramı. insanın doęa üzerindeki üstünlüğüne dair oluşturmuş olduęu antroposentrik (insan merkezci) ideolojileri yıkararak yerine, insan ve insan olmayan canlıların maddesel olarak birbirinden ayrıt edilemeyecek derecede içiçe geçtięi, ayrıca insan ve insan olmayan tüm canlıların hem fiziksel yönleriyle hemde öyküleriyle birlikte örüldüğü görüşünü ortaya atar. Bu bağlamda, maddesel ekoeleřtirini özellikle üstüne bastığı konu fiziksel evrenin ve edebi metinlerin, madde ve dilin, insan ve doęanın birbiriyle son derece bağlantılı olduęudur. İnsanın doęa üstündeki ayrıcalıklı pozisyonu ve koruyucu rolünü yıkmaya alıřan maddesel ekoeleřtiri kuramı, doęayı insanın atfettięi tanım, anlam ve temsillerden kurtarmaya alıřarak yerine, kendi anlamlı öykülerini oluřturma kapasitesine sahip tamamen canlı ve aktif bir doęa anlayışı getirir. Bu bağlamda, Dylan Thomas (1924-1953) řiirlerinde insan ve doęa arasında kapatılması güç farklılıklar yaratmaktansa,

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insanın doğayla tamamen bütünleşmiş olduğunu gösterir. Eserlerinde maddesel ekolojik bir görüş benimseyen Dylan Thomas, insan ve insan olmayan canlıların biyolojik olarak birbirine bağlı olduklarını gösterir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma Dylan Thomas'ın şiirlerine maddesel ekoeleştirel bakış açısıyla yaklaşarak, şairin doğayı hareketsiz bir obje olmaktan öte, yaşayan canlı bir birey olarak yansıttığını göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

the social and political concerns of his age in favor of a personal experience of implausible natural events with a focus on the necessity of death for the continuation of life. Ackerman associates Thomas's emotional attachment to the outside environment with an awareness of the "sacramental universe" in which "all created things, whether blades of grass or sea-waves breaking on to the shore...are of themselves holy and are witness to the Creator" (1996, p. 16). Yet, explaining Thomas' fascination with nature in religious terms as a reverberation of God seems to be a simplistic approach to the poet's biological concept of nature which is apprehended as a materially self-sustaining system in which each entity exerts agency and intentionality in its interrelatedness with other entities. Thomas develops a dis-anthropocentric perspective of humans who are not separate from other organisms and are extensions of nonhuman nature. In this respect, the aim of this study is to bring a material ecocritical perspective to Dylan Thomas' poetry in which nature is represented with agency and dynamism. Exploring his poetry from the perspective of material ecocriticism will shed a broader light to the understanding of Thomas' poetry and his conception of the material universe.

Since its appearance during the 1970s with the aim of creating an ecological awareness towards environmental problems, ecocritical studies has not ceased to develop and evolve through miscellaneous branches by incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives to literary studies. Material ecocriticism, in this regard, represents a "material turn" in ecocritical studies, grounding its fundamental principles on the new materialistic understanding of the universe in which living and nonliving, animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic entities are all embedded with vitality, agency, meanings and stories of their own (Iovino and Oppermann, 2014, p. 75). The privileged status quo of humans is destabilized by material ecocriticism which offers a dis-anthropocentric system in which humans are not the only intelligible and agential beings, and thus, not indispensable elements of the universe.

According to material ecocritical perspective, the world is conceptualized as a dynamic, self-sustaining system which is capable of producing and reproducing heterogeneous lives that are in a constantly meaningful relationship with each other, in Barad's words, "a complex agential intra-actions of multiple material-discursive practices or apparatuses of bodily production" (2007, p. 140). A similar notion of the materiality of the bodies in a perpetual state of intertwinement with each other is endorsed by Stacy Alaimo (2010) who introduces trans-corporeality as a prerequisite for humans' material entanglement with nonhuman bodies which "entails a rather disconcerting sense of being immersed within incalculable, interconnected material agencies that erode even our most sophisticated modes of understanding" (p. 17). In tandem with other new materialist theorists, Alaimo entails all natural bodies with agency "a world of fleshy beings, with their own needs, claims, and actions" (2008, p. 238). For Alaimo, recognizing the agency of non-human beings is crucially important in preventing the objectification of natural resources and opening a necessary space to enable the flourishing of nonhuman life forms on earth. "By emphasizing the movement across bodies", Alaimo argues, "trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between human corporeality and more-than-human" (2008, p. 238). In her attempt to reconfigure human and non-human corporeality, and their trans-corporeal bodily entanglement with each other, Alaimo underlines the agency of all material bodies and thinks that it is time for humans to acknowledge the agency of matter and "understand nature

as something other than as a passive resource for the exploits of Man” (2008, p. 244). Both Barad’s concept of material-discursive practices and Alaimo’s theory of trans-corporeality emphasize the agency and the materiality of human and nonhuman bodies in perpetual intertwinement with each other as a “heterogeneous compound of wonderfully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter” (Bennett, 2010, pp. 12-13)

With the purpose of terminating human abuse of nature, material ecocriticism overthrows human’s hierarchical supremacy over nature by calling for a replacement of humans’ narcissistic conceptualization of themselves as the only active intentional agents with an all-encompassing view that “all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations” (Bennett, 2010, p. 13). Obfuscating the sharp distinctions between nature and humans, Bennet brings forth the concept of “vital materiality” which fosters the idea that agency cannot be solely ascribed to humans but should be distributed equally among nonhumans also because even inanimate entities in nature are dynamic agents, having a unique sense of expression and “agentic capacity” (Bennett, 2010, p. 9). Iovino and Oppermann assert the idea of materiality of human and nonhuman entities in a complex, dynamic and agential entanglement with each other and elucidate the concept of agency as follows:

Agency assumes many forms, all of which are characterized by an important feature: they are *material*, and the meanings they produce influence in various ways the existence of both human and nonhuman natures. Agency, therefore, is not to be necessarily and exclusively associated with human beings and with human intentionality, but it is pervasive and inbuilt property of matter, as part and parcel of its generative dynamism. From this dynamism, reality emerges as an intertwined flux of material and discursive forces, rather than as complex of hierarchically organized individual players. (2014, p. 3, emphasis in the original)

The agency of the matter is not a static phenomenon, on the contrary, it is characterized by an infinite flow of action in an everlasting state of becoming and production of meanings. Repudiating anthropocentric mindset which ascribes agency solely to humans who are granted with rationality and self-consciousness, material ecocriticism argues for the agentic capacity of all entities regardless of their being animate or inanimate, organic or inorganic. Every matter, as Bennet insists, is active and therefore, should be configured as “actants rather than as objects” (2010, p. 10). These actants have the capacity to construct their environment and their own system of networking, and should not be “treated as merely passive screens for human projections” (Bryant, 2011, p. 283). In a similar vein, Karen Barad focuses on the “agential realism” and underpins that the “materialization of bodies are not only social, and the bodies produced are not all human” (2007, pp. 33-34). Transcending the boundaries between human and nonhuman beings, Barad with her agential realist theory argues that meanings, realities, identities and bodies are produced by their active participation in an ongoing reciprocal engagement with each other. For Barad, “*matter is substance in its intra-active becoming-not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity*” (2007, p. 151, emphasis in the original). Arguably then, regardless of their attempts to set themselves apart from the other nonhuman beings, humans in reality, are material compositions, undistinguishable from other organisms and processed by the same mineral reserves. Material ecocriticism refuses the hierarchical boundaries between individuals since no individual can come into being separately from others. Not only animals, plants, air, water, earth and stones have vitality in themselves but also objects like tin, plastic or bottle have the capacity to participate in vital interaction with other beings and sharing the same energy with them with an ability to transmute and being transmuted by them. As Stuart A. Kauffman argues, every entity is “an autonomous agent” that is “a physical system, such as bacterium,

that can act on its own behalf in an environment” (2000, p. 8). Hence, even the smallest life forms like fungus or algae have the agency to reproduce themselves and “carry out one or more thermodynamic work cycles” (Kauffman, 2000, p. 53). Thus, material ecocriticism suggests that each single organic or inorganic, animate or inanimate being has its own unique, vibrant, and self-sufficient system. This agentic capacity requires a permanent “interference of many bodies and forces” where neither one is dominant over others including humans who are “assessed not as autonyms but as vital materialities” (Bennett, 2010, p. 21).

Considering the major paradigms and premises of material ecocriticism, it can be argued that Dylan Thomas in his poetry presents a dis-anthropocentric vision of the universe in which agency is disseminated uniformly among human and nonhuman beings who are in a never-ending mutual interaction with each other. “The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower”, published in *The Sunday Referee* in 1933, is a poem with which Thomas begins his literary career as a “revolt poet against the political poets of the thirties” (Goodby, 2013, p. 50). The poem is significant in reflecting the poet’s “sensitivity towards animal and vegetal life much more profound than the conventional ‘love of nature’” (Ackerman, 1996, p. 41). Indeed, Thomas’s preoccupation with nature is much more complicated and multi-layered than a mere love of nature as revealed in the following lines:

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
 Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
 Is my destroyer.
 And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
 My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.
 The force that drives the water through the rocks
 Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
 Turns mine to wax.
 And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
 How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks. (Thomas, 2003, p. 9)

Emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living and nonliving beings in the universe, the poem depicts not only the vulnerability of human beings against the uncontrollable power of nature but also the persona’s struggle to communicate with the non-human elements of nature. William Christie (2019) suggests that “the poem rather explores than asserts a pantheistic union between man and nature through a quintessential life-and-death force” (p. 471). Thomas, in these lines, draws attention to a network of material connectivity between the elements of nature and human bodies through a flow of energy between trees, rocks, rivers, flowers, worms, and humans. The word “force” is repeatedly used throughout the poem to describe the material agency imbedded in nature which ensures the continuity of life and vitality. The poet dis-anthropocentrically observes that the outside world is not as a predetermined, static being that exists for human agents, instead, humans are only a small part of the complex matter that “refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization” (Barad, 2007, p. 151, emphasis in the original). Matter, for Barad, is not a passive, inactive object but “a substance in its intra-active becoming-not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency” (2007, p. 151, emphasis in the original). Accordingly, Thomas’ poem underscores the materiality of every single entity in nature that come into existence through its relationship with other entities. The force that is emphasized in the poem is the dynamic and material energy which gives life to flowers and drives the water through the rocks, also, enables the blossoming of human life. The use of “green” as an adjective to describe the persona’s

youth in the second line and the association of the flow of waters through the rivers with the flow of blood in his veins reinforce humans' entrenchment in nature in which nothing exists alone, but everything evolves through an endless sequence of material engagement with other actors. The poem unfolds Thomas' material understanding of the universe in which the matter emerges as a fecund and an active force in its "intra-activity" (Barad, 2007, p. 150). There is no primordial existence of the matter since it comes into being only through its interaction with others. Thus, the poem reveals the "matter-energy in its different forms and of multiple coexistences and interactions of these forms" in which all living and nonliving "geological, organic, and linguistic materials will be allowed to 'have their say'" (De Landa, 2000, p. 21-22). Similarly, the same matter energy that causes the decay of the vegetations and aridity of water sources simultaneously effects the withering of young age in humans. The concepts of life and death are presented as an inevitable part of biological process in the poem. In the following lines, the poet more strongly emphasizes humans' bodily enmeshment in nature's mineralization and materialization procedure:

The hand that whirls the water in the pool
 Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
 Hauls my shroud sail.
 And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
 How of my clay is made the hangman's lime. (Thomas, 2003, p. 9)

The persona meditates upon how life and death as two interlocking strings in the web of an ongoing materialization of the universe. Humans as nature's material compositions are not excluded from the cycle of life and death. The matter energy that maintains nature's vitality and dynamism also transfuses into human body, causing its decomposition and integrating it into nature's recycling system. This complex system of nature employs an oppositional, and at the same time, complementary forces to maintain its prolongation. The same life giving power that causes the whirling of the water, stirring of the quicksand and the blowing of the wind works contradictorily to accelerate the death of the persona.

Yet, the death of the persona is not a complete loss but a necessary requirement for nature's regeneration process where the persona's decayed material body will feed other life forms. The persona thinks that the life and death are so intermingled in nature's system that he will accomplish a unique amalgamation with nature through his death.- Each natural entity in the universe organic or inorganic are "composed of vital materials" undergoing a process of "mineralization" as a result of which new life forms reassert themselves (Bennett, 2010, p. 11). Similarly, the persona is aware of the materiality of his body that is subject to the same mineralization process and does not perceive himself as separate from the rest of the nature by arguing that all living and nonliving beings in nature are elements of nature's regenerative system. Death, in this manner, is only a process of mineralization in nature where the death of one life form contributes to the emergence of other life forms. Thomas's insistence on the materiality of human self as not apart from the other elements of organic nature is also reminiscent of Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality" of human body which is "never a rigidly enclosed, protected entity, but is vulnerable to the substances and flows of its environments" (2010, p. 28). In other words, human body, as an extension of the material world, cannot be disintegrated from other material bodies in nature, and above all, has the capacity to influence them and be affected by them. In this regard, the persona of the poem, through his close observation of the natural universe, is aware of his trans-corporeal entanglement with the outside world, wiping out his human exceptionality and turning him into a coextensive unit of material word. Hence, the persona of the poem perceives his death as part of a self-producing system of enduring vital entanglements of material agencies. The poem clearly unravels the fact that human

beings do not hold the hegemonic power of control over nature but are themselves subject to the same power of nature. In the fourth, ninth and 14th lines, beginning with the words “I am dumb to tell”, and “I am dumb to mouth”, the poem specifically portrays human self as speechless while nature is presented as a speaking subject. Due to his dumbness, the persona can understand the language of nonhuman world, a space where humans no longer are obliged to use words to communicate with nature. Thomas’s notion of nature as a speaking subject while envisioning himself as speechless turns the anthropocentric tradition of human exceptionality upside down and explicitly shows that speech cannot not be solely attributed to human realm. Every element in nature has the capacity to speak in their own language which is more efficient than human language in telling their own story. As Bruno Latour (2004) also suggests “speech is not a self-evident phenomenon that properly belongs to humans and that could be offered only metaphorically to nonhumans” (p. 70). Thomas as poet of nature is conscious of the essential requirement of acquiring the discourse of material nature which is much older, efficient, universal, and not limited by the linguistic system of human discourse.

The poet’s particular concern with the destructive and reconstructive process of the biological vibrancy of natural life continues in “A Process in the Weather of the Heart” in which the poet insistently conjoins humans with a wider physical universe which is endlessly and assiduously active in forming new relations and new lives in mutual interaction with each other. There is an ongoing process of activity and agency of nature in which the persona finds himself completely immersed. What is created in the poem is a sense of organic universe, the reverberations of which is physically and emotionally felt by the persona in his heart and body:

A process in the weather of the heart
Turns damp to dry; the golden shot
Storms in the freezing tomb.
A weather in the quarter of the veins
Turns night to day; blood in their suns
Lights up the living worm.
A process in the eye forwarns
The bones of blindness; and the womb
Drives in a death as life leaks out. (Thomas, 2003, p. 6)

Life and death are the recurring images which are conveyed through the words, “dry, storm, tomb, blood, womb and death” (Thomas, 2003, p.6). The poem expounds on human’s primeval interconnectedness with nature, beginning long before his birth and continues even after his death in the tomb. The persona’s development of a dis-anthropocentric perspective of the outside world allows him to perceive self-producing process of the material agency in nature where the tomb becomes a part of food chain for the nourishment of the “living worm” while “the womb” is embedded with birth and decay at the same time (Thomas, 2003, p.6). Juxtaposed images of life and death, womb and tomb, damp and dry, the poem draws attention to the creative and destructive forces of nature as an essential part of its self-evolving system. In the following stanza of the poem, Thomas brings forth human body and its connection to the wider universe as follows:

A darkness in the weather of the eye
Is half its light; the fathomed sea
Breaks on unangled land.

The seed that makes a forest of the loin
Forks half its fruit; and half drops down,
Slow in a sleeping wind. (Thomas, 2003, p. 6)

The persona's observation of the outside world in a continual flow of change, progress and vitality is conveyed through the images of "the fathomed sea" and "unangled land" as coextensions of each other (p. 6). After ruminating on the darkness that also includes lightness, and the enmeshment of the sea with the land, the persona's concentration shifts to human sexuality conveyed through the image of the seed "making a forest of loin" and dropping its fruit and fertilizing a new life (p. 6). The poet's combining the idea of the perpetual flow of dynamism in nature with the human sexual activity shows how human and nonhuman bodies are materially intertwined within nature's revitalizing process. The self-producing capacity of human body is in complete harmony with the self-producing system of the material universe. Dylan Thomas, in this way, delineates human beings as the biological entities of the material world, subject to the same processes of mineralization, fertilization, destruction and reconstruction. Instead of building an idealistic and romantic conceptualization of nature, Thomas seeks to establish an organic, autonomous and ongoing process of nature. The word "process" is repeated four times throughout the poem to describe the self-sustaining system of an autonomous universe. The working of this system that the poet describes as a "process" is a new materialist paradigm of autopoiesis which is elucidated John Mingers (1995) as follows:

With the help of some basic chemicals imported from its medium, the cell produces its own constituents. So a cell produces its own components, which are therefore what produces it in a circular, ongoing process. It produces, and is produced by, nothing other than itself. This simple idea is all that is meant by autopoiesis. The word means 'self-producing,' and that is what the cell does: it continually produces itself. Living systems are autopoietic _ they are organized in such a way that their processes produce the very component necessary for the continuance of these processes. (p. 11)

Within the context of the poem, "A Process in the Weather of the Heart", autopoiesis, the self-producing system of organisms in nature, reveals itself as a process of life and death embedded within each other as it is understood by the lines "the womb drives in a death as life leaks out" (Thomas, 2003, p. 6). As a constituent of nature's autopoietic system, the death of human life cannot be comprehended as a complete eradication from the earth since human body and other natural entities after death turn into earth and become compost materials, necessary for the replenishment of other forms of life in nature. The repetitive use of the term "process", in this manner, alludes to an organic living system, the operation of which depends on the workings of its constituent parts, mutually producing its equal components, and in this way, confirming the self-sufficient and autonomous system of autopoiesis.

The poet's acknowledgment of the materiality of the universe and humans' insignificant and unprivileged position within nature are further explored in "Before I Knocked" which evinces humans' biological interconnectedness with nature even before their birth:

Before I knocked and flesh let enter,
With liquid hands tapped on the womb,
I who was shapeless as the water
That shaped the Jordan near my home
Was brother to Mnetha's daughter
And sister to the fathering worm.

I who was deaf to spring and summer,
 Who knew not sun nor moon by name,
 Felt thud beneath my flesh's armour,
 As yet was in a molten form,
 The leaden stars, the rainy hammer
 Swung by my father from his dome. (Thomas, 2003, p. 7)

In these lines, the poet argues that humans' interrelatedness with the physical environment extends back to a period much before taking their human form in the womb. Before evolving as a sperm cell in the womb, and acquiring an identity, humans exist shapelessly in the universe as a liquid form of water. The persona insists that even if he does not know the sun or moon by name in his shapeless form of water, he inherently could feel their presence in his molten form. The poem also presents a religious symbol of Jordan, alluding to the Christ whose major substance also consists of water, as a biological source of all life in the universe. The persona in his shapeless state of liquidity develops a kinship with the worm and calls it as the "fathering worm" (p. 6). The poet, thus, draws attention to the materiality of human body and indivisible relatedness of everything in the universe where water, air, and earth, plants, animals, and humans are all biological entities in constant entanglements which each other. Examining worms as exceedingly significant elements of ecosystems, Jane Bennett (2010) states that:

And without worms or aluminum (or edibles or stem cells) and their conative endeavors, it would be difficult if not impossible for humans to exercise our exquisite wills or intentions. It seems both that worms are 'like' us and that (to use a Kantian formulation) we must posit a certain nonhuman agency as the condition of possibility of human agency. Or are these claims fatally dependent on anthropomorphization? (p. 98)

From the material ecocritical perspective, the poet's considering himself as the kinsman of the worm can be explained by the poet's ability to comprehend the material interconnectedness of the universe in which the sustainability of life depends on the dynamic interactivity of its organic entities. The persona, identifying with the worm, articulates a materialist perspective of nature where each organism manifests itself with the potential agency for intelligence and intentional behavior. Thomas' poem, in this regard, obfuscates the anthropocentrically drawn boundaries between human and nonhuman entities of nature and shows humans as indistinguishable corporeal elements of the material universe. The persona's wakefulness to nature's agency is enacted in the following stanza of the "Before I Knocked" as follows:

I knew the message of the winter,
 The darted hail, the childish snow,
 And the wind was my sister suitor;
 Wind in me leaped, the hellbom dew;
 My veins flowed with the Eastern weather;
 Ungotten I knew night and day. (Thomas, 2003, p. 7)

The persona continues to depict his ability to understand "the message of the winter", "the darted hail" and "the childish snow" before taking a human form in the womb of his mother (p.7). The persona's sensitivity to nonhuman nature is understood by his aptitude to hear the voices of natural elements and communicate with them through his senses in the womb of his mother. The persona's perceptiveness to the message of the winter is reminiscent of his ecological understanding of the universe in which human

discourse is not a necessity for founding meaningful communication between human and nonhuman beings. As Abram (2010) notes, "all things have the capacity for speech - all beings have the ability to communicate something of themselves to other beings" (p. 172). For the accomplishment of such kind of communication through senses and feelings, it is essential to leave aside the anthropocentric and eco-racist convictions about humans' superiority over nature, and then, develop a respectable ecological awareness towards all bodies of nature. Similarly, the persona, conscious of his deep-rootedness in the material elemental forces of nature, inhales and feels the flow of wind through his veins. What creates the complexity and the materiality of the universe is the mutual interchange of feelings and emotions between human and nonhuman bodies. In Barad's words: "All bodies, not merely 'human' bodies, come to matter through the world's iterative intra-activity_its performativity" (2007, p. 152, emphasis in original).

Thomas, in "Before I Knocked", does not envision the universe in a stagnant, motionless situation, on the contrary, the poet endeavors to create a constantly evolving dynamic universe in an uninterrupted state of interactivity. The poet's material and dynamic conceptualization of the universe epitomizes humans not as dominant actors but as equal partners of nature's material coming into being. From this vantage point, Thomas' ideas coincides with the predominant ideology of material ecocriticism which argues that "all constituents of nature from the subatomic to the higher levels of existence possess agency, creativity, expression, and enduring connections that can be interpreted as a męlange of stories" (Oppermann, 2013, p. 57).

In addition to "Before I Knocked" in which the meaning of universe is comprised by the dynamic workings and interconnections of its intelligible and coextensive units, Dylan Thomas's spiritual and intuitive amalgamation with the elements of material cosmos is exposed in the "Especially When the October Wind" in which the persona takes a seaside promenade on an October day and feels the powerful impact of nature on his body through his senses:

Especially when the October wind
With frosty fingers punishes my hair,
Caught by the crabbing sun I walk on fire
And cast a shadow crab upon the land,
By the sea's side, hearing the noise of birds,
Hearing the raven cough in winter sticks,
My busy heart who shudders as she talks
Sheds the syllabic blood and drains her words. (Thomas, 2003, p. 16)

The poem portrays the change of seasons from summer to fall and the destructive effect that it produces on the other elements of nature as well as humans. The blowing of the October wind is imagined as a human who punished the persona with its frosty fingers. Similarly, the persona resembles his being caught by the sun to a crab, caught by a big strong hand. Further, the experience of walking on the sun-heated sands makes the persona feel like walking on the fire. These unconventional images of natural elements reveal the poet's dynamic and agentic perception of nature as a powerful devastating force against which humans are extremely vulnerable and insignificant. Walking on the seaside, the persona tries to understand the stories of the birds. Hearing the coughing of the raven, the persona listens to her story and his heart shudders, shedding a "syllabic blood", symbolically signifying the poet's process of writing poetry (Thomas, 2003, p. 16). Ironically, the poet's giving expression to nature in his poem "drains her words" and obstructs nature's speaking on her own behalf (p.16). The poet's syllabic blood, showing his

unsuccessful attempt to narrate nature's story drains the words of nature, intercepting her to tell her own story. The poet's inability to express nature's song by using human discourse is more clearly observed in the following part of the poem:

Shut, too, in a tower of words, I mark
 On the horizon walking like the trees
 The wordy shapes of women, and the rows
 Of the star-gestured children in the park.
 Some let me make you of the vowelled beeches,
 Some of the oaken voices, from the roots
 Of many a thorny shire tell you notes,
 Some let me make you of the water's speeches. (Thomas, 2003, p. 16)

Quite significantly, the persona imagines himself imprisoned in “the tower of words” which, quite significantly, demonstrates the insufficiency of human speech to tell nature's story (2003, p. 16).- The poet is aware of the fact that nature does not need a mediator to tell its story, and all that is needed for humans is to open their senses to hear the voices of nature. The poet surrenders himself to nature by indulging into the story of nature. His human speech is dissolved into the story of nature, loses its human domain, and becomes part of nature. The intersection of the language and nature are conveyed through the juxtaposition of different images. The bodies of women are brought together with the image of walking trees while children who play in the park are combined with the stars in the sky. The persona continuously underscores the agency of the natural elements and claims that he can draw together human and nature in the form of “vowelled beeches”, “oaken voices”, “thorny shire” and “the water's speeches” (Thomas, 2003, p. 16). In Thomas's imagination, language does not stand as a symbolic system of human discourse to convey solely human thoughts and ideas but it has its own physical existence as a material body. Thomas insists that his poetry as a narrative agency is completely enmeshed in the material phenomena. In a letter to Pamela Handsford Jonson, Thomas underpins the enmeshment of his poetry within the earth:

The body, its appearance, death, and diseases, is a fact, sure as the fact of a tree. It has its roots in the same earth as the tree. The greatest description I know of our own ‘earthiness’ is to be found in John Donne's Devotions, where he describes man as earth of the earth, his body earth, his hair a wild shrub growing out of the land. All thoughts and actions emanate from the body. Therefore the description of a thought or action – however abstruse it may be – can be beaten home by bringing it onto a physical level. Every idea, intuitive or intellectual, can be imaged and translated in terms of the body, its flesh, skin, blood, sinews, veins, glands, organs, cells, or senses. Through my small, bone-bound island I have learnt all I know, experienced all, and sensed all. All I write is inseparable from the island. (qtd. in Christie, 2019, p. 473)

Thomas, in his letter, clearly ascertains the materiality of human body and its rootedness in earth just like trees. He further argues that since his thoughts and ideas arise from his material body, it would not be erroneous to claim that discourse also has a material existence through which he reveals his thoughts. In the end, Thomas boldly asserts the inseparability of his writing from the material earth, combining his own story with the stories of the earth. In this regard, the poem, “Especially When the October Wind” auspiciously displays that the physical world is filled with material agency and meaningful stories, told by natural entities. In Thomas's poem, humans' stories are intermingled with the stories of nature.

Thomas' notion of material universe, constituted by the stories of its individual units, is redolent of Iovino and Oppermann's (2014) definition of the material world embodied with stories and meanings:

The world's material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be 'read' and interpreted as forming narratives, stories. Developing in bodily forms and in discursive formulations, and arising in coevolutionary landscapes of natures and signs, the stories of matter are everywhere: in the air we breathe, the food we eat, in the things and beings of this world, within and beyond the human realm. All matter, in other words, is a 'storied matter.' It is a material 'mesh' of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces. (pp. 1-2)

Material ecocriticism endorses the idea that natural environment is embedded with stories and narratives of its living and nonliving, human and nonhuman agencies. Nature evolves itself through the complex network of interwoven relations between matter and meaning. Matter and meaning are two closely interrelated terms which cannot be separated from each other. Likewise, Thomas' emphasis on the embeddedness of his poetry within earth evokes the material ecocritical premise of the connectedness of the matter and meaning. In Barad's words, matter and meaning are "inextricably fused together, and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder" (2007, p. 3). In addition to being interfused with each other, "smallest parts of matter are found to be capable exploding deeply entrenched ideas and large cities" (Barad, 2007, p. 3). Thus, even the most insignificant microscopic organisms in the universe are considered to be intelligent, self-performing and self-producing individuals. Material ecocriticism, in this manner, connects the text and matter "revealing the bonds between text and the world with the insights of the new materialist wave of thought" (Iovino and Oppermann, 2014, p. 2). In Oppermann's own words, "material ecocriticism explores the narrative aspects of agentic materiality as intermingled dynamic emergences and discursive forms" (2013, p. 56). Hence, Thomas, in his poem, blurs the sharp-edged distinctions of human/nonhuman, matter/meaning, and matter/discourse. Thomas invites his readers to listen to the stories that natural entities tell, and acknowledge the self-sufficient system of the material world, filled with "geological, biological, and cosmic stories that compel us to envision the physical world as storied matter teeming with countless narrative agencies that infiltrate every imaginable space and make the world intelligible" (Oppermann, 2013, p. 57).

In conclusion, reading Dylan Thomas' poetry from a material ecocritical perspective brings forth the poet's dis-anthropocentric vision of universe in which human and nonhuman entities are material interconnected to each other. Thomas' poetry encourages its readers to contrive an unbounded physical entanglement with nonhuman entities without prioritizing their anthropocentric interests above everything. Significantly enough, unlocking his intuitive sensations to understand the stories of the natural elements, Thomas achieves to construct a material ecological perspective of the vitality, receptiveness, and intelligibility of the material universe. Thomas invites his readers to conceive themselves as material agencies, interconnected with other material agencies in the dynamic and self-sustaining system of the universe.

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