

RS Thomas Poetry Leading Notes

Looking at finding heaven in the ordinary

1. Introduction to what it going to happen

Look at short history

Back ground to the influences on Thomas' work

To analysis the two poems

Look at the Implications of findings on the theme of finding heaven in the ordinary

Look at the Implications for pastoral care

2. Short History – Read handout

3. Read Poem 1

To help with drawing out some of the imagery and interpretation of these poems I have completed my own explorations but also held a meal with friends to explore the key questions I have put below.

Poem 1 – The Coming

Tasting the words

Stanza 1

- The initial words create a sense of wonder & mystery
- Later words create extreme imagery – scorched land of fierce colour, the light burned there, bright serpent, radiant with slime – intense and violent imagery.
- Light being harmful not bringing life but life threatening.
- Crusted buildings – sense of heat. Dryness, waterless.
- Contrast with river of slime – luminous – sense of corrupted river – pollution – of being ruined.
- The words Far off....through water... create a sense of distance (*).

Stanza 2

- Intense words again – sense of lifelessness & struggle for survival – bare hill, thin arms, vanished April.
- The words waiting....vanished...to return...let me go there... create a sense of movement, movement of God to the planet and the people (*).

Evoking Emotional response

Stanza 1

- Sense of shock, emotive language – similar to apocalyptic – polemical response.

Stanza 2

- Sense of the people being desperate, of needing salvation – sense of people begging to be helped
- Vanished April – Spring – sense of re-growth and natural renewal – as vanished – that something terrible has happened – failure of rains?
- Crossed boughs – language up to it seems quite desperate – arms reaching,

Both

The words stated at (*) create an intensity and desperateness. Of God moving from being absent to the present by God's initiative.

Key Words, Images & Allusions

- And God held in his hand a small globe – illusion to the mystical writings of Julian of Norwich:

"And with this insight he also showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand. It seemed to me as round as a ball. I gazed at it and thought, 'What can this be?' The answer came thus, 'It is everything that is made.' I marvelled how this could be, for it was so small it seemed it might fall suddenly into nothingness. Then I heard the answer, 'It lasts, and ever shall last, because God loves it. All things have their being in this way by the grace of God.'" (Revelations of Divine Love, Chapter V)

- Image of God/Trinity in discussion – and the discussion of Christ's incarnation as if happening now – allusion to:

Psalm 110 – The Lord says to my Lord...

John 1:1-5, John 1:14 – The Word made flesh and dwelt amongst us

Hebrews 1, Hebrews 9:11-12 redemption through Christ's coming.

It's the incarnation in a new context – a context of late 20th Century in the grip of the Cold War and Nuclear tension. Fits with idea of crusted buildings – famous film images of buildings in nuclear testing.

- Scorched land, river of radiant slime – apocalyptic image – global warming? Destruction of nature? Follow on from a nuclear incident or war or lack of concern for the environment.
- Crusted buildings casting their shadows – only place to get out of the burning light in the shadows of buildings. Shadows – reminds us of darkness – that the buildings may be part of the destruction – buildings as negative? Darkness is poignant? Allusion here to Psalm 74:18-22

Do not give to wild beasts the soul of your turtle dove;

Forget not the lives of your poor for ever.

Look upon your creation,

For the earth is full of darkness

Full of the haunts of violence.

Let not the oppressed turn away ashamed,

But let the poor and needy praise your name.

Arise, O God, maintain your own cause;

Remember how fools revile you all the day long.

Forget not the clamour of your adversaries,

the tumult of your enemies that ascends continually.

- Serpent – allusion to the Dragon in Revelation and the serpent in the creation story. Dragon is in the context of conflict and in opposition to God & God's people (Rev 12-13). The beast that ascends from the bottomless pit (Rev 11:7), an ancient serpent and deceiver of the world (satan) (Rev 12:9) The Beast and the Dragon come from the sea – brackish water is sometimes slimy. Revelation draws on ancient Canaanite mythology found in the OT as well (Daniel) where a serpent opposes God and creation coming from the sea.
- Uncoiling Serpent – sense of being less defensive or vulnerable to attack – but establishing itself in its context – taken over? Pythons who strangles prey usually releases its coils once it has suffocated its prey beyond the point of death and then relaxes.
- River of slime - Dramatic contrast - the reverse of Revelation 22:1 – Where the image of a pure flowing river is seen as a river of life brought by Christ. By implication the serpent is the opposite to Christ and an enemy to humanity.

- Vanished April – dramatic language – expected re-growth of spring has not occurred, and also an allusion to Easter – the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.
- Bare Hill, Bare Tree – Golgotha? – 1 Peter 2:24
He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and love for righteousness.
 - Genesis 2:9 Tree of life, Tree of knowledge of Good & Evil
 - Teal Tree (Lime Tree) Often stands isolated in very barren places – often on dry bare hill sides where little else grows. See picture of such a tree.
 - Psalm 72:3 Mountains bring peace to the people, and the hills bring righteousness – People seeking righteousness?
 - Command in Isaiah 13:2 (Where God is to defeat the Babylonians) to go up to a bare hill, shout and wave your hands, the Lord is coming to save you.
- Crossed boughs – sense of the Cross – with the people’s arms outstretched – sense of the crucifixion.
- Additional: Thin arms outstretched – awaiting arrival – wanting to be saved – possible allusion to Jesus’ birth and Jesus; arrival at Jerusalem where people waved their arms in the air saying “Hosannah” ‘Save us’.

Perspectives & Paradox

- Incarnation in a new context – if right – and if the apocalyptic analysis is correct – of climate change or nuclear war – then there is a strong connection with these being spiritually evil – the sense of the city or technology being a threat to the world and humanity. Thomas is very critical of ‘technological advancement’. A lot of his poems are very anti what he calls the “machine” as he sees technology as destroying and distancing people from nature, which is inherently good, and therefore distancing people from God.
- There is a paradox – of God being present and distant – away “far off” yet in God’s hand. Sense of the absence of God from the World facing serious affliction of evil. The incarnation as God making God’s self, present and accessible through Christ.

Who is speaking?

Someone speaking a mythic narrative or even prophetic utterance on behalf of God. Could be humanity, Adam or Thomas.

Who is the audience?

The reader who has some Christian understanding of some of the imagery and words used here as allusions.

Purpose

Trying out a creation/incarnation/crucifixion story in a mythic form in a modern context to see if they can hold our attention, and whether they can yield new resonance’s. (2)

The sense of God coming to us – ‘Emmanuel’ God with us – moving from absence to presence. Messiah - saviour

What is it saying

- Challenge to Christians of having value for the planet - an ecological justice.
- A challenge to see the politics of our times with a view to good and evil.

- Re-contextualising the importance of Christ today.

Immediate connections : Heaven in the ordinary

- Seeing the things of God in our current times - politics
- Understanding the relevance of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection in the context of the present, not something of History that has no relevance for today.
- The importance of a holistic understanding of the need of redemption – of people, or the planet. ? the need for politics & faith not to be separated.
- For us who are comfortable – to perceive the spiritual behind the ordinary – are theories about Revelation being written for the same reason, for people who were feeling comfortable in the Roman Empire in the early church, to see that the Empire was based on greed and not justice.

Poem 2 – Coming

Tasting the words

Stanzas 1&2

- Opening line a question – but sounds frustrated – annoyed – as if people in an argument are not getting what you are talking about. Jeans and beard make it feel contemporary – not an ancient discussion but a current one, frustration is maintained but in the end words are passionate and loyal as if reading a story.

Stanzas 3&4

- Words are mystical – reaction to the senses echo – sound, light – vision, seen but not seen, heard but not heard, smelling flowers which you can not see. Presence of God is like that – not objective presence – mystical presence.
- End in a form of paradox?

So both stanzas – eventually sound like someone in a discussion or argument – with no comment from the other person – but something you would have said or wished you had said.

Evoking Emotional response

- Sense of crucifying God through ignoring God.
- Frustration that people are spiritually unaware.
- That people are in denial about facing death and ultimate things.

Key Words, Images & Allusions

- Invisible as a mutation
Used in speech to denote how to say a word – soft or hard or fixed mutation – marks into the speech particularly the Welsh Language where the letters at the front and back of a word change depending on gender etc e.g. **'neu'** shows that a soft mutation is needed after *neu'*. So by implication they are marks that can be seen on the written page but are said. A gifted welsh speaker would hear the mutations clearly through practise and familiarity of the language, which would be invisible to those new to the language. Who would not understand the full meaning of the sentences.

The relevance here, is of words being said where there are hidden mutations which the hearer cannot hear but are there – a lot of hidden meaning that is not perceived. This links to the next phrase. Such an awareness needs to be learnt.

- An echo of what the light said,
The personification of light – the light said something that no body attended. Attention is key to the other words – attending to God's presence. But no one attends. They are unaware of God's presence.

The next sentences talk of sensing, or rather people not sensing God through hearing, seeing and smelling. Emphasis about relationship of God on sensing – emotional/relational rather than cognitive/rational.

- An impression of eyes, quicker than to be caught looking
Sense of being looked at – but when turn round you don't catch someone watching you
- Taken on trust like flowers in the dark
Smelling something in the dark – again presence and absence.
- Dark country towards which we go
Dark Country death where we all go – flowers paradox – funerals we think of at funerals on top of graves etc – but here flowers are in the dark country – the sense of trusting in God that the dark country to which we go, will be ok.

An allusion to Shakespeare's Hamlet: Hamlet Act III, Scene I

*Who would these fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,*

- Darkness – biblically: McGrath
Darkness as an inability to understand God's mysterious workings.
Darkness as a symbol for sin
Darkness as a symbol of divine unknowability. (3)

Perspectives & Paradox

- To be made friends with for his jeans and beard ? Allusion to a modern understanding of the human/divine relationship as 'friendship' Jesus as my friend – largely the image in Pentecostal, charismatic churches – seeing Jesus in a new context - ? Criticism of this approach as dumbing down – which results in people not understanding the crucifixion? ?key emphasis to point out loss of awe and sense of the transcendent?
- Gods are not put to death anymore, Their lot is with the ignored – contemporary secular perspective – much think if Christianity in the American Evangelical perspective and therefore reject it?
- The sense of God's presence being unseen and unknown. Paradox of God being present but perceived as absent.
- The focus on People coming to God.
- Focus on language in the third stanza – raises the issue that you need to learn to perceive God in nature as you have to learn the nuances of language to understand its full meaning – there is a skill to attending to nature. An ancient tradition e.g. 'Lectio Divina' – spiritual reading of texts and life.

Who is speaking?

Thomas speaking to our contemporary largely secular culture and society.

Who is the audience?

Speaking to people he knew that saw no truths in Christianity.

What is it saying

That the Christian tradition holds onto an important truth to the presence of God.

That Christ is very relevant for today's world.

?The ancient inherited faith is a good model for being Christian?

Immediate connections: Heaven in the ordinary

- Attending to God in the ordinariness of life.
- The place of natural revelation as a resource to spirituality.
- Understanding of the Holy Spirit, as God's presence with us revealed in moments of transcendence.

6. Heaven in the Ordinary: Connections with the Core & Worship Modules

- **Transcendent model of contextual theology (Bevans, 2002, 97-110)**

Contextual Theology: the contextualisation of theology – the attempt to understand Christian faith in the terms of a particular context. In the West we have a particular problem of the culture becoming increasingly distant from the faith.

The transcendent model states that culture and understanding of the faith can only occur through an encounter with God that leads to a radical shift of perspective.

Key assumption "There are some things we cannot understand without a complete change of mind through experience". Understanding from encountering God through the senses and therefore religious experience.

So the focus is less on translating the bible into contextual language – but focusing on mystical experience to understand the ancient faith today. In practice this model often makes appeal to the mystics, pre-modern forms of the faith in a post-modern context. You see this being used in Alternative worship communities and other new forms of being church as community.

Brueggemann and Ricoeur are particular exponents of this approach:

"Imagination is the active enterprise of moving beyond one's defining commitments to entertain alternative definitions of self, world, other, and God. This is indeed the dangerous work of all serious artistic effort, that is, to lead the participant beyond what is self-evident to what becomes evident, available and real only in artistic articulation. Ricoeur shows that concrete change – attitude, action, behaviour, policy – of any serious, lasting kind arises only through an alternatively imagined world....Such change is invitational and not at all coercive."

(Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*).

- **Connections with Brueggemann & role of the prophetic imagination (Brueggemann, 1978, 11-27)**

Brueggemann talks a lot about an alternative imagination – and in particular the role of the prophets to use poetry and the creative arts to see another way of being when people are in cultures which are oppressive. He makes big connections between the oppression of our current culture that is losing the sense of Christians alternative vision of being such as Moses' vision that led to the Exodus.

In his book *Finally Comes the Prophet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* – Brueggemann makes the connection of the importance of poetry and the arts as modes of enabling transcendent experience, of heaven in the ordinary:

“The reality of God’s self-giving outruns all our capacities to speak about it. We have no language to say fully what we know about God’s love, which is self-giving, transforms. Unless we speak poetically, God’s self-giving transformation will be heard as a form of cheap grace that costs God nothing because God simply overrides. Our poetry, however, helps us articulate how costly our new life is for God.... It is a total giving, out of extravagance, that runs beyond payment, but at deep cost.

- **Fowler’s stages of faith (Watts et al, 2002,109-14,110-1)**

Talks about faith being a journey resultant from experiences – that many people move from a simplistic/fundamentalist faith where everything is absolute to a more integrated faith normally through the sense of crises of faith. These later expressions of faith promote spiritual questing and engaging in difficult and dangerous questions – a faith based on discipleship and questing – living in a particular context holding onto a tradition – a spiritual and divine narrative. Keeping going on such a quest is an experience of encountering God (presence) and absence where God and the faith feel very distant.

- **Contemporary Spirituality**

Marie McCarthy in her section in the *Blackwell Reader Pastoral & Practical Theology* entitled “Spirituality in a Post-modern Era” emphasised that many people are on a spiritual quest resulting from the uncertainty of living. She promotes the need of the church to draw on its resources to promote the faith and exploration of the faith through re-telling the tales of salvation history, contemplative awareness – experiencing God in the present, positive action and promoting community and community spiritual questing as some of the ways that Church can be re-contextualised into our current culture. With the need of pastors to respond creatively to pastoral care – drawing on a hermeneutic of restoration to counter the prevalent hermeneutic of suspicion.

- **Absence & Presence: the place of Mystery (Countrymann, 1999, 62-90)**

The bible is full of the sense of blessing and curse, light and darkness, presence and absence – which are very much part of life. This mystery is often expressed uniquely in poetic writings.

Whenever human beings try to speak of the actual subject matter of faith, we move paradoxically beyond the capacities of ordinary human language, even of poetry.

Poetry works allusively and metaphorically, it works by indirection, pointing the reader toward some moment of recognition that relates the poetic construct to the reader's own experience and helps the two to interpret one another or perhaps even opens up new realms of encounter with the Holy Spirit.

Absence

The experience of absence is the more usual for humanity. It may overtake us anywhere, at any time, as an experience of meaninglessness and futility. It may afflict us even in the midst of religious practice or the spiritual quest.

Who is responsible for this absence? God or the speaker? Has the absence of God rendered the experience of faith dry? Or has the speaker's blindness masked the presence of God?

Presence

Absence is contrasted with moments of metanoia sensed grace which transforms the sense of absence to presence. Can be a transcendent encounter that lifts the person out of normal human limitations, in which one becomes aware of oneself as immersed in God or in eternity, and as such is an aspect of what is commonly called mysticism.

- **Knowing God through experience v knowing God through knowledge**

- the re-establishment of the place of attention (Lectio Divina) as spiritual encounter
- The Holy Spirit - the Go-between God (John Taylor) Worship Module (Taylor, 1978, 18-19)

True attention is an involuntary self-surrender to the object of the attention. The Holy Spirit is that power which opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware and minds that shrink from too much reality... If one is open to towards God, one is open also to the beauty of the world.

7. Heaven in the ordinary: Implications & Resources for pastoral care

- The importance of using the old to resource the new.
- The importance of re-enchantment in worship and devotional life.

Lord of the Rings e.g. – seeking for awe and mystery – away from the talked down/dumbed down expressed in many churches.

- Absence and Presence: the place of mystery .
- Re-establishing the place of awe and spiritual reflection into discipleship or faith-progression.
- Faith as Journeying with God – and relationship changing from simple friend to more complex relationship.
- Complex God & complex world
- Spiritual Direction
- Attention to God as a spiritual skill – Spiritual Reflection

8. Concluding thoughts

Absence & Presence – as an important part of life – needing pastoral assistance..... Absence is often seen as a medical condition – depression – rather than part of life – where we are always expected to be up. The place of mature and gifted pastoral care is a unique role for the Church.

Sometimes in human experiences the hope of presence is little more than this sense that the absence cannot be all, cannot be the whole story.

Quoting Countryman:

“The alternation, then, of absence and presence, however unpredictable and seemingly arbitrary, has about it an inevitability. Like the alternation of day and night, of sleep and waking, of life and death and new life, the pain of absence and the joy of presence are related intimately to one another.

Absence may arise from a variety of causes - human loss and grief, our own sin and weakness, the apparent refusal of God to become available to us. And we may expect it to be excruciatingly painful at times. TO ignore it is a fool's solution. The life-giving response is to look through it for the hope of reunion.”

Finally and as a conclusion, I want to read Thomas' key poem which expresses the essence of this struggle between absence and presence....

Poem 3: "Via Negativa" from *H'm* (1972)

Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find.
He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.