Fern Hill by Dylan Thomas: Summary and Critical Analysis

Fern Hill by Dylan Thomas is an autobiographical poem in which Thomas uses the memories of childhood days in order to explore the theme of a journey from innocence to experience. The theme is based on William Blake’s division the world of experience and it is reinforced through the use of Wordsworthian double consciousness.

The poem can be divided into two parts: the first three stanzas are related to the poet’s experience as a child when he uses to spend his summer holidays at his uncle’s farm (Fern Hill, it is in Wan sea in Wales) but the last three stanzas are about an awakening in the child which signifies the loss of the world of innocence. At the center of this loss of the innocence are the myths of fall of the first human beings (Adam and Eve). The world of innocence (child) as described in the first three stanzas is like the Garden of Eden. This is a world in which the child is in complete union with the nature.

This world of fantasy offers the child an Edenic bliss. The way Thomas describes this world; it appears to be a timeless world without a sense of loss and decay. In the third stanza the poet slowly moves towards the transition between the world of innocence and the world of experience. In the fourth stanza the speaker’s sleeping is a symbolic sleeping, which ends a flashing in the dark. This flashing is a kind of awakening as hinted by the first line of the fourth stanza. In this awakening the child (speaker) initiates into the world of maturity. “Sleeping” in the poem is symbolic that refers to the loss of innocence that equates the Adam and Eve, who had slept after a fall from the Grace of God. This initiation of the world of maturity entails the loss of Edenic bliss, innocence, grace and freedom. Moreover poet loses creative imagination and fantasies in which a union with nature was possible.

In the last stanza the poet once again contemplates on the memoirs of his childhood, but this time the awareness, becomes dominant. In the last line the poet refers to his chained situation in the world of experience. Now he is in chain, green color is withered now. So, this poem is the journey from childhood to manhood when the manhood comes, the man suffers from agony. Now I am not what I was in the past. The use of verb “song” hints that the losses can be captured through art in the last line stanza.

Of course, the poem is intensely nostalgic: but it is written from a point of view which takes into account the fact that the adult has awoken, "to the farm forever fled from the childless land". The farm still exists, in reality: but it no longer belongs to the phantasm world which the child created and lived in. That land seems itself still to exist somewhere, but is childless: and one can never go back to live in it: One has died out of that land. To be green and growing is to die out of it: but during the whole process, he sang in his chains - as the sea does, in the rhythmic control of the tides.

 Adult consciousness brings a loss of phantasy freedom. Undeniably, the poem is written from a schizoid feeling about reality: The self can relate with immediacy to an object, which is the object of its own imagination or memory.' When the self 'abandons itself to the real' it will lose its sense of freedom. This applies to both perception and action. The child is self-enclosed in his Eden, and the poem encounters the paradoxes of omnipotence and impotence, freedom and slavery (chains), being 'anyone in phantasy and nothing in reality'. The air in that childhood world is different from the air of Thomas' poems of strangling and constriction: it is the air of freedom, and everything is made of it like ‘castles in the air' - it is the 'other air', of morning songs, of chimney tunes, of the child's horns and the bark of foxes. Even the image of Time taking him by the hand is not here bitter or negative: it is as though time is a merciful mother.