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Under Milk Wood

RG 22

by

RG 22

Dylan Thomas

THE CAST

First Voice Richard Burton
Second Voice Richard Bebb
Captain Cat Hugh Griffith
Rosie Probert Rachel Thomas
Polly Garter Diana Maddox
Mr. Mog Edwards Dafydd Havard
Myfanwy Price Sybil Williams
Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard Dilys Davies
Mr. Ogmores David Close-Thomas
Mr. Pritchard Ben Williams
Butcher Beynon Meredith Edwards
Gossamer Beynon Gwenllian Owen

The Rev. Eli Jenkins Philip Burton
Lily Smalls Gwenyth Petty
Mr. Pugh John Huw Jones
Mrs. Pugh Mary Jones
Mary Ann Sailors Rachel Thomas
Sinbad Sailors Aubrey Richards
Dai Bread David Close-Thomas
Mrs. Dai Bread One Gwenyth Petty
Mrs. Dai Bread Two Rachel Roberts
Willy Nilly Postman Ben Williams
Mrs. Willy Nilly Rachel Thomas
Cherry Owen John Ormond Thomas

Mrs. Cherry Owen Lorna Davies
Nogood Boyo Dillwyn Owen
Organ Morgan John Glyn-Jones
Mrs. Organ Morgan Olwen Brookes
Mae Rose Cottage Rachel Roberts
Gweny Norma Jones
The three boys : Ian Griffith, John Watts, and
Philip Cyster

The songs set by Daniel Jones
Children's songs and
singing game recorded by
children of Laugharne School

Produced by Douglas Cleverdon

issued with the co-operation of The British Broadcasting Corporation

Under Milk Wood

On the 9th of November, 1953, a few days after his thirty-ninth birthday, Dylan Thomas died in New York. At the time of his death a new poem was still unfinished, and the collaboration with Stravinsky, planned for the end of the year, had not even begun. The survival of *Under Milk Wood* is a remarkable piece of good fortune, for it was not completed until Thomas came within a month of his death, though he had worked intermittently on the play for nearly ten years. There was no time for any final revision of the text by the poet himself, but we are justified in regarding what he has left as a complete work.

The publication of Thomas's *Collected Poems* in 1952 marked the end of one period of his literary development; after this, according to his own words, he intended to turn from the strictly personal kind of poetry to a more public form of expression, and to large-scale dramatic works in particular, where there would be scope for all his versatility, for his gifts of humour and characterization as well as his genius for poetry. It is fortunate that at least one of these projected works has been preserved for us.

Under Milk Wood, a Play for Voices, grew by a slow and natural process, and the story of that growth, known only to a few friends of the poet, is most interesting. Thomas liked small towns by the sea best, and small Welsh towns by the sea best of all. Before the war he lived for many years in Laugharne, and during the war for a time in New Quay; there is no doubt that he absorbed the spirit of these places and, through imagination and insight, the spirit of all other places like them. When, more than ten years ago, a short talk was commissioned by the B.B.C., the description of a small Welsh seaside town was a natural choice of subject. *Quite Early One Morning*, short as it is, and written so many years ago, is closely related to *Under Milk Wood*. There is the same sequence of time, though limited to the morning hours and in winter, not spring; we hear the dreams of the sleeping town and see the sleepers getting up and going about their business. Captain Tiny Evans and the Rev. Thomas Evans are pygmies beside the blind sea-captain and the reverend bard of *Llaregyb*, but Miss Hughes 'The Cosy' recalls Myfanwy Price, Manchester House stands ready for Mog Edwards, and the husbands of Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard

are already at their tasks; 'Dust the china, feed the canary, sweep the drawing-room floor; and before you let the sun in, mind he wipes his shoes.'

The success of this broadcast talk suggested to Thomas a more extended work against the same kind of background. At first he was unable to decide upon the form of the work, and there was much discussion with friends about a stage play, a comedy in verse, and a radio play with a blind man as narrator and central character. The blind man, a natural bridge between eye and ear for the radio listener, survives in *Under Milk Wood*, with the difference that Captain Cat is made to share his central position with two anonymous narrators. But the simple time sequence of *Quite Early One Morning*, which resembles the pattern of *Under Milk Wood* so closely, at first appeared inadequate; some kind of plot seemed to be necessary. Thomas thought he had found the theme he wanted in the contrast between the mythical town and the surrounding world, the conflict between the eccentrics, strong in their individuality and freedom, and the sane ones who sacrifice everything to some notion of conformity. The whole population cannot very well be accommodated inside the walls of a lunatic asylum; so the sane world decrees that the town itself shall be declared an 'insane area,' with all traffic and goods diverted from it. Captain Cat, spokesman of the indignant citizens, insists that the sanity of the town should be put on trial in the town hall with every legal formality; he will be counsel for the Defence and the citizens themselves will be witnesses. The trial takes place, but it comes to a surprising end. The final speech for the Prosecution consists of a full and minute description of the ideally sane town; as soon as they hear this, the people withdraw their defence and beg to be cordoned off from the sane world as soon as possible.

Once more settled in his house overlooking Laugharne Estuary, Thomas began working according to the plan of *The Town Was Mad*, as he called it, and brought the action up to the delivery of letters by Willy Nilly the postman; but by that time he had changed his mind, and there was no letter for Captain Cat about the sanity or the insanity of the town. When this first part of *Under Milk Wood*, with the provisional title *Llaregyb, a Piece for Radio Perhaps*, appeared for the first time in *Botteghe Oscure*, Thomas had returned to the plan of *Quite Early One Morning*; his intention was to limit the picture to the town itself, with hardly a suggestion of a

the town, and to extend the time sequence to form a complete cycle.

Before Thomas's third visit to the U.S.A. in 1953, the title *Under Milk Wood, a Play for Voices* was decided upon, the first part, *Llaregyb*, was revised, and the work had been extended to the end of Polly Garter's song, where it first appears. In this form the play was read at the Kaufmann Auditorium of the Young Men's Hebrew Association on the 15th and the 29th of May; the poet himself read the parts of the First Voice and the Rev. Eli Jenkins.

As soon as Thomas returned to Britain the B.B.C. urged him to complete the work without further delay, and, by omitting some projected ballads and unfinished material for the closing section, he was able to supply a finished version at the end of October. The first broadcast of the whole work, produced by Douglas Cleverdon with a distinguished all Welsh cast, was given on the 25th of January, 1954, with a repetition two days later.

In case *Under Milk Wood* falls into the hands of a Welsh philologist, it must be made clear that the language used is Anglo-Welsh. Dylan Thomas spoke no Welsh, and the reader must imitate his inconsistency if he wishes to hear the words as they were pronounced by the poet himself.

DANIEL JONES.

January 1954.
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