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The Poetry of Edward Thomas

A Linguistic Analysis of Selected Works

by

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Abstract

In this thesis I have undertaken a linguistic/stylistic analysis of selected poems of Edward Thomas. Thomas wrote 144 poems in the two years prior to his death on active duty in France in April 1917 at the age of thirty nine. He was a contemporary of members of the various schools of poetry which existed at this time, the Georgians, the Imagists, the early Modernists and the war poets being the most important. He shared the concerns, philosophic, and linguistic, with all these groups, but was essentially a unique voice. He eschewed equally the decadence of the late -Victorians and what he considered the excesses of the Modernists. To say he steered a middle course is not to do him justice. He tenaciously steered his own course.

Though appreciated by a small and largely insider group of literary critics, Thomas has been subject to unwarrented critical neglect.Surface readings of his works could bring accusations of a certain lack of colour and vitality. This combined with his refusal to be neatly categorized has contributed to his lack of status. I believe a true understanding of Thomas' works can only be achieved by a sustained linguistic analysis.

I have concentrated on ten works which I consider demonstrate the variety of Thomas' linguistic *modus operandi*. For convenience sake, and for the sake of a unified approach, I have grouped these works according to the major thematic concerns. The War and its effects on society and the lives of individuals with 'As The Teams Head-Brass'; the War as a personal meditation with 'Rain'; roads and tracks as metaphors for life's journey with 'The Path'; sections of countryside as correlatives of inner vision with 'The Hollow Wood', 'The Barn' and 'Over The Hills'; the linking of names, smells and memory in 'Old Man' and finally the forest as exemplar of mystery and death in 'The Green Roads', 'Lights Out' and 'Out In The Dark'.

My linguistic methodology has used as a main grammatical text Quirk and Greenbaum's *A University Grammar Of English.* I have drawn on the concepts of linguistic cohesion as discussed in Halliday and Hasan, and some reference has been made where appropriate to Charles Fillmore's theory of role relationships. Other grammatical and linguistic texts consulted are listed in 'The List Of Texts Cited'. The text of Edward Thomas' works throughout this study has been *The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas*, edited by Professor R. G. Thomas (1978).

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Table Of Contents

Introduction		5
Chapter 1.	War, Change, And The Countryside. *As The Team's Head-Brass.*	13
Chapter 2.	War: A Private Meditation. *Rain*	24
Chapter 3.	A Silent Companion Always Ready For Us. *The Path*	34
Chapter 4.	Not Empty, Silent, Still, But Full Of life Of Some Kind. *The Hollow Wood, The Barn, Over The Hills.*	44
Chapter 5.	An Avenue, Dark, Nameless, Without End. *Old Man.*	59
Chapter 6.	Into The Forest. *The Green Roads, Lights Out, Out In The Dark.*	76
Conclusion.		92
List Of Works Cited.		95

Introduction

Weighing the nuances, always linguistic,
of a Thomas or a Frost poem can exercise
more muscles than construing Eliot. (Longley)

Edward Thomas was intensely interested in poetic theory and the workings of language. It was his bread and butter and private preoccupation for the seventeen years before his first poems were submitted for publication. The hesitations and rough edges of some works which may disconcert the uninitiated reader are not the result of a fumbling practitioner but of strong emotion pruned into shape by much thought, care, and meticulous attention to the techniques which he felt were true to feeling and the organic nature of the words themselves. Words were living, vital entities which would suggest their own usage to the receptive writer.(McDonald,228). 'Choose me,/ You English words.' ('Words') The relative lack of recognition Thomas has received may be due in part to the apparently unostentatious nature of his unique stylistic features which though innovative, draw unashamedly on the living poetic tradition. Some of his works such as 'Adlestrop' and 'Old Man' are immediately intriguing. Others require a greater scrutiny to assess their true worth . In this study I have attempted by a process of close linguistic/stylistic analysis to do justice to a poet whose position in the history of twentieth century literature is largely underrated.

Edward Thomas wrote poetry only during the final two years of his life. From December 1914 until April 1917 when he was killed at the age of thirty seven, he wrote one hundred and forty four poems. Apart from the 'Last Poem' which was written in the January before his death, he wrote nothing after embarkation. Apart from a few pieces which appeared under the pseudonym Edward Eastaway, the bulk of his verse was published posthumously. Although recognition has grown over the years, Thomas' place in the history of English poetry has been largely overlooked -- and frequently misunderstood. He has been labelled at various times a nature poet, a Georgian, a late Victorian, a War poet, a proto modernist, and an English Romantic in the direct line of Wordsworth. Each individual label must be found wanting. Thomas fitted no one of these, but undoubtedly all, and was, from the perspective of the late twentieth century, greater than the sum of the parts. Stan Smith believes that the 'metaphysical and private gloom ' evident in his verse was 'the situated response to a specific moment in the evolution of modern society: the mood of an era'. Thomas was responding to a conviction that his own age 'is party to some crisis in the relationship between words and thing,' a subject he would tackle in 'Old Man'. (Smith, 57; 59, 1976) Whatever the case, his problematic refusal to slot neatly into a poetic category must account for much of the critical neglect. Even a cursory examination of many of the poems reveals much that is original, with innovative reworkings of traditional material and an assured technical mastery. But his

wielding of a new broom was achieved with restraint.There is no sign of the dramatic linguistic experimentation of his Modernist contemporaries, Pound, Eliot and Joyce. Allusions to his predecessors which are scattered throughout Thomas' work were taken as proof of his being 'derivative in a bad way'. (Longley 70). Surface readings of country descriptions were seen as merely tired continuations of an already tired rural tradition, which the Georgians were doing nothing to revitalize.That fact that Thomas used the countryside to expose a complex and often mysterious world view was frequently overlooked, as was the evocative beauty of his acutely observed slices of rural life. Peter Mitchell has discussed Thomas' relationship with the Georgians at some length, taking issue with Leavis' 1932 judgement that Thomas was 'a very original poet who devoted great technical subtlety to the expression of a distinctly modern sensibility'. He asserts that while Thomas had his poetic roots firmly entrenched in the 'woolly pastoral' and sentimentalism of the worst of Georgianism, his better work transcended both the prevailing moods of celebration and melancholy. His emotional complexity and subtlety of expression generally set him apart from the 'ultimately disengaged pastoral of escape' that was the stock-in-trade of many of his contemporaries. (Mitchell,359-366)

Thomas' role as a War poet deserves special consideration.W.Cooke lists in some detail the erroneous views held by a number of critics. Athalie Bushnell, after wrongly stating that the poems often had their background in the army hut or trench, states that '...very little of his poetry actually takes war or war incidents as its subjects. His poetry is nature poetry, taking simplicity, wonder and longing as its keynotes'. Coombes, extraordinarily, found only 'six or seven war poems'. John H Johnston considered that Thomas, along with Francis Ledwidge, 'refused to let the conflict interfere with their nostalgic rural visions'. Bernard Bergonzi stated that 'very few of Thomas' poems are actually about the war, even obliquely: in his loving concentration on the unchanging order of nature and rural society, the war exists only as a brooding but deliberately excluded presence'. (Cooke, 209-210) The truth of the matter is rather different. The War was an overriding presence in Thomas' work. It continuously impinged upon the central symbols and chosen imagery, and governed the interplay of syntax and meaning. The awareness of death, even from an early age, had, under pressure of depressive bouts, and domestic and work pressures, gradually intensified into a muted death wish, feelings which were crystallized with the outbreak of war and his eventual decision to enlist. Since these two years were the period when he was prompted to respond to the call to poetic expression, his works truly, as Robert Frost stated after his death, followed the 'Roads to France.' From 'Up In The Wind' to 'Out In The Dark' the growing awareness and barely concealed desire for death can be easily traced. Even the most transparent expressions of delight in the minutiae of country life are often darkened by a sombre shadow. Anthologists of the poetry of World War One have often represented Thomas as eager to respond to the call to arms by the solitary inclusion of 'The Trumpet' -- a less fervid example of unbridled patriotism than first appears -- and which was in fact among the last group of poems written in late1916. A truer picture of his attitude to the public conduct of theWar and the actions of politicians is found in 'This Is No Petty

Case Of Right Or Wrong': 'I hate not Germans, nor grow hot/ With love of Englishman.' His patriotism was both complex and fundamental, responding to the very soil of England of which he felt a part. 'The ages made her that made us from dust:/ She is all we know and live by, and we trust/ She is good and must endure loving her so'. The sentiment expressed is strongly reminiscent of Rupert Brooke's famous sonnet, 'The soldier', written the previous year: 'There shall be/ In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;/ A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware'. The bugle call is mocking and indifferent in the untitled 'No one cares less than I' : 'Nobody knows but God,/ Whether I am destined to lie/ Under a foreign clod... But laughing, storming, scorning,/ Only the bugles know/ What the bugles say in the morning,/ And they do not care when they blow/ The call that I heard'. Bloodshed easily translates into images of soil and fertility. In 'Blenheim Oranges' the speaker describes repeated patterns of seasonal change.'The Blenheim oranges/ Fall grubby from the trees,/ As when I was young - /And when the lost one was here - / And when the War began/ To turn young men to dung'. Death as a grimly ironic counterpoise to the habits of daily life is evident in 'A Private' with the carousing ploughman who 'slept out of doors/ Many a frozen night...now at last he sleeps/ More sound in France - that, too, he secret keeps'. The dialogue between the speaker and the travelling countryman in 'Man And Dog' exemplifies how allusions to the fighting infiltrate the description of country life. 'In 'seventy-four a year of soldiering/ With the Berkshires, - hoeing and harvesting/ In half the shires where corn and couch will grow. / His sons, three sons, were fighting, but the hoe/ And reap-hook he liked, or anything to do with trees'. Later in the poem:'"So Alton I must reach tonight somehow:/ I'll get no shakedown with that bedfellow/ From farmers. Many a man sleeps worse tonight/ than I shall.' 'In the trenches.' 'Yes, that's right.'" Two four lined lyrics, 'The Cherry Trees' and 'In Memoriam' speak directly of the loss of young lives. To quote from the first: 'The cherry trees bend over and are shedding,/ On the old road where all that passed are dead,/ Their petals, strewing the grass as for a wedding/ This early May morn when there is none to wed'.

The 'true' trench poet might assault the sensibilities of the Edwardian reader with descriptions of 'trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud/ Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled' (Sassoon, 'Counter-Attack'); or the dead Boche, 'propped against a shattered trunk,/ In a great mess of things unclean'.(Graves, 'Dead Boche); Thomas more subtly, with less obvious impact, but ultimately to more lasting effect, transferred the images of mutilation to a scarred and decaying countryside. Fallen trees abound. In 'The Wind's Song', in a 'lone pine clump', of the six trees, the tallest was dead, 'one a mere stump./ On one long stem, branchless and flayed and prone'. A fallen tree 'checks the sight' in 'The Path'. Trees are or have been felled in 'Fifty Faggots', 'The Barn' and 'As The Team's Head-Brass'.The representation of decline is a pervasive iconic presence. Sassoon's 'butchered , frantic gestures of the dead', (Counter-Attack) compares with the pathos of 'broken reeds,/ Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff', in the monologue 'Rain' where the speaker's private anguish becomes a part of the wider pain in the trenches: 'But here I pray that none whom once I loved/ Is lying tonight or lying still awake/ Solitary, listening to the rain'. In an analogous

example, 'The Owl', the comfort of an inn is 'salted and sobered' by the voice of an owl, 'Speaking for all who lay under the stars,/ Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice'. A country scene provokes unbidden the images of battle: 'Tall reeds/ Like criss-cross bayonets/ Where a bird once called.' ('Bright Clouds') The timeless symbolism of the forest poems adverts with the phrase 'this June' to historical reality in 'The Green Roads'.Speculation about the future after the disruption of the War hovers around the syntax of such poems as 'It Was Upon' and 'Fifty Faggots', and finds a focus in the final lines: 'Now I recall,/ This July eve, and question, wondering,/ What of the lattermath to this hoar spring?' and 'Better they will never warm me, though they must/ Light several Winters' fires. Before they are done/ The War will have ended, many other things/ Have ended, maybe, that I can no more/ Foresee or more control than robin and wren'. Even with no overt or peripheral reference to the War, the psychological stain of the carnage on society is reflected throughout Thomas' work with recurrent intimations of violence, death and decay : 'From the inn one watches, too,/ In the room for visitors/ That has no fire, but a view/ And many cases of stuffed fish, vermin, and/ kingfishers'.('The Watchers) 'Cheap-jack, balloon-man, drover with crooked stick, and steer,/ Pig, turkey, goose and duck, Christmas corpses to be'. ('The Gypsy') 'I should like to be lying under that foam,/ Dead, but able to hear the sound of the bell'. ('The Child On The Cliff') 'But far more ancient and dark/ The combe looks since they killed the badger there,/ Dug him out and gave him to the hounds'. (' The Combe') 'And many other beasts/ And birds, skin, bone, and feather,/ Have been taken from their feasts/ and hung up there together'. ('The Gallows') In 'The Long Small Room' the dimensions of the room, 'long' and 'small' and 'narrowed up to the end', are suggestive of a coffin. In an article on War Poetry published in 1914 in *Poetry And Drama*, Thomas wrote: 'No other class of poetry vanished so rapidly, has so little chosen from it for posterity.' In his own case, he has happily been proved wrong.(Longley, 135,1981)

In giving due recognition to the pervasive influence of the War on the poetry of Edward Thomas, it would of course be wrong to overlook other factors that gave rise to the special voice that emerged so precipitately in the final two years of his life. The War did not prompt the poetry; it gave an urgency to the poetry that was dormant, and, ironically, it provided financial security which enabled him to devote himself to his true literary vocation.The War did not provide the subject matter or thematic concerns, but it provided the edge and underpinning to express poetically the preoccupations that existed since childhood. One recurring theme throughout Thomas' work is the yearning for an unobtainable lost land, 'a perfect country of the imagination'. Leslie Norris and J.P. Ward both considered this a yearning after the land of his ancestors, an example of the sense of dispossession Smith has discussed: 'This is my grief. That land,/ My home, I have never seen'. (Home) There are few specific references to Wales; two that appear quite incidentally are 'The mountain ways of Wales' in 'Roads' and the haunting comment, 'Sweeter I never heard, mother, no, not in all Wales', in 'The Child On The Cliff'.(Norris,90; and Ward,105) D.W.Harding also felt that Thomas displayed a 'pervasive' sense of homesickness and nostalgia.(Harding,8;17) In the later

poems, as a proccupation with death became more acute, the 'lost land' came to have a more specific location in the 'forest'.

Thomas' apprenticeship in poetry was served as critic, essayist and nature writer, his first book, *The Woodland Life*, being published at the age of eighteen. By the beginning of 1914 he had written over thirty prose books and thousands of articles and reviews. Helen Thomas has written of 'the hateful hack-work books written to the order of publishers, which though he did them well did not at all satisfy his own creative impulse, the damming up of which contributed largely to his melancholy'. But despite the frustration of this financially driven toil, the genesis of the poetry lay in the prose; the acute observation of the moods and colours of the natural world; the working through of his feelings of himself as an Englishman of Welsh extraction; the development of his personal symbols and his unique world view; his sense of the continuity of English poetry and deep interest in the mysterious workings of words and their power to represent 'the thing it is'. ('Old Man') It was Robert Frost who encouraged the switch to poetry. His friendship with Thomas, of whom he wrote, 'the closest I ever came in friendship to anyone in England or anywhere else in the world I think was with Edward Thomas', was mutually productive. Thomas' reviews of *North of Boston* were highly influential in estalishing Frost's reputation in England, and Frost recognized the poetry in Thomas' prose. He claimed that he simply told Thomas to rewrite parts in verse form, 'in exactly the same cadence. Thats all there was to it'. Thomas saw in Frost's verse what came to be the credo for his own: 'These poems are revolutionary because they lack the exaggeration of rhetoric...Their language is free from the poetical words and forms that are the chief material of the secondary poets. The metre avoids not only old fashioned pomp and sweetness, but the later fashion also of discord and fuss. In fact the medium is common speech'.(Works of E.T.,5) In the lengthy discussions the two men engaged in, Thomas found much that was congenial to his own developing poetic theory. Frost felt that it was 'the image of the living voice that informs the sentence' and that 'the living part of the poem is the intonation entangled somehow in the syntax idiom and meaning of a sentence'.(R.G.Thomas,32;1978) In his plea for a return to the use of the colloquial voice and the rhythms of speech in poetry Thomas was echoing Wordsworth's plea for the use of common speech in the *Preface* to the second edition of the *The Lyrical Ballads* in 1800. The aim was 'not to reproduce the spoken word, but the *effect* of the speech, and the speaker'. Literature was 'to make words of such spirit, and arrange them in such a manner, that they will *do* all that a speaker can do by innumerable shades, by tone and pitch of voice, by speed, by pauses, by all that he was and all that he will become'. (*How I Began* quoted in Works Of E.T.,6) An early admiration for the classic prose style of Pater came to be a highly critical view of what he perceived as 'encouraging meticulosity in detail and single words, rather than a regard for form in its largest sense' Pater used words as 'bricks, as tin soldiers, instead of flesh and blood and genius'.With this in mind, he declared that he wanted to 'begin over again with them [the ideas] and wring all the necks of my rhetoric--the geese'. (Vogeler,117) The new movements in poetry came in for equally damning criticism. Pound, he considered, exhibited confusion and 'eccentric speech', and his verses looked 'so extraordinary, dappled with French, Provencal, Spanish, Italian, Latin, and old English... with

crudity, violence and obscurity, with stiff rhythms and no rhythms at all'. The Imagists were dismissed tersely as 'imbeciles.' (Quotes from Longley,28;35) In dismissing what he considered as the worst excesses of the new, and of the artificial poeticisms of the late Victorians, Thomas strove to create a voice of integrity, a language 'not to be betrayed', and one that proved to be uniquely his own. He would not, and in a sense could not, divorce himself from his antecedents, placing himself without excuse in the line of Cobbett, Jefferies and Clare. Echoes from the past unobtrusively slip into his syntax and stanzaic forms.Shakespeare himself, and a glancing allusion to *The Winters Tale*, make an appearence in the historical panorama of 'Lob'.As Longley has discussed, the Romantic heritage is in evidence in 'October', with impressionistic reworkings of lines from Keats and Wordsworth. Both 'Lights Out' and 'Out In The Dark' appear to owe aspects of phrasing and cadence to Shelley's 'The Sensitive Plant' : 'For love, and beauty, and delight/ There is no death nor change: their might/ Exceeds our organs which endure/ No light, being themselves obscure'. The existential loneliness -- and 'wet' images - of 'Rain' recall the spirit if not the phrasing of Matthew Arnold, worked through via his study of Pater. 'The waters are too deep between us' evokes Arnold's 'To Marguerite': 'Yes! in the sea of life enisled,/ With echoing straits between us thrown,/ Dotting the shoreless watery wild,/ We mortal millions live alone'. Thomas wrote much blank verse and experimented endlessly with a wide variety of stanza forms and rhyme schemes, both traditional and formulations of his own, from the ten-line stanza form of 'The Other', to the rhyming couplets of 'The Green Roads' and the monorhyme of 'Two Pewits'. He wrote forteen sonnets, and other poems which seemed to embody the ghost of the sonnet form. Line length varies from the often bisyllabic 'Words' and 'Bright Clouds' to the extended dialogues of 'Man And Dog', 'The Gypsy' and 'Wind And Mist'. He used internal rhyme quite extensively, and experimented with half-rhyme, an innovation more often attributed to his contemporary Wilfred Owen.

Thomas remained true to his linguistic principles. He used few Latinate forms, the most common etymology of his lexical choice being Anglo-Saxon, or Anglo-Norman.Trisyllabic words are relatively rare. Almost all words are in common use, their very accessibility foregrounding their unique qualities and application in a particular situation. Cliched attributive terms such as 'dear', 'sweet', and 'strange' acquire a fresh significance.Occasional patterns of diction that brought stylistic echoes from the past were less lapses of judgement than a form of homage to the living tradition.In 'Adlestrop' the spare simplicity of diction and abbreviated syntax of the first two stanzas contrasts markedly with the mid-Victorian ambience of the second two. 'The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat./ No one left and no one came/ On the bare platform. What I saw/ Was Adlestrop - only the name.' (Stanza two) 'And willows, willow-herb, and grass,/ And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,/ No whit less still and lonely fair/ Than the high cloudlets in the sky'. (Stanza three) 'Aspens' contains an unusual Gothic- Romantic stanza: 'A silent smithy, a silent inn, nor fails/ In the bare moonlight or the thick-furred gloom,/ In tempest or the night of nightingales,/ To turn the cross-roads to a ghostly room'. Minor archaisms, eg 'naught' and 'aught', syntactic inversions such as 'The herb itself I like not' assert the links with his Georgian contempories and immediate

predecessors.Thomas had an acutely tuned ear for the nuances of country speech -- he considered the speech of the Surrey peasant to be a pure form of speech -- finely demonstrating the differences between the educated city speech of the speaker (himself) and his salt of the earth country characters in the represented dialogues in 'Man And Dog' and 'The Chalk-Pit'. His fascination with names created a whole sub-category of verse in which the sheer pleasure of the sounds of places and flowers mingled with the intrigue of their folk origins and ancient history: 'Wingle Tye and Margaretting/ Tye,-- and Skreens, Gooshays, and Cockerells,/ Shellow, Rochetts, Bandish, and Pickerells,/ Martins, Lambkins, and Lillyputs'. ('If I Were To Own') In 'Lob' the tumbling proliferation of place and flower names bears witness to the historical incarnations of Lob in his many guises and the endlessly inventive linguistic process of naming names: 'Lob-lie- by- the fire, Jack Cade, Jack Smith, Jack Moon, poor Jack of every trade'...'named Bridget-in- her-bravery, Love-in- idleness, Traveller's-joy and Jenny Pooter'. Folksongs were the authentic voice of 'true' poetry which Thomas was happy to adopt -- and adapt: 'Early one morning in May I set out,/ And nobody I knew was about./ I'm bound away for ever,/ Away somewhere, away forever'. ('Early One Morning') 'Will you come? / Will you come? / Will you ride/ So late/ At my side? / O, will you come?' ('Will You Come')

Longley discusses the often underrated importance of syntax in poetry, and its significance in any attempt to explicate the works of Edward Thomas. She describes his 'back and forth trawls for meaning', when an uncertain tone is worked through a series of trailing clauses marked by 'at least' and 'and yet' and 'if', in search of the key to some elusive idea.Freud wrote of the importance of these minor lexical items which reveal the underlying truth of attitudes, often unexpressed in the sequence of dream-like images which was the stuff of some Modernist poetry.The train of thought follows an apparently erratic course in 'The Barn': 'They should never have built a barn there, at all -- / Drip, Drip, Drip! -- under the elm tree,/ Though then it was young. Now it is old/ But good, not like the barn and me'. A series of qualifications often subvert what has already been stated until some kind of resolution is reached, usually in the last two lines.The sentence connective 'but' constantly raises contradictory possibilities in a dogged search for the truth of a matter.Assertions are often couched in negative terms as in this cold dedication to his father: 'I shall be sorry for/ Your impotence:/ You can do and undo no more/ When you go hence,/ Cannot even forgive/ The funeral./ but not so long as you live/ Can I love you at all'. And in this tribute to Helen: 'none was ever was so fair/ as I thought you:/ Not a word can I bear/ spoken against you'. The final eight lines of 'Old Man' demonstrate the powerful effect of an unrelenting series of negatives. The deliberate inclusion of the often ragged syntax of the spoken voice easily fitted in with more formal rhetorical constructions. When Edward Garnett suggested that he should 'tidy up' 'Lob',Thomas refused, saying: 'It would be the easiest thing in the world to clean it all up and trim it it and have every line straightforward in sound and sense, but it would not really improve it.That was much the easier course of action'. (Motions,83) His aim was not one style at the expense of another. It was, as Kirkham states, 'the naturalization of form'. (Kirkham, 168) In my linguistic analysis of the poetry

of Edward Thomas, I have concentrated heavily on the grammar of each poem under consideration, in particular the intricacies of phrasing and syntactic structure. The lexical simplicity of Thomas' poems often masks a unique and complex world view which was expressed in a voice that owed much to what had gone before, but was also innovative and of its time.A close structural analysis builds on an intuitive reaction to explicate a multi-patterned mosaic. I have also drawn on concepts of linguistic cohesion as discussed in Halliday and Hassan, and some reference has been made where appropriate to the theory of role relations as outlined by Charles Fillmore. Phonetic patterning is an important but frequently unobtrusive component in all of Thomas' poetry. I have limited any detailed examination of this to a few examples where it seems especially pertinent such as 'The Hollow Wood'- I have chosen works which seem noteworthy examples in representing the dominant themes and preoccupations: the War in its effect on traditional country life in 'As The Team's Head-Brass'; the War as a personal meditation in 'Rain'; roads, tracks and paths in 'The Path'; close observation of a section of landscape in 'The Hollow Wood' and a broader perspective in 'Over The Hills'; the peculiar intermingling threads of names, smells and memory in 'Old Man'; the sense of continuity and organic change in 'The Barn', and finally, perhaps the most memorable and haunting of Thomas' symbols, the forest, in 'The Green Roads', 'Lights Out' and 'Out In The Dark'.