Give me my glasses. No, not my reading glasses, I want to look out. I want to see.

(Mrs. Pugh, Under Milk Wood)

I

The increased precision with which Thomas, taking his cue from Joyce, began to delineate the community and to explore the relationship between the individual and the community is part of a general movement in his work away from nightmare into the light of common day until the caricature of Under Milk Wood. The external, as opposed to the internal private, world gradually acquires a stronger presence in Thomas’s writing and the extent to which men and women appear as fully realised individuals serves almost as a measure of Thomas’s developing empirical observation. This chapter tries to explore the gradual realisation of character in Thomas’s work vis-a-vis the changing outlook of adolescence and early adulthood, the working-class culture in which Thomas grew up, and his concern to develop some of the themes and preoccupations of the more introspective, early work.

The later stories, especially those in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog, not only work better than the early stories as whole pieces of communication, but are more concerned with entertaining than shocking the reader. Often they concern the whimsical or the absurd. Some of the characters are interesting because they are unusual or eccentric. Indeed, Alun Richards has argued that exaggeration and whimsicality are about the only characteristics of the Welsh or Anglo-Welsh short story. It is to be found he points out, without developing the argument, ‘in other literatures, some of them colonialist, and it is perhaps the inevitable consequences of
the dominance of a distant metropolis'.¹ When one thinks of writers such as V. S. Naipaul and Achebe there is an obvious truth in what Richards says. Peoples who are the subjects of colonialism are often imbued with a strong sense of inferiority to which exaggeration and whimsicality are counter stratagems.

Notwithstanding some noticeable exceptions, Thomas’s characters in the later stories are not objects of satire. They are delineated generally with either warmth and affection or the objectivity of a chronicler who unrolls a pageant of extraordinary characters as if to say ‘a slice of human life is here’.

In Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog, Thomas has indeed moved into the light of common day and there is an acceptance of people that totally belies the sentiments in the letter Thomas wrote to Hughes in 1932 and which pervade the earlier stories: ‘I wish I loved the human race; but ghouls, vampires, women-rippers . . . pass by the window, going God knows where or why, in a dream up and down the hill.’

Although the later stories are different in tone and method from the early stories and although the characters are more fully delineated, subjects and themes of the early stories are carried over into them. In their concern with secret cravings and half admitted or understood desires, the early stories probe the relationship between what appears to be real and what is real. In the later stories Thomas is interested in the ability that some people have to live, as it were, between realities. Gwilym in ‘The Peaches’ aspires to the church, he has a makeshift pulpit and writes hymns and poems to God. But he enjoys women, allows himself a sexual licence that is unusual in an aspiring minister, has actresses for girlfriends, and the poems he writes to God are usually those he has addressed previously to a girlfriend. While not living a double life such as this, Uncle Jim also does fail to face up to his drinking and gambling, and what they are doing to Annie. He has the ability to retreat behind a cloud of smoke.

Generally speaking, Thomas is interested in chronicling the incongruities rather than in passing moral judgements or probing the roots and consequences of self-deception. Sometimes as in the case of Grandpa Thomas, a crazy old man who converts his bed and a slow pony and trap into barely controllable stage coaches, the self-deceit is written about with obvious affection. At other times there is enough detail for the reader to judge for himself as in the description of Uncle Jim: