Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night Study Guide

Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night by Dylan Thomas

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Introduction

The first poem that Dylan Thomas ever published, when he was only eighteen, was an early version of "And Death Shall Have No Dominion." The cycle of life and death formed a constant underlying theme throughout his poetry since that earliest effort. In "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," a moving plea to his dying father, death takes on a new and intensely personal meaning for Thomas.

David John Thomas was an important influence throughout his son Dylan's life. A grammar school English teacher, he had a deep love for language and literature which he passed on to his son. In a 1933 letter to a friend, Dylan Thomas describes the library he shared with his father in their home. His father's section held the classics, while his included modem poetry. It had, according to Thomas, everything needed in a library.

"Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" was in all likelihood composed in 1945 when D. J. Thomas was seriously ill; however, it was not published until after his death on December 16, 1952. Thomas sent the poem to a friend, Princess Caetani, in the spring of 1951, telling her that the "only person I can't show the little enclosed poem to is, of course, my father who doesn't know he's dying." After his father's death, the poem was included in the collection *In Country Sleep.* Ironically Dylan Thomas himself died just a year later. The poem discusses various ways to approach death in old age. It advocates affirming life up until the last breath, rather than learning to accept death quietly.

Author Biography

Thomas was born at home in the Uplands district of Swan sea, Wales, on October 27, 1914, the second child and only son of middle-class parents. His sister Nancy was nearly nine years older than he. His father was a schoolmaster in English at the local grammar school. Though considered a cold and bitter man who resented his position as a teacher, the elder Thomas's love for literature encouraged a similar devotion in his son. Thomas feared, respected, and deeply loved his father, and in some sense his life appeared to be an attempt to realize his father's frustrated dream of being a great poet. In contrast to his father, Thomas's mother was loving, overly protective, and inclined to overindulge her son. Even at the end of his life, she found no fault in his public behavior and the drinking habits which ultimately led to his death.

Thomas enjoyed his childhood in Wales, and his work in later years would reflect a desire to recapture the relatively carefree years of his youth. A generally undistinguished student, Thomas entered the Swansea Grammar School in 1925. In 1931 he left school to work for the *South Wales Daily Post* in Swansea. He would later say that his real education came from the freedom he was given to read anything in his father's surprisingly well stocked library of modem and nineteenth-century poetry and other works. Following his resignation from the paper early in 1933, poetry became Thomas's primary occupation. By all accounts, he was not a successful news reporter: he got facts wrong, and he failed to show up to cover events, preferring instead to loiter at the pool hall or the Kardomah Cafe. During the early 1930s Thomas began to develop the serious drinking problem that plagued him throughout the remainder of his life. He also began to develop a public persona as a jokester and storyteller. However, his notebooks reveal that many of his most highly regarded poems were either written or drafted during this period and that he had also begun to experiment with short prose pieces. In May of 1933 his poem "And Death Shall Have No Dominion" was published in the *New English Weekly,* marking the first appearance of his work in a London journal, and in December of the following year his first poetry collection, 18 *Poems* (1934), was issued. During this period he established a lifelong pattern of travel between London and some rural retreat, usually in Wales. As the decade progressed he gained increasing recognition for both his poetry and his prose.

In the summer of 1937 Thomas married Caitlin Macnamara, a young dancer of Irish descent whose Bohemian lifestyle and behavior rivaled Thomas's own. For the next twelve years the couple led a nomadic and financially difficult existence, staying with friends, relatives, and a series of benefactors. The stories later collected in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940) were written primarily during the couple's stay in the Welsh coastal village of Laugharne in late 1938 and early 1939. Too frail for active military service, and needing to support himself and his wife, Thomas took work writing scripts for propaganda films during World War II, at which time he also began to participate in radio dramas and readings for the BBC. His financial burdens increased during this time. In January, 1939 Thomas's first child, a son named Llewelyn, was born. Daughter Aeron followed in March, 1943. Thomas emerged from the war years a respected literary figure and popular performer; however, his gregarious social life and

the excessive drinking it encouraged seriously interfered with his writing. Seeking an environment more conducive to poetic production, Thomas and his family returned to Laugharne in 1949.

During the early 1950s Thomas wrote several of his most poignant poems, including "Lament." Nevertheless, fearing that his creative powers were rapidly waning and seeking to avoid the pressures of writing, he embarked on a speaking tour of the United States in the spring of 1950. During the final years of his life, he traveled to the United States four times, each time engaging in parties and readings in and around New York City, followed by readings and more celebrations at numerous universities throughout the country. Thomas's personal charisma and self-described public reputation as a drunkard, a Welshman, and a lover of women seemed to serve only to enhance his standing in literary circles. His fourth and final American tour began on October 19, 1953 and ended with his death from a massive overdose of alcohol on November 9.

Poem Text

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-3:

The first tercet introduces the poem's theme; it also introduces the two recurring refrains that end alternate stanzas. Although these two lines, the first and the third, both state Thomas's basic theme about resisting death, they contrast in several ways. Each of the predominant words in line one finds its opposite in line three. "Gentle" is paired with "rage," "good" with "dying," and "night" with "light." The tone of the two lines also is quite dif ferent. Line one is subdued; the verbs are deliberately simple, vague. Thomas uses the predicate adjective "gentle," making it describe the personality of the individual, rather than the more obvious choice "gently," an adverb which would only refer to the action of the verb. "Good night" when it refers to dying becomes a paradox for Thomas, meaning a good death. Although this line may be an exhortation to resist death, its entire tone is gentle. Compare this to the beginning of line 3 where "rage" is repeated twice. Here the poet urges a furious resistance to death.

The second line introduces Thomas's advice to those who near death. The idea of burning is frequently associated with the passion of youth; however, Thomas wants the elderly to cling as passionately to their lives as anyone would. The phrase "close of day" establishes a connection with the "good night" of the previous line, while the words "burn" and "rave" move the reader into the third line of the stanza.

Lines 4:

The next four stanzas describe four different types of old men and examine their attitudes and feelings as they realize that death is approaching. The first type Thomas mentions are the wise men. They may be considered scholars or philosophers. Perhaps because of this, intellectually they accept the inevitability of death. Thomas begins the line with the word "though," however, to indicate that their knowledge has not prepared them to accept the reality of death.

Lines 5:

This line explains why the wise men are unable to act in accordance with their knowledge. Scholars are known and measured by their words. These men have many words still left unwritten or unspoken, so their goals have not been accomplished. Thomas ends this line in mid-thought, leaving the rest of the idea to the next line. This parallels the unfulfilled lives of the wise men, with their messages only partially delivered.

Lines 6:

In many villanelles, the refrains simply serve as a chorus. Here, Thomas makes it an integral part of the meaning of the stanza.

Lines 7-8:

"Good" seems to be used in a moral sense here, describing men who have lived worthy, acceptable lives. The phrase "last wave" presents readers with a dual image. The men themselves are a last wave, the last to approach death; they also seem to be giving a final wave to those who they are leaving behind. "Crying," as well, has two meanings here. In one sense, it simply means speaking out, but it also carries the sense of weeping and mourning. Like the wise men, the good men have not accomplished what they wished to in life. Their actions failed to stand out.

Thomas uses rhyme for different purposes here. Rhyming "bright" at the end of line 7 with "might" in line 8 serves to emphasize both words and link the two stanzas. Also, the rhyming of "by," "crying," and "dying" unites this stanza, while the use of "deeds" and "danced" is an example of alliteration.

Lines 9:

The intensity of the refrain contrasts with the nature of the good men as Thomas has presented them. They seem passive, their actions weak. Now at the end of life, they must finally behave passionately, finally be noticed.

Lines 10-12:

Thomas's wild men are very different from the good, quiet men in the previous stanzas. The image, "caught and sang the sun," is joyous and powerful when compared to frail deeds. These men have lived live fully, not realizing that they, too, will age and die. Since Thomas himself cultivated an image as a wild Celtic bard, this stanza seems ironically prophetic about his own death.

Lines 13:

The word "grave" carries two meanings here: seriousness and death. These are the men of understanding; paradoxically, although they are blind, they are able to see more clearly than those with sight.

Lines 14-15:

The mentions of blindness are references to his father. Thomas spoke of this blindness again in the unfinished elegy he wrote after his father's death, describing him as:

Too proud to die, broken and blind he died.. An   old kind man brave in his burning pride.

In this stanza, Thomas contrasts light and dark imagery; for instance, the term "grave" is countered by "gay," just as "blind" is contrasted with "sight."

Lines 16-17:

While the last stanza referred to Thomas's father only obliquely, this stanza is addressed to him. The "sad height" refers to his closeness to death. There are Biblical overtones to Thomas's request in line 17, as he asks for a final blessing or curse; the patriarchs delivered such parting messages to their sons. As in many Bible verses, with their parallel structure, blessings and curses are paired together. If this line is read as iambic pentameter, however, the emphasis will fall on the words, "bless" and "now." The image of "fierce tears" shows contrast: the tears acknowledging the inevitability of death, while the use of "fierce" indicates resistance until the end. "I pray" reinforces the Biblical imagery; however, the prayer is addressed to his father, the agnostic, rather than God

Lines 18-19:

The refrains are repeated for the last time, now specifically requests to D. J. Thomas from his son.

Themes

Anger

The poem tells its reader to "rage" against dying, and it offers several examples of men who feel their lives unfulfilled, but it does not offer any reason why raging might be more appropriate than despair or peaceful acceptance of the absurdity of death. Anger is a heated, unreasoning emotion, and Thomas is too clever to try reasoning about it. By giving us the models of wise men, good men, wild men, and grave men, Thomas populates this poem with men who have all been in vigorous pursuit of something in their lives, and their anger would therefore result from frustration and disappointment. Although it could be said that these are admirable types of men, and that if they all reach the same conclusion having traveled there on different roads then it must be the correct one, they still do not achieve any comfort or satisfaction from raging-from not going gentle. The poem is expressed as advice, "choose rage," but these men do not find their rage by choice.

So why does "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" advocate rage, if the details of the poem do not lead naturally to it? Anger is much more of a young man's emotion than an old man's, and anger's value is that it can create a powerful feeling, even if it cannot beat death. In the final stanza, the speaker addresses his father "on that sad height." Perhaps this poem is not meant to offer sound advice, but to show us a young man's unreasonable, almost hysterical refusal to cope with the sad weakness of his father by evoking rage. Another possibility is that anger, though not completely satisfying, is considered here to be better than sadness.

Human Condition

As it is shown in "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," the human condition-the situation we all find ourselves presented with-is as simple as the contrast between light and dark. Life, the light, can be filled with any number of activities, but even the most noble of these turn out to be distractions that are easily forgotten as death approaches. The poem implies that the only adequate response to death is an emotional one, that humans cannot do anything with their lives that would make death a peaceful transition.

Still, in offering the four models for living that Thomas does in stanzas 2 through 5, he does give a sense that he has priorities as to how life can be lived. The poem examines the specific cases of good men, wise men, wild men, and grave men: in examining these and ignoring other ways of life, the poem seems to have selected them out of dozens of possibilities as being the only lifestyles that are worth serious consideration. Men who acquire great wealth, for example, are not mentioned, nor are holy men. Lives filled with humor or love are left out. It could be said that each of these unmentioned lives can be fit into one of the main categories, that for the purposes of this compact, tightly structured verse all people of the earth can be categorized as wise, good, wild or

grave. If this is so, then the poem is only recognizing a narrow way to live. The question is whether these four types are meant to be the only way we can live or are the only ways of life that are important enough to consider.

Identity

This poem is addressed to the speaker's father, which helps us put the poem's stance in perspective. The angry attitude that the speaker tells his father to take is not necessarily suggested for all people, but is instead an emotional reaction to the imminent death of a figure of power. Thomas uses the formalized villanelle style to make a comment, not about death, but about standing by when a loved one faces death. The tight structure suggests an attempt to hold on to emotions.

The fact that sons identify with the circumstances of their fathers has been a constant throughout history, and the son of a father who projects a strong, controlling presence can be understandably disturbed at the prospect of watching the father's power diminish. Thomas is on record as having written poems in response to his father's death, and we know from interviews that his father was the sort of boisterous, lively man who was himself likely to rage against unfairness when he was in the best of health. In wishing to see the same indignation against death, the speaker of this poem is balancing fear of death against a primal, almost Freudian belief in the power of the father.

The examples of the wise, good, wild, and grave men extend this beyond a self-analytical poem about Thomas's family and into the realm of an exploration of identity. By all accounts, Thomas's father was not the sort of man one would instinctively use these words to describe. In examining these four categories, the speaker of this poem is identifying the kind of man he would like his father to be and, by extension, the kind of man he would like to be himself. The reference in line 5, to wise men experiencing disappointment because "their words had forked no light," is particularly more appropriate to the poet than to his father. Likewise, the metaphor of sight and blindness in stanza 5 reflects Thomas's understanding of poetic knowledge and its limitations, not necessarily his description of his father or anyone else. By using these examples, the poem's speaker reveals ideals of what he would like to be before death.

Style

Dylan Thomas, partly because of his legendary status as a hard-drinking, wild-living Welshman, is often considered to be a primitive poet, one for whom poems somehow appeared on the page, almost miraculously springing up fully developed out of his passionate nature. In actuality, the contrary is true. Thomas's poetry is very carefully crafted, and he often uses complicated structures.

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is an intricately structured villanelle, made up of five tercets, a unit of three lines of verse, followed by a quatrain, a unit of four lines of verse. The opening line of the poem, the first line in the first stanza, also ends the second and fourth tercets. The third and final line of the first tercet serves as the last line in the third and fifth stanzas. They will also become the last two lines of the quatrain.

The entire rhyme scheme of the poem is built around the words that end the first two lines, "night" and "day." The first and third lines in every stanza rhyme with "night," while every second line rhymes with "day." These words serve as more than just a simple rhyme however; they provide the contrasting images that serve as the poem's core. Thomas also uses internal rhyme to make his poetry flow smoothly, giving it a melodic quality. The poet's use of alliteration, with its repeated initial sounds, can be seen in the words "go" and "good" in the first line, and "blind" and "blaze" in line 14. The words "caught" and "sang" in line 10 illustrate assonance, or the repetition of similarly located vowel sounds. In line 17, the words "curse" and "bless" are examples of half-rhyme, another convention Thomas frequently employs.

The meter in the poem is described by some critics as basically iambic pentameter, a line of verse featuring segments of two syllables where the first syllables is unstressed and the second is stressed, as in the word "above." Pentameter means that there are five such segments in each line-"penta" meaning "five." But Thomas's poetry seldom fits neatly into conventional metric analysis. Therefore many critics choose to view his poetry in terms of the number of syllables in each lines, rather than by metric feet. Thus "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" may also be described as decasyllabic, having ten syllables in a line.

Historical Context

Dylan Thomas wrote in such a fiercely personal style about such narrowly personal themes that there is hardly any relationship at all to be found between his poetry and the times in which he lived. Critic Jacob Korg noted in a 1965 study of Thomas's work that "he was occupied with introspections that lie outside of time and place... his style owes comparatively little to tradition or example." Thomas grew up in a middle-class family, in a seaside town in the south of Wales; his father was the senior English master in the local grammar school; he lived in London during the Second World War; he was a chronic alcoholic, who stole from his friends and lied to them, was loud and offensive in public, and died of poisoning from drinking too much too fast one day. These facts of his life are well known and often repeated, but they can only be found in his poetry-if one looks for them-with a loose imagination.

Welsh Tradition: Like the traditional poetry of Wales, Thomas's work displays two tendencies that might seem to the casual reader to contradict each other: an intuitive, mystical religious sense and a strong controlling hand. Wales, along England's western border, has a traditional poetic form known as the *eisteddfod,* which was used by druidic cults and in religious worship of nature. It has a strong structure and, like any prose written primarily for recitation and not reading, has a strong, elaborate meter. These facets are not directly noticeable in Thomas's work, but a reader can find in his work a deep strain of very personal religious beliefs, often attributing mystic powers to natural objects; also, Thomas frequently wrote in regular rhythm and meter and often employed recognized forms, as evinced by the use of the villanelle in "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."

World War II: In the years immediately following Great Britain's entry into the World War in 1939, Germany bombed strategic points of England, particularly London, on a regular basis. Wales was under constant watch from a naval invasion from Germany or its allies. During those years, Thomas lived in several places around Wales, mostly settling around the quiet fishing village of Laughame, and in 1941, when he landed a job writing scripts and reciting poetry on the British Broadcasting Company's Program 3, he and his wife moved to London. When the United States entered the war in 1941, German resources were diverted somewhat, but infrequent air raids continued until the end of the war in 1945. Living through the dangers of war helped define the sensibilities of a whole generation of poets, *who* recognized the wastefulness of mass destruction and saw the shame of demolishing sites across Europe that had stood for centuries. Still other British poets acknowledged how the war reduced the United Kingdom to a second-class power, and the pity and frustration is reflected in their poetry. It only very rarely shows itself in Thomas's work.

Critical Overview

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" was first published in a collection of six poems, *In Country Sleep.* In *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas,* William York Tindall points out that the "ritualistic repetition" of the refrain in the villanelle is the ideal expression for Thomas's theme. Tindall discusses each of the four types of men *who* face death in the stanzas, identifying the wise men as philosophers, the good men as moralists, and the wild men as hedonists. Grave men, he believe, are "the most important of all-the climax toward which the poet has been working." They represent poets, and ultimately Thomas's own father, who was blind in his last years. Tindall ends his comments with an ironic comparison between the sentiments expressed in the poem and Thomas's own death shortly after it was published.

Rushworth Kidder, in his *Dylan Thomas: The Country of the Spirit,* describes the work as Thomas's attempt to come to an understanding of death, as each of the poems revolves around an individual "confronting either the fact of or the threat of death.. .." Kidder states that the poet plays with the "metaphor of light as life" in "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night." Since D. J. Thomas was an agnostic, Kidder stresses that religious imagery is left out of the poem. He argues instead that the actions of the men suggest pagan attitudes; for instance, the grave men could be seen as astrologers or seers.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Jhan Hochman is a freelance writer and currently teaches at Portland Community College, Portland, OR. In the following essay, Hochman suggests that the contradiction inherent in Thomas's instructions to "rage against" a death that he terms a "good night" serves as a plea to the dying to show their love for those whom they leave behind.

While Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" could be addressed to anyone, by the end of the last stanza, the reader realizes that the specific addressee is Thomas's sick father. In this poem he never sent, the son entreats his father not to accept death quietly, but instead, to fight it. While the more usual-sentiment counsels accepting death peacefully and gracefully, something more provocative is at work here: that is, though death is a "good night" in its romantic or hopeful sense of restful bedtime and peaceful darkness, one should not accept it, and instead "rage" against this "dying of the light." Perhaps it is this contradiction, unreconciled, that gives this poem its power, its ability to paralyze rational overcoming and obstruct the desire to make polarities meet at some middle ground. This poem says that death is good *and* that one should rage against it.

Perhaps we should be skeptical and ask: Why rage against what is, what is good, what cannot be avoided, in other words, why fight death?

In "Do Not Go Gentle," every first and third line of the five three-lined "tercets" and first, third, and fourth lines of the final four-lined "quatrain" end-rhyme with "night" or "light" (aba or abaa). This scheme characterizes the *villanelle* (derived from the Italian *villan,* meaning "peasant"), a form that comes from sixteenth century peasant songs. Poets usually employed the villanelle for light or bucolic subjects, a kind of peacefully rural poem or "pastoral." "Do Not Go Gentle" is one of the most famous examples of this rather uncommon form and for at least the following reason: the poem does not preach calm, as might be expected, but rage, rage against death, that event often equated with Nature as an ultimate physical force. This is not a villanelle expressing the pleasure of nature's cycles and seasons, a balanced acceptance of births and deaths, but a raging against what is, an acknowledgment that a life within nature-as all lives subject to life and death must be-is not just harmoniously repetitive but also full of sudden pain and occasional grieving. Perhaps this is one reason for Thomas's euphemism, "good night," an expression minimizing death, that event which apparently is too painful for Thomas to mention.

Day and night or light and dark are long-standing metaphors for life and death, and while Thomas merely adopts the tradition, he also breathes new life into it. The four middle tercets describe the acts of four kinds of men-"wise," "good," "wild," and "grave"-employing words associated with light and dark. In the second tercet, the words of wise men "forked no lightning," presumably in the darkness of the foolish. In the third tercet, the deeds of the last tide of good men were not "bright" enough to "dance" (sparkle) on the "green bay," or what might here be thought of here-since the water is green instead of blue-as the darker, more dangerous world. The wild men of the fourth tercet "who

caught and sang the sun in flight," only "grieved it on its way," that is, made matters worse, perhaps by being partially blind to the *darker* side of human wildness. Finally, in the fifth tercet, grave men near death, despite their "blinding sight," that is, their presumed ability to see more clearly because they are dying, can "blaze like meteors and be gay," being gay or happy as itself as a state of lightness.

Though, while living, these four types of enlightened men or people-the wise, good, wild, and grave-failed to lighten the dark world they lived in, at times even unwittingly darkened it with their brave and clear vision, or obscured its misery with their overly bright outlook, they must not fail to blaze and rage against the darkness of death. They must rebel against "the dying of the light" and "close of day" no matter what the role light played in their life. In this sense, Thomas asks us to see rage as a kind of beam of light shooting through the darkness of death, light which refuses death' s pacification or darkening. Such a light yields a vision which exposes death in the way Thomas comprehends it: the ultimate horror. Therefore, Thomas counsels his father to make the ultimate refusal by refusing the ultimate, urges his father toward futile rebellion against what is and cannot be stopped. One may ask themselves whether or not the horror attached to death is primarily natural and therefore unavoidable (as Thomas seems to believe), or whether the horror of death arises from particular cultural viewpoints of death as horrible.

Thomas called his poems "statements on the way to the grave" and "two sides of an unresolved argument," both comments relevant to "Do Not Go Gentle." Compare his "I See the Boys of Summer" where an older father figure condemns young boys as possessing that kind of death in life known as destructive energy, and the boys defend themselves with, "But seasons must be challenged or they totter." In "Do Not Go Gentle," however, the son internalizes the father, counseling him to take hold of youth's destructive energy and turn it against the ultimate destroyer, death. See also the dialogue in Thomas's" 'Find Meat on Bones"' between father and son where this time, in reverse direction from "Do Not Go Gentle," the father urges the son to "'Rebel against the... Autocracy of night and day / Dictatorship of sun / ... against the flesh and bone." Far more obvious here is the coupling of Death and Nature already mentioned in the second paragraph above. In "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, of a Child in London," Thomas maintains that saying nothing (eloquently) is the only thing which can be said in the aftermath of death. While silence must succeed death in "Refusal," raging must precede it in "Do Not Go Gentle." In "Fern Hill," Thomas remarks on the death resting latent within youthful invulnerability, the opposite of a kind of immature raging or tantrum in the face of "Do Not Go Gentle's" "dying of the light." And finally refer to his "Elegy," an unfinished poem by Thomas written after his father's death and completed after his own death from notes he left behind. Unlike what Thomas had pleaded that his father do in the face of imminent death, in "Elegy," Thomas's father remained what he always was: "kind" and "brave" and "too proud to cry."

If "kind," "brave" and "proud" describe Thomas's father in "Elegy," was the man also "wise," "good," "wild," and "grave," adjectives used for men in "Do Not Go Gentle"? Was the father all of these? None of them? While this cannot be accurately answered with evidence found in the poem, it might be that adjectives found in "Elegy," coupled with

some theorizing on the word, "gentle," of "Do Not Go Gentle," can provide a clue. Notice that Thomas substitutes the less grammatically correct part of speech, the adjective, "gentle," in place of the more correct and usual adverbial form, "gently." Why? Perhaps because as an adjective, "gentle" can be used to describe Thomas's "kind" father, could even be an epithet for him. So when Thomas says, "Do not go gentle into that good night," a translation might be, "Do not go, gentle father, into that final goodbye," or "Do not die father, do not accept death." In the end, if wise, good, wild, and grave men rage against death, so should gentle men.

But for whose benefit is this advice given? Is it for Dylan Thomas's father or Thomas himself, the latter who seems unable to tolerate the idea of his father dying? If we answer that the advice is offered more for the benefit of Thomas himself than for his father, this being part of the reason Thomas never sent the poem to his father, then "Do Not Go Gentle" becomes less a poem of defiance than a poem of paralysis and pain. With this in mind, perhaps an answer to the question that began our discussion of "Do Not Go Gentle" can now be ventured. The question was, Why rage against what is, is good, what cannot be avoided, in other words, death? The answer, Thomas seems to imply with the words, "bless me" in the final stanza, is that raging against death, while also, as Thomas says, a "curse" for friends and relatives to endure, is more importantly a blessing on those left behind, on those not wanting the dying to leave them. For this reason: by raging "against the dying of the light," by struggling against death, the dying demonstrate--{)r so the living would like to believe-their love of those who will be left behind. Perhaps more than anything, this is the kind of demonstration Thomas wanted so desperately from his father.

Source: Jhan Hochman, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1997.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Murdy explores the structure and depth of "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night. "

"Do not go gentle into that good night" is perhaps too often considered lightly as only simple iteration. Cid Corman even believes that "the set form of the villanelle treads Thomas's feet." By definition the villanelle *is* restrictive, because it demands nineteen lines on two rhymes in six stanzas, the first and third lines of the opening tercet recurring alternately at the end of the other tercets, both being repeated at the end of the concluding quatrain. Within this structure, however, Thomas creates a poem of great force, beauty, and tenderness, in which sound and sense are exquisitely blended.

Thomas's villanelle is a plea to his ill and aging father to die as wise men, *good* men, wild men, grave men die and as the father himself has lived -struggling, "[raging] against the dying of the light". The structure of the poem involves *two* uses of the repeated lines with some functional change. In the opening stanza, *"Do* not go gentle into that *good* night" and "Rage, rage against the dying of the light" are imperatives directed to an unidentified person. In the next four stanzas one or the other of these repeated phrases forms the predicate to statements about, respectively, wise men, *good* men, wild men, and grave men. In the concluding stanza, the poet directly addresses his father, and the repeated lines thus become significant imperatives-first the negative command to his father, *"Do* not go gentle into that *good* night"; then the positive command to him to assert his individuality, "Rage, rage against the dying of the light".

Numerous other devices contribute to the subtle variations within the pattern of the villanelle. Although the meter is generally iambic pentameter and the vocabulary contains seven times as many monosyllables as polysyllables, the speech stresses in a line vary from five (the "Rage, rage" line) to eight (the *"Do* not go gentle" line) and help save the poem from a monotonous, "singsong" rhythm. The full, resonant *effect* of the poem is intensified by the fact that the *two* rhyme-bases involve long vowels *(e* and *ai).* Especially in stanzas III and V, the rhymes are emphasized by a concentration of internal assonance of *e* and *ai:*

Good men, the last *wave by,* crying how bright Their frail deeds might have danced in a green *bay,* Rage, rage against the *dying* of the light.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight

Blind *eyes* could blaze like meteors and be *gay,*

Rage, rage against the *dying* of the light.

Both stanzas have at least four uses of each of the rhyme vowels, excluding the rhyme words themselves. The repetition of vowel sounds focuses attention upon the meaningful words of these stanzas; it helps to indicate an important theme underlying

the poem-the discrepancy between what the *good* and grave men have done in life (frail deeds) and what they *might* have done (blazing, meteoric deeds).

Part of the powerfulness of the poem results from the intensity of striking power of the words used. One out of every eight syllables is of very high striking power (ten syllables have a striking power of 39, thirteen have a striking power of 40 to 44). Thus Thomas's language is exhortative in both sound and sense; the words rage as he desires his father to rage.

In the final stanza lies the core of the meaning of the poem. More quiet, calm, and tender than the preceding lines, this stanza directly addresses the poet's father on his precipice of death-i.e., "on the sad height". Then in the second line Thomas urges his father to

Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

This line of ten monosyllables is strong, deliberate, and slow in tempo. Closely juxtaposed repetitions of the same sound usually produce an effect of retarding the rhythm. Such is the case here, where the s sound, introduced by the word "sad" in the first line of the stanza, is repeated. The three most important words end in the sound s-"curse", "bless", and "fierce"-and "tears" ends in the closely related *z* sound. Thomas's use of punctuation also retards the rhythm, in particular the nongrammatical use in "curse, bless, me now". Indeed, the oxymoron effect of "curse, bless" reflects the dichotomy and poignancy of Thomas's plea to his father. The poet prays that his father will, with fierce tears, curse and bless him-as his final and ultimate protest against death.

Source: Louise Baughn Murdy, *Sound and Sense in Dylan Thomas's Poetry.* Mouton & Co., 1966, pp. 96-7.

Critical Essay #3

Knauber explores the theme of light versus darkness in Thomas's poetry.

Dylan Thomas' definition of poetry as a record of the "individual struggle from darkness towards some measure of light" suggests an interest that can be traced through at least three thematic levels of his work. The conditions of *light* and *dark* represent particular aspects of experimental faith. In the first dramatic phase of his existence, Thomas inhabits a primitive world whose realms are simply day and night:

A weather in the quarter of the veins
Turns night to day; blood in their suns
Lights up the living worm.

Vitiated by the seasons' cycle and, on a lesser scale, by the rhythmic tides of sun and moon, he dwells alternately in the light and dark:

A darkness in the weather of the eye is half its light; the fathomed sea Breaks on unangled land.

The initial senory perception-either of man in the womb or of man in a cultural dawn-indicates an effort towards understanding the forces which conflicting powers exert upon the poet's being. In the role of myth's philosopher, Thomas attempts to comprehend the mystery of life's reality in order that his world might be made more acceptable. He is incapable of creating an escape from reality, for, on this level, the real world is his only sphere. What he requires is that an intelligible conciliation be made between the threatening dark and the benefic light. Attending a first confused idea of reality, Thomas is able to postulate that "A process blows the moon into the sun," without defining what that "process" is. He expresses the myth of light in terms of the rhythms that his eye perceives. In a general way, light and dark are symbols of man's life and death, and the poet sees in them evidence of a spiritual concern. Man's primordial need is for that first degree of trust which intuition bestows upon his mind.

But as his mental capacities increase, man begins to live imaginatively. Desiring to penetrate deeper into life's mysteries, or to transcend its commonplace realities, he envisages a superior realm. On this intermediate cognitive plane, the "process" of the blown moon is described as "the man in the wind and the west moon." Acquainted with reality and blessed with the ability to create new images, he attempts to express what he knows (in sensory manner of knowing) in terms of what he hopes to realize. From the essence of the sensible dark he abstracts an idea of the darkness of a yonder place, interpreting it as a spatial and temporal dimension that can be physically traversed. Man, motivated by the dream of vision and the restless passion of desire, is promoted to a heroic role. Thus it is that he prepares to

Sail on the level, the departing adventure
To the sea-blown arrival-a passage that will

carry him
From the kangaroo foot of the earth,
From the chill, silent centre to the spaces of a world beyond the world.

Employing Thomas' terms, the hero's adventure is essentially an attempt to journey across a "fathomed [i.e., a known] sea" to an "unangled [i.e., an unmeasured] land." It is the striving to bring that which is unknown into measurable being. Darkness, the ever-threatening shadow of death, is synonymous with inferior knowledge. Thus, in *Vision and Prayer,* Thomas tells of the interpreted evening

And the known dark of the earth...

Light, by contrast, is symbolic of the hero's effort towards an illumination of the image of a su pernatural sphere and its divinity:

I dreamed my genesis in sweat of death, fallen
Twice in the feeding sea, grown
Stale of Adam's brine until, vision
Of new man strength, I seek the sun.

Movement in the direction of light represents the beginning of faith:

"For men were in the darkness of ignorance: God indeed destroyed this darkness, sending light into the world that men might recognize the truth"... Not to believe is to be in darkness; not to be in the light is to be unborn.

The final development, then, is found in Thomas' use of revelation as a means of translating fundamental knowledge, or, more properly, of defining the eternal light made manifest in temporal experience. Hence, the symbol of the Savior is a bewildering, life-penetrating light whose nearest image is "the sudden / Sun." In attempting to express the nature of this light, St. -Augustine says: "What is that, which so brightly shoots through me, and strikes my heart without hurting it? And I shudder, and I catch fire; I shudder inasmuch as I am unlike it, I catch fire inasmuch as I am like unto it." Experimentally, and in a similar mystic mode, Thomas narrates the experience that can neither be adequately returned nor clearly communicated outside itself:

0 let him
Scald me and drown
Me in his world's wound
His lightning answers my
Cry. My voice bums in his hand.
Now I am lost in the blinding One.

The soul, first in Thomas' words and then in Augustine's, is "taken by light" and "made by it." Man rejoices in the light but suffers in the knowledge of his material being. We describe the light as love because it is the gift of the participating experience that results from faith's experiment. Thomas is guided to his vision by God's answer to his cry-"the message which we have heard from him... that God is light, and in him is no darkness at

all" (I *John:* 3,5). The evolutionary manifestation of God, the progressive revelation of life, is defined by this poet as man's growth in Him.

Source: Charles I. Knauber "Imagery of Light in Dylan Thomas" in *Renasence,* Vol. I, No.2, Spring, 1954 pp. 95-96, 116.

Adaptations

An audio cassette read by Thomas and others called "In Country Heaven-Evolution" is available from Harper Collins Audio.

"Return Journey to Swansea," and audio cassette read by Thomas, is available from Harper Collins Audio.

Dylan Thomas: A *Portrait,* is a video cassette from Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

A video cassette narrated by Thomas titled A *Dylan Thomas Memoir* was released by Pyramid Film and Video in 1972.

Dylan Thomas: Return Journey was released on video cassette by Direct Cinema Limited in 1991.

Dylan Thomas: Under Milk Wood is available on video cassette from Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

The Wales of Dylan Thomas is available on video cassette from Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

Topics for Further Study

Is there another group, beside the old and dying, that you think should "rage"? Write a poem to stir up their emotions.

Try writing a villanelle about advice you would like to give to your parents. Start with two lines that express your main idea independently of one another and then follow Thomas' structure.

Give some examples of public figures who are wise men, good men, wild men, and brave men. Give examples of wise women, good women, wild women, and brave women. Explain how they fit into what the poem has to say.

Compare and Contrast

1946: The postwar demand for consumer goods gave workers the edge in bargaining for wages: 4.6 million workers held strikes against the manufacturers they worked for, including Westinghouse, General Motors, the meat packers, and the railroads.

1981: 13,000 air traffic controllers went on strike and were fired by President Ronald Reagan, marking the start of a new era of pro-employer "union-busting."

Today: Labor unions have the lowest membership since the 1940s and, in many cases, have little effect on wages and benefits being offered.

1947: The first casino was built in Las Vegas, Nevada-the only state to allow legalized gambling.

1978: Atlantic City, New Jersey, legalized casino gambling in order to bring in tax revenues.

Today: Most states have some form of legalized casino gambling

What Do I Read Next?

The best of Thomas's poetic works can be found in his *Collected Poems,* published in 1971.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog and *Adventures in the Skin Trade and Other Stories* are Thomas's two works of fiction, which draw more from his chaotic life than does his poetry.

Ralph Maud, a very keen-eyed and easy to read literary critic, published *Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry* in 1963. The book gives the general reader a good start at understanding the poems, stories, and plays as well as Thomas himself, focusing on the creative works.

In *The Denial of Death,* psychologist Ernest Becker explains human behavior in terms of fear of death. The narrator of this poem would be seen in Becker's analysis as being panicked when faced with a death so close to his life.

Further Study

Cox, C.B., editor, *Dylan Thomas: A Collection of Essays,* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Inc., 1966.

Contains several critical essays written while Thomas was still alive or soon after his death, including poet Karl Shapiro's reflections on Thomas's place in our culture from a perspective of a peer who knew him. Also particularly significant is John Ackerman's "The Welsh Background," which highlights some thin social strains that can be found in Thomas's work.

Moynihan, William, *The Craft and Art of Dylan Thomas,* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966.

A very detailed analysis focused closely on Thomas's writing in the order that it was published and the theoretical basis behind each work.

Tindall, William York, *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas,* New York: Octagon Books, 1962.

Considered by critics to be a key study of Thomas, redefining the poet's reputation by giving serious consideration to his technical ability and the tremendous effort Thomas put into making his poems sound spontaneous.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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