

15. "Do not go gentle into that good night" by Dylan Thomas

POET

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)

Dylan Thomas is a famous Welsh poet and writer. Born in Swansea, he began writing and publishing while a teenager. He suffered from alcoholism and led a wild and reckless life. Thomas struggled to survive financially from his poetry and so began doing reading tours and radio broadcasts for the BBC. It was these broadcasts which made him famous. He travelled to America in the 1950s to give poetry readings, but while in New York in 1953, he became ill and died at the age of 39.

BACKGROUND

The poem was written in 1951 to his dying father.

SUMMARY

The poem is an appeal from the poet to his father to fight against his impending death.

ANALYSIS

The poem is written in the form of a villanelle. This is a nineteen-line poem which has a fixed rhythm and rhyme. All villanelles have five stanzas with three lines, concluding with a quatrain of four lines. Within these verses there are set refrains or repeated lines which operate like choruses in songs. The form originated as a simple song, usually concerned with pastoral or countryside matters. However, it later became a form that dealt with obsessions. This theme is primary in Thomas's poem which relentlessly dwells on his desire for his father to resist death.

The poem begins with a line which becomes a refrain in the poem, being repeated three times. This repetition gives the poem the quality of obsession. Thomas cannot stop this thought running through his head. The opening line, "Do not go gentle into that good night" is an imperative or instruction. This makes the poem sound quite authoritative or bossy, but this is ironic. The entire poem actually pivots around the terrible irony that even if his father fights against death, it will always win. The word "gentle" is interesting here.

Grammatically, the sentence should use an adverb – gently, but Thomas chooses to employ an adjective. This makes the sentence sound jarring and alerts the reader to the importance of the word. Gentle means mild, meek or calm. Here Thomas is telling his dying father not to face death passively or meekly but to fight. The "good night" is a metaphor for death. It compares death to the end of a day; importantly it is a "good" end, so death is not a terrible place. The phrase is also a pun which reminds the reader of the words we say to our parents before going to bed. This makes the emotion of losing Thomas's father even more powerful.

The poet goes on to give his opinion that "Old age should burn and rave at close of day". This means he thinks the elderly ought to fight death in a fiery, angry way. They should "rave" or speak with anger and madness against the end of their lives. He then repeats the word "rage" meaning passionately express your hatred. The repetition shows how important Thomas believes this to be. "The dying of the light" extends the metaphor of a life as a single day and suggests that dusk is the end of our lives. This line becomes a second refrain, ending stanzas one, three, four and five.

The next four stanzas are all examples of different types of men who fight against death when it approaches. They are each examples for Thomas's father to emulate or copy. The second stanza describes the deaths of "wise" or clever men. The poet says even though they know "dark is right" or death is inevitable, they still do not "go gentle". The reason they fight is "Because their words had forked no lightning". This metaphor compares the wise words of the clever men with bolts of lightning. It is because all their wisdom has not produced lightning or a powerful effect in the universe, they refuse to let death take them away. Thus it is the fact they have not made a difference in their lives which leads them to fight death. Thomas repeats this idea in stanzas two to five. It is a sad concept; he is suggesting that because none of us ever fully appreciates our life when we have it, then we must fight to keep it when death wants to take it from us.

The third stanza employs a different type of dying man as an example. This time it is a "good" man. This suggests a person who is moral and well-meaning. The poet says these men fight death because when the "last wave" goes by they see they have not made a difference. The "last wave" is a metaphor comparing life with a beach on which waves are crashing. The "last wave" is the one which marks the end of your time on the beach. These men realise at the end of their lives that their actions were "frail" or weak and ineffectual. Their moral lives "might have" or could have "danced in a green bay". This means their good deeds could have taken them from the crashing waves of the beach to a happy moment of dancing with others in the calm of a bay or sheltered part of the sea. However, because this did not happen, they must fight death.

Stanza four deals with "Wild men". These are men who have lived life to excess, drinking and enjoying themselves. They "caught and sang the sun in flight". Here their partying lives are compared to being able to catch hold of the sun, the most powerful object in the universe, and to sing with it, or be part of its exciting existence. However, facing death, the "wild men" realise or "learn" that they "grieved it on its way" or made their lives pass more quickly by enjoying themselves. Therefore they fight death.

Stanza five describes the "Grave men". There is a pun here on the word "grave". It means serious, but it also suggests the idea of death and the graves in which the dead will be buried. These serious men "see with blinding sight". This is an oxymoron, combining the apparently opposite ideas of blindness and seeing together to make the reader realise something startling. The oxymoron here suggests that "Grave men" are able to perceive the world more clearly than others. However, their penetrating eyes "could" have done much more during their lives. They have not allowed them to "blaze like meteors and be gay". This simile explains that serious men do not use their keen wits to be spectacular like falling stars, or to enjoy themselves. Therefore when they face death, they must fight it.

Thomas employs four different examples for his father of men who resist death due to regrets. Each type of man is characterised by a different elemental force, such as lightning or water or sun or meteors. These images show that lives should be lived on a grand scale, and that we should reach for the stars. If we are not able to clasp the stars then we have not fulfilled our life's potential. This is a clever technique as Thomas is making a very personal appeal to his dying father also something universal and important to everyone.

The final stanza goes back to Thomas's father and addresses him directly. The opening phrase "And you, my father" is touching. It begins the stanza with a conjunction which

should normally be used to connect parts of a sentence. Here the conjunction reminds the reader that all the other things the poet has described are only parts of a picture which is being painted just for his dad. The possessive pronoun “my” underlines the fact this is very personal.

The poet goes on to imagine his father facing death through a metaphor of him standing on a mountain; he is “there on the sad height”. This image places Thomas’s father high up looking down on his life and sadly facing death. Thomas then starts to beg his father, instructing him to “Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears”. Therefore he doesn’t care if his father swears at him or confers love with his weeping. Thomas has got to the point that he would rather his father stayed alive even if he is kept alive through bad temper or anger. The religious diction of “bless” is extended in the phrase “I pray”, showing Thomas is realising that God is the only person he can appeal to now to help his father. The phrase “I pray” means both I wish and I am speaking to God.

Thomas concludes the poem by repeating his two refrains together. He tells his father once more not to die mildly and that he must fight with anger against death. The repetition of the refrains, formed here in one great summary, does not make the reader think that Thomas can win. Ironically, the fact he has not been able to move on from his instruction at the beginning of the poem, and has had to repeat it again, tells us that he is fighting a losing battle. Thus the poem describes a son’s desire to keep his father from death, but his ultimate failure to do so.

POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

“If” – provides comparisons because it is also a poem about the relationship between a father and son.

“Prayer Before Birth” – provides lots of comparisons because it is also about a person facing a horrible event. However, in MacNeice’s poem birth is more awful than death.

“Piano” – provides lots of useful comparisons because both poems are about a son thinking about a dead or dying parent.

“poem at Thirty Nine” – provides useful comparisons as both poets are writing about their dead or dying fathers.

“Remember” – provides comparisons between a poetic voice facing their own death and a poet facing the death of someone else