

Aaron Allen

Professor Daniel Anderson

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Analysis of Death and Grief in the Dylan Thomas's poem, "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night"

INTRODUCTION

Dylan Thomas was a Welsh-born poet in the 20th century, famous for writing poems, prose, and plays during his lifetime. From childhood, Thomas had a connection with English, as his father David John Thomas had been an English Literature professor for a local grammar school. David John had an immense impact on Dylan, as he first introduced him to the subject of poetry. After first having a job as a journalist, Thomas soon turned his attention to writing poetry full-time. He began writing several poems and collections, such as "Fern Hill" and his collection of *18 Poems*, but while writing these poems over time, Dylan's father soon became deathly ill. This led to his famous poem "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night".

"Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night" speaks about the battle between grief and death. Throughout the poem, the narrator references different types of men who encounter death in unique ways. The author mentions four different types of men: the wise men, good men, wild men, and grave men. The narrator explains that each of them have had unique experiences in life that allows them to encounter death in a different way. However, in the last stanza of the poem, the narrator speaks directly to the father, and merely commands him to not "go gentle into that

good night” (18) but to “rage against the dying of the light” (19), two important lines mentioned several times throughout the poem.

STYLE

What makes "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night" a unique poem is the fact that it is stylistically set up in a way that is rarely seen in poetry-- through a villanelle. A villanelle utilizes a unique structure in which there are five tercets, followed by one quatrain. The first and third lines of the tercets are repeated in an alternating pattern as the final line of the next tercet, with those two lines being used as the last two lines of the last tercet. Although these rules may seem confusing as they are not in line with traditional poetry styles such as haikus or Shakespearean sonnets, it can be easily seen through "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night":

(Tercet 1)

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.

(Tercet 2)

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.

(Tercet 3)

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.

(Final Tercet)

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.

Figure 1

As seen through Figure 1, the highlighted text represents the lines that were first introduced in the first Tercet ["Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night" (1) and "Rage, rage against the dying of the night"(3)], and shows how each of these lines are alternated in each succeeding tercet. Then in the final tercet, both of the lines are reintroduced, in the order they came in with the first tercet, and concludes the poem in this way. This style is highly important in this poem because it sets the tone that Thomas is trying to unveil that death may be coming, but he is commanding his father to rage towards death defiantly, not peacefully. The first line of the poem, "Do not go gentle into that good night," immediately establishes the sense that an eerie presence may be lingering and the narrator is urging that person or reader to not take this eerie presence lightly. Following this, the last line of the first stanza more overtly shows the passion the narrator possesses, as they clearly plead the reader "rage, rage against the dying of the light." Then, as the narrator begins to describe the different types of men (wise, good, wild and grave), Thomas uses the format of villanelles and alternates the lines of "Do not go gentle into that good night" and "rage, rage against the dying of the light." From here, the reader is able to understand that from the descriptions of the men and how their lives are coming to a close, that the eerie presence of the "good night" and the "dying of the light" represents death and the narrator is warning us to not take death lightly.

Because of the format of a villanelle, Thomas is able to successfully set up the message and tone of the poem by using the alternated lines of "do not go gentle into that good night" and "rage, rage against the dying of the light." In addition to the use of these lines and the villanelle,

the order in which the narrator addresses the men-- from wise, good, wild, and grave-- Thomas is able to set up a dramatic introduction of the father. With this introduction, the reader can see that the narrator is urging the father to take the experiences of the other men the narrator spoke about, and to “not go gentle into that good night” and “rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

Because of the repeated alterations of these two lines throughout the poem due to the villanelle, the last two lines were deemed the most significant as the narrator showed a personal connection with their father, and giving their last plea to them, before their father passes away.

SETTING

While Thomas is effectively setting up the defiant tone of the poem, he also utilizes the imagery of several environments to create a metaphor associating light and darkness with life and death. Although there is not a definitive setting in this poem, Thomas creates a unique environment for each of the men he describes. For instance, the wise men know “dark is right” (4) and “had forked no lightning” (5), the good men “crying how bright their frail deeds... danced in a green bay” (7-8), the wild men “caught and sang the sun in flight” (10), and grave men with “blind eyes could blaze like meteors” (14) all represent an environment that shows light, therefore, life. In doing this, Thomas is trying to show his father that many men, despite the different walks of life, have lived their lives and may have some regrets, but they will have to approach death in some type of way, and that he too would have to, as death is inevitable. However, unlike in the tercets leading to the introduction of the narrator’s father, the narrator urges their father to find power in the situation they are in. In the lines describing the other men, the narrator shows that the men are approaching death in some sort of way, recognizing they are weak, but show how this weakness does not hinder them from living their last days to the fullest.

In lines 10 and 11, the narrator addresses that wild men, who have lived their lives dauntlessly, have learned “too late” that death does exist and is creeping upon them. These lines show that although the wild men understand that they are now mortal, they cannot choose living without adventure, as they have done so their entire life. Looking at lines 13 and 14, the narrator shows that the grave men have “blinding eyes,” however, elevates this unfortunate attribute to a positive, showing that they could “blaze like meteors and be gay.” This shows that the narrator understands that grave men know that death is upon them after noticeable changes in their appearance; but this doesn’t change their perceptions of living a long life with little regrets. With these two examples, along with the wise and good men, the narrator is trying to urge their father that he must do the same, fighting to keep going and take the “good night”, or death, head on. In line 17, the narrator urges the father by saying “Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears I pray,” which shows the passion that the narrator has for their father when encountering death, and leads to the final two lines of the poem, finishing with the narrator’s ultimate plea.

GRIEF AND DEATH

Thomas emphasizes a relationship between grief and death in the poem "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night," through the two important repeating lines, "Do not go gentle into that good night" and "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." At the very beginning of the poem, Thomas establishes the themes of grief and death by starting with the title line, "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night"(1). This line immediately establishes the sense that death is quickly approaching, and that the narrator is commanding the father not to go “gentle” or peaceful into death.

Throughout the poem, the narrator speaks of death as inevitable and something all people, no matter what they did in life, must encounter. And while encountering the phenomena of death, one must not go gentle, or peacefully, but rather aggressively, making every last moment precious. With that, Thomas easily could have named this poem “Do not go gentle into that night,” where night represents death. However, he chooses to use the key adjective “good” to place in front of night. This is important because rather making death seem gloomy and somber, the use of this “good” adjective makes it seem that death is an extension to life and should be seen through a joyful scope. According to Marc Cyr, he views the death that Thomas is speaking about as “inherently good” and is the “order of life/nature” (Cyr, 1998). Moreover, he sees death as “good” because it is “the agent for stopping pain, whether physical, mental, or spiritual.” So, as the narrator is speaking to his father (possibly on his deathbed), this moment in the poem is seen much more than the narrator pushing his father to put aside grief and to put rage towards death, but rather to experience this moment as a joy of all they had done in their life and to not be regretful.

“One Art”

“Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night” by Dylan Thomas, a villanelle poem, tackles the inevitability of death, through the experiences of four men, a narrator, and their father, and shows how the narrator yearns for the father to find joy in this situation, rather than grieve over it. In the poem “One Art” by Elizabeth Bishop, the narrator discusses the similar topic of death inevitability; however, this narrator handles the situation a little differently. Elizabeth Bishop, similar to Thomas, lost her parents early in her life, in addition to another loved one later on. In “One Art,” a villanelle poem as well, she introduces the topic of death in the beginning by saying

“The art of losing isn’t hard to master”(1). With this line, she shows that loss, or with the deeper meaning, death, is inevitable in life, no matter how hard you try to regain something. This is very similar to the line that Thomas employs in line 2, where he says “Old age should burn and rave at close of day,” where he is saying that as one gets older, death impedes upon them. Throughout the poem, Bishop gives examples of the narrator losing common things such as “door keys”(5), “hours badly spent”(5), and “mother’s watch”(10), as a build up to the ultimate thing the narrator lost-- “losing you”(16). This build up of normal events in life, such as losing the door keys, goes to show that in life it is normal to lose things, and shows the bigger metaphorical meaning that as a human being, you will have to lose others in the process of life. This is also extremely similar to the devices that Thomas employs by giving examples of the different types of men and how they all cope with grief; all humans must do it at some time in their life. But rather than grieving over this situation, the poem has an unforeseen turn in which the narrator hints at using a joking voice when mentioning that they were losing “you” (15). This unforeseen change of events shows how this narrator, in contrast to the narrator of “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night,” has a more lighthearted approach to grief and hopes that the reader also takes this cathartic approach in return when they may lose something dear to them.

CONCLUSION

Although two very different poems in terms of analogies and metaphors being used, the themes of overcoming death and grief were both present. Rather than approaching death with grief, the narrator in “One Art” approaches it as another stage in life and tries to joke it off. “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night” utilizes the same idea by the narrator advising their father not to take death lightly but with rage, as only “good” can come out of this situation. Overall,

death is a part of everyone's life and will have to encounter it sooner or later. In this same situation, grief will also be inevitable. But, as shown through these two poems, grief must not blind one of the light in the situation, but rather one must see it more clearly.

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