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Themes of Death and Acceptance in Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night"

Dylan Thomas, born in 1914, was a Welsh poet known for his lyrical and emotional poetry (Foundation). His poetry resembles Romantic poetry, but his work largely defies genre. He is famous for his heavy drinking, which is suspected to have led to his death in 1953. "Do not go gentle into that good night" is perhaps his most famous poem. Thomas wrote this villanelle in 1947, as his father was on his deathbed. The speaker of the poem is widely considered to be Thomas himself considering his personal connection to the subject matter and the speaker's address to his father in the poem. "Do not go gentle into that good night" has inspired people for decades with its theme of both fighting and accepting death. Literary analysts have noted aspects such as the poem's personal appeal, allusions to other works, depth of emotion, and I admire the poem for the raw authenticity of its themes, its intense visual imagery, and the depth of emotion and urgency conveyed through the restrictions of the villanelle form.

In order to understand the complexity of Thomas's poem, you must first understand the restrictions of the villanelle. The villanelle is defined by the Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature as a French verse form consisting of five tercets and a final quatrain with line repetitions. The standard structure of a villanelle consists of these nineteen lines. The final quatrain includes the central refrain of the poem, which in this case is "do not go gentle into that good night/rage, rage against the dying of the light (Thomas lines 18-19)." Each line of this

refrain is repeated alternately at the end of every stanza. The rhyme scheme of a villanelle is generally ABA for the first five stanzas, and ABAA for the final quatrain. Because the villanelle is so constrained, the emotional urgency and intensity conveyed by Thomas in this poem are all the more impressive. “Do not go gentle into that good night” is probably the most famous example of this verse form, and the apparent simplicity of the repeated couplet is one of its greatest strengths.

In order to convey the poem’s central theme, Thomas uses the refrain to depict an image of fiercely fighting against death and “rag[ing] against the dying of the light (Thomas line 3)”. The overall message the speaker seeks to impress upon his father is the importance of determination and resolve in the face of death. Yet Thomas also indicates that death is inevitable, and fighting is ultimately useless by saying that “though wise men at their end know dark is right/because their words have forked no lightning they/do not go gentle into that good night (Thomas lines 3-6).” This stanza perfectly encapsulates the tension between accepting death and struggling to prevent it. Wise men, such as Thomas’s father (presumably), understand the nature of death and do not shy away from the knowledge that they too must die. They know that no matter how hard they fight, the light will still die. However, for the sake of their dignity and the world they leave behind, they must battle fiercely with death. They undertake this battle not because they can win, but because in doing so they truly earn their rest.

Jhan Hochman, author of *Poetry for Students* offers another interpretation of the importance of raging against the dying of the light. In his discussion of the last stanza, which discusses Thomas’s ardent desire to see his dying father’s passion and “fierce tears,” Hochman suggests that Thomas needs his father to fight against death because that would prove he will

fight against leaving him (Hochman). While those who must die have the responsibility to accept and understand the inevitability of their passing, they must also fight fiercely to remain with their loved ones. In doing so, they have fulfilled their responsibility to comfort those they leave behind.

Another example of the tension between death and inevitability in literature can be found in Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in which a dying woman successfully battles her morphine addiction before death so she can die with honor and dignity -- beholden to no one but herself (Lee 115). This endeavor led to one of the work's most enduring quotes, which reads "[Real courage is] when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what (Lee 115)." This battle with inevitability defines "Do not go gentle into that good night." Ultimately, it is not about whether you succeed --whether you live or die. It is about whether you cling to the passion and intensity of life and always raged against the dying of the light.

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