**Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night**

**Context**

Dylan Thomas was born in Swansea, Wales, in 1914 (he died in 1953). He was a very popular poet during his lifetime. His most famous works include Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night and Under Milk Wood, which began life as a radio play and explores a gently sleeping Welsh village in poetic voices.

He is one of the most important Welsh poets of the 20th century, although he only wrote in English. He led a tempestuous life, both in terms of the women with whom he was involved and his excessive drinking. He did not serve in the war because of health problems, but instead wrote scripts for the BBC, which were his contribution to the war effort. He was living in London during the time of the Blitz.

Thomas’s poetry is often quite difficult to read, because it is dense with images that dictate the organisation of the sentences, so it can be difficult to see what is happening. Despite this his poetry is very lyrical and very beautiful. He usually worked in free verse rather than strict forms, but his poems have their own rhythm.

**Subject matter**

The poem is about getting old and close to death. Instead of giving in and going gracefully the poem urges people – and particularly the narrator’s father – to protest and rage against the end of their life. It lists all sorts of people who do exactly that. It is about the end of life, and reactions to that.

**Form and structure**

Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night is a villanelle, a form of poem that has 19 lines. The first and third lines of the first stanza are used alternately as the last lines of the remaining stanzas, except for the last one, where both are used together as a rhyming couplet, making that stanza into four lines rather than three. The middle lines of all the stanzas also rhyme with each other, so the poem follows the rhyme scheme ABA ABA ABA ABA ABA ABAA.

It is a very formal structure for a poem, and it is unusual for Thomas to use it. This poem is considered to be one of the finest examples of a villanelle.

**Language and Imagery**

**Imagery**

Much of the imagery in the poem is based around the twin themes of light and dark. The "light" symbolises life, while the "good night" is death, with a deliberate pun on saying good night and the idea that death is the right or "good" thing at the end of life. Death is characterised as "close of day". In this way the "rage" that the narrator wants to provoke becomes a fight against death, so that his father will not "go gentle" into death.

In each of the middle four stanzas, which describe how different types of men go to their death, there is an image of light to contrast against the final line of the stanza, representing the range of life. One of the types sees paradoxically with "blinding sight" – demonstrating perhaps the "rage" of the fight. This is picked up in the simile that their eyes can "blaze like meteors" in the next line – but of course meteors pass quickly, like this last fight. Wise men, even though they know that "dark is right" – that is, that it is their time – still fight against it.

Other paradoxes are included too: the narrator asks his father to "curse, bless, me now". This reflects his desire for his father to have any kind of fight left in him. The impassioned "I pray" at the end of that line suggests the strength of his desire for his father to remain alive a little longer.

**Sound**

The strong rhyme scheme of a villanelle combines with Thomas’s use of repetition (of structures and of words) and alliteration ("blind" and "blaze" for example) to create a strong rhythm to the poem, and to emphasise the "rage, rage" aspect of the poem – they make it seem fuller of fight.

**Attitudes, themes and ideas**

Death is seen as a natural pair to life, just as light is to dark and day to night. Despite the fact that death is acknowledged as the natural and right end to life, the poem still urges us to fight against it at the end of life. This seems to be mainly because of the personal reaction of the speaker, who does not want to grieve – as shown by his emotional reaction in the first two lines of the last quatrain. The different types of people who are shown as examples suggest that we should all fight against death.

**SUNRISE AND SUNSET**

This poem begins with a reference to "that good night," and we spend most of the poem watching one sunset after another, one nightfall after another. When the sun does appear, it speeds across the sky and out of sight pretty quickly. It's the darkness, not the light, that preoccupies our speaker.

Line 1: Beginning with this line, we have an extended metaphor in which day represents life, night represents the afterlife or a void, and sunset represents the moment of death. Throughout the poem, entering into the dark, noticing night fall, and the last lingering light of the evening will remind us of how easily – and how inevitably – life slips away from us. The first line is also a refrain in the poem, repeated a total of four times. As if that weren't enough to make you notice it, it's got quite a bit of obvious alliteration of n sounds at the beginning of "not" and "night" and hard g sounds at the beginning of "go" and "good." (Even though "gentle" begins with g, it doesn't count as alliteration here because it's a soft g instead of a hard one.) There are also other n sounds buried in the line, in the middle of "gentle" and "into." All this sound play ties the line together into a tidy package, making the words go together, even though they're full of harsh, hard sounds.

Lines 1-3: These lines are an apostrophe to the person the speaker is addressing. (We don't find out who it is until the last stanza.)

Line 3: The repetition of the first word of this line, "rage," emphasizes it with an uncanny doubling. The end of the line is united by the similar vowel sounds in the middle of "dying" and "light," a technique called assonance.

Lines 10-11: Here the sun's rapid flight across the sky is still part of the extended metaphor in which day represents a life cycle, but the sun also becomes a symbol of all that's beautiful, wonderful, or amazing in the world. The sun stands in for all the amazing things in the world that artists and poets might want to celebrate in their work.

**LIGHTNING, METEORS, AND OTHER THINGS THAT FALL FROM THE SKY**

 Symbol Analysis

Bolts of lightning, blazing meteors, and other images of light and fire captivate our attention in this poem about living with intensity. Life is no "brief candle" here; it's a blazing bonfire, a towering inferno, a firecracker. Sometimes people say they want to "go out with a bang," and Dylan Thomas would definitely have approved of that attitude.

Lines 4-6: The poem relies on intense and puzzling imagery, a lightning bolt that isn't forked or split by the words of wise men. (For our opinion of what this image means, see the "Line-by-Line Summary.")

Lines 13-14: The poem presents us with a paradox: the dying men who have gone blind can still "see," at least in a metaphorical sense. The paradox and the images surrounding it are emphasized by more over-the-top alliteration: "blinding," "blind," "blaze," and "be." Three of these four words repeat a bl consonant pair in addition to the initial b sound, making the alliteration even more noticeable.

**THE BEST OF MEN**

Symbol Analysis

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" begins with an address to an unknown listener and ends by revealing that this listener is the speaker's father. In between these direct addresses, however, the speaker describes the valiant and praiseworthy behavior of many different kinds of exemplary men – "wise men," "good men," "wild men," and "grave men." The speaker hopes that his father will be all these things.

Lines 7-15: The poem uses parallelism as the actions of the different types of men are listed. Each of these three stanzas begins by listing the type of men in question, then describing something amazing that that group of men have done. The speaker ends each by reminding the reader that these men won't let themselves die without a struggle.

Line 17: The speaker creates an oxymoron by asking his father to "Curse" but also to "bless" him. The juxtaposition of these two words together, separated but also joined by a comma, implies that they can be thought of as opposites, but also as, in some strange way, the same thing. This line is also one of the only soft-sounding lines in the poem, due to the sibilance, or repeated s sounds, throughout – in the words "Curse" and "bless," but also, less obviously, in "fierce" and "tears." This makes the line sound extremely different, softer and gentler than the rest of the poem. Hmm, maybe the father is going to pass away in a "gentle" manner.

**ANALYSIS: FORM AND METER**

 **Villanelle**

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is written in a very specific form, the villanelle. Now follow us closely here, because we're going to hit you with more numbers than a baseball stats chart at the end of a great season.

Villanelles have nineteen lines divided into five three-line stanzas and a sixth stanza with four lines. In English, villanelles tend to be written in the common metrical pattern called iambic pentameter, which means ten syllables per line, with every other syllable stressed, starting with the second syllable. So the lines will sound like this: da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM. For example, the second line of this poem is, more or less:

Old age should burn and rave at close of day

The meter, however, isn't required in order to make it a villanelle – we just thought we'd mention it.

What villanelles are required to have is an intricate rhyme scheme and two lines that are refrains – like refrains in songs, they get repeated over and over (Beyonce anyone? "To the left, to the left, everything you own in a box to the left"). The rhyme scheme is ABA ABA ABA ABA ABA ABAA, so there are only two rhymes that end all the lines. In addition, the first line and third line, the refrains, are repeated four times each – the first line appears at the end of stanzas 2 and 4 and as the second-to-last line in stanza 6. The poem's third line appears again at the end of stanzas 3, 5, and 6. So if we call the first line A and the third line A', and any line that rhymes with them a, then the rhyme scheme is: AbA' abA abA' abA abA' abAA'.

Looks almost like math, doesn't it? That's because villanelles have to have a mathematical precision when they're written in English. The villanelle form wasn't designed for the English language, which has fewer rhyming words than many other European languages. Villanelles were originally a French type of poetry, and they only became popular in English as a late-19th-century and early-20th-century import. Dylan Thomas's ability to follow this strict and complicated form, which actually works against the language he's using, and still create such an emotional poem with an urgent feel, is truly impressive.

**ANALYSIS: SPEAKER**

Usually we're super-strict about keeping the speaker of a poem separate from the author of a poem. After all, poets often create fictional personas who they imagine to be speaking their work – not everything they write down is what they personally believe. But in the case of "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," it's nearly impossible to separate the speaker of the poem, who is urging his father to struggle mightily with death, from the author Dylan Thomas, who was really upset about his own father's declining health and impending death. Maybe the best way to think of it is this: Thomas is using the speaker of his poem to say things to an imaginary father that might have been too difficult to say face-to-face to his own father, or that his father (who was dying at the time) wouldn't have had the energy to hear or understand. The speaker is Thomas's alter ego, composed of autobiographical elements, but still not quite the same as the man himself.

It's also interesting to notice that we don't know the speaker is using the first person until nearly the end of the poem, when he uses "me" and "I" in line 17. We have to shift our opinion of the speaker and his perspective once we're blindsided with the first-person stuff in the last stanza.

**ANALYSIS: SETTING**

Where It All Goes Down

The Deathbed and Beyond

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" doesn't just have one setting – it has many. Over the course of the poem's compact nineteen lines, Thomas takes us from a lingering sunset to a bolt of lightning, from a green bay extending out from the seashore to a shooting star blazing across the sky, and finally to the top of a mountain. Of course, all of these places are metaphorical descriptions of life, death, and struggle, but we're starting to notice that they're all grand aspects of nature. This poem literally goes from the depths of the ocean, the "green bay," to the tallest peak, that "sad height," and everywhere in-between. Of course, the whole time we're traveling through nature, the speaker is really at the bedside of his dying father.

**ANALYSIS: SOUND CHECK**

 "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is harsh but lyrical, jarring but hypnotic. It's halfway between listening to monks chanting in Latin and listening to officers shouting orders at their troops. The repeated lines, called refrains, and the use of only two rhyming words give the poem a singsong quality. But Thomas also uses harsh consonant sounds, often alliterated, to give the poem an explosive feel. He also omits soft endings on words wherever he can – notice that his choice of "gentle" in the first line, instead of the more grammatically correct "gently," makes the word end on the strangling consonant "l" instead of the sweeter long "e" sound. The poem also has as few linking words and conjunctions as possible; connections happen through commas instead, as in "Rage, rage" and "Curse, bless." This means there are more stressed words in the poem, which adds to the feeling of a strong, intense rhythm.

For a taste of how the author wanted it to sound, check out Dylan Thomas reading "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" aloud.

**ANALYSIS: TITLE**

There isn't one – that's what's up with the title! This famous villanelle, the poem for which Dylan Thomas is best known, was left untitled by the poet. Like most untitled poems, it's usually referred to by its first line in quotation marks. For some of our theories on what the first line means and how it's put together, see the "Detailed Summary" and the "Quotes and Thoughts."

**ANALYSIS: CALLING CARD**

Passion in a Paradigm

When Dylan Thomas was writing, a lot of people thought he was going to start a new Romantic movement. You know, the obsession with feeling, nature, and the individual that ties together poetry by William Wordsworth (check out "Tintern Abbey"), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (take a gander at "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"), Lord Byron (coming soon… "She Walks in Beauty"), John Keats (consider "Ode on a Grecian Urn"), and others.

Thomas certainly is a passionate poet, and his intense feelings come close to overwhelming the reader in this poem. But he's also a very organized poet. He chooses a poetic form with a lot of complicated rules to follow – the villanelle – and then he shapes his passion to fit this form. The amazing thing about the poem is that this highly structured form doesn't stifle any of the feeling in his message. When you read poetry that has overwhelming emotion but also a complicated paradigm, or structure, then you know you're reading Dylan Thomas. (Well, it's more than likely, anyway.)

**ANALYSIS: FORM/STRUCTURE**

Dylan Thomas likes to fool around with his syntax and extend his metaphors, but the villanelle form creates constant repetition of his message and helps us follow along. One read-through of the poem is probably enough for most of us to get his basic message – after all, he repeats it no fewer than four times – and you can pay attention to the details of his imagery the second time through. (Yes, you need to read poems more than once to really "get" them, but at least this one is only nineteen lines long!)