

Poetry
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Dylan Thomas

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Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)



- Historical and Literary Context
- Dylan Thomas
- “A Refusal to Mourn the Child, by Fire, of a Child in London
- The Villanelle Form
- Modern Villanelles
- “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night”
- Analysis
- A Poet’s Reading



Hello. Dylan Thomas is the last poet we have in the seventh week of our course. Dylan Thomas was born in 1914 and died in 1953. First, let us see the historical and literary context in which Dylan Thomas lived and wrote his poems. We will pay special attention to “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” with reference to the form called villanelle because it is a very interesting form which is well exemplified by Dylan Thomas.

We will also read “A Refusal to Mourn the Child, by Fire, of a Child in London” to give a base for the kind of profound theme Dylan Thomas has in his works and then we will analyze the poem and lastly we will offer a Poet’s Reading, how would another poet Dylan Thomas’s poem , Particularly this “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.”

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Historical and Literary Context



- Second World War (1939-1945)
- **Modernist poets:** Yeats, Eliot, and Pound
- **Auden Group/Pylon poets:** W H Auden, C Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender; after Spender's poem "The Pylons"(1933); urban, industrial and leftist poetry
- Persistence of Romantic poetry: Dylan Thomas
- **Movement poets:** Philip Larkin, Donald Davie, D J Enright, and Elizabeth Jennings; Robert Conquest's anthology *New Lines: A Way of Living* (1956) anti-romantic, witty, and sardonic poems
- Irish, Scottish, and Welsh contribution to English poetry



Let us see the Historical and Literary Context. Second World War happened between 1939 and 1945. During this time, we find modernist poets had reached their heights and then another group of poets was coming up Yeats, Eliot, and Pound; they were also writing but then we have another group of poets called Auden Group or Pylon group of poets represented by W H Auden, C Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender.

This term Pylon is used to refer to this group because of a poem by Spender that is called "The Pylons." These poets were generally writing about urban life, industrial life and they had leftist leaning, some socialist cause they had, that is why they are part of this group called pylon Poets. During this time also, we notice the persistence of romantic poetry.

Just because modernist poetry was popular, it does not mean that everybody was writing modernist poetry. A notable example of romantic poetry we find in Dylan Thomas. We also have another group of poets called Movement Poets. This group is represented by Phillip Larkin, Donald Davie, D J Enright and Elizabeth Jennings.

This group wrote about anti romantic sentiments. They were using witty, sardonic comments in their poems. They had an ironical attitude to life, so we have an anthology called 'New Lines, A Way of Living' by Robert Conquest who was also a poet from this Movement Group. In addition to all these Modernist Poets, Auden Group or Romantic Poets or Movement Poets, we have to

remember that Irish Poets, Scottish Poets and Welsh Poets also contributed to English poetry. We have many Irish poets.

One famous example is Seamus Heaney. We have similarly, a good number of Scottish poets. A good example is Carol Ann Duffy and then we have many Welsh poets. One example is our poet Dylan Thomas. That is why in this context, in the context of twentieth century British poetry, we have to remember many groups contributed to twentieth century British poetry.

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Three Thomases



Edward Thomas (1878-1914) A war poet (WW I) A friend of Frost	Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) Escaped WW II A Romantic Best-known Welsh poet	R S Thomas (1913-2000) Anglican priest A Welsh poet
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We have a strange case of three Thomases writing at the same time. We have one Edward Thomas. He was the war poet that we referred to. This was poet was also a friend of Robert Frost. Next, we have Dylan Thomas who we are going to see. He did not join the Second World War, he somehow escaped. He used this romantic tendency in his poems, one of the best-known Welsh poets. Then we have Welsh poet R S Thomas. He was a priest and the poet; so in this context, it would be good to remember three famous Thomases from the same, almost the same period.

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Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)



- A distinct Welsh poet in the Romantic tradition
- Reputed for his original use of language and imagery
- Obsessed with words, sounds, rhythms, and meanings
- Concerned with the themes of the unity of time, creative destruction and destructive creation, and correspondence of all living things
- A legendary artist of poetry, short stories, radio plays, and live and recorded performances
- Well-recognized for his two volumes: *Deaths and Entrances* (1946) and *In Country Sleep* (1952)
- Known for "Fern Hill," "A Refusal to Mourn the Death by Fire, of a Child in London," and "**Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night**"



Now let us come to Dylan Thomas. Dylan Thomas is a distinct Welsh poet in the romantic tradition. He was reputed for his original use of language and imagery. Throughout his life, he was obsessed with words, sounds, rhythms and meanings. He was concerned with the themes of the unity of time, creative destruction and destructive creation and correspondence of all living things. We can remember the correspondent breeze.

There is a correspondence between nature and human beings among all things. Dylan Thomas was a legendary artist of poetry, short stories, radio plays and live and recorded performances. He was one of the most popular poets in his own life, in his own lifetime. He was well recognized for two of his volumes, "Deaths and Entrances" published in 1946 and "In Country Sleep" published in 1952. Some of his well-known poems are "Fern Hill," "A Refusal to Mourn the Death by Fire, of a Child in London," and "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."

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A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London



Never until the mankind making
Bird beast and flower
Fathering and all humbling darkness
Tells with silence the last light breaking [l, s, i]
And the still hour
Is come of the sea tumbling in harness

5



We have this poem “A Refusal to Mourn the Death by Fire, of a Child in London” here. When we read this poem, we will understand that thematic density or the thematic profundity in his poem.

“Never until the mankind making

Bird beast and flower

Fathering and all humbling darkness,

Tells with silence the last light breaking, [l, s, i]

And the still hour

Is come of the sea tumbling in harness.”

We have highlighted certain words like making, fathering, humbling, flower, hour, harness, darkness to indicate the kind of awareness of rhythm and sound patterns that Dylan Thomas had. You also have noticed l, s, i in terms of these consonants and assonants. These poetic devices contribute to the immense poetic quality that we have in Dylan Thomas. Then let us continue.

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A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London



And I must enter again the round
Zion of the water bead
And the synagogue of the ear of corn
Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound
Or sow my salt seed
In the least valley of sackcloth to mourn

10



“And I must enter again the **round**

Zion of the water **bead**

And the synagogue of the ear of **corn**

Shall I let pray the shadow of a **sound,**

Or sow my salt **seed**

In the least valley of Sackcloth of **mourn.**”

Here again we have indicated the imagery, the metaphor and alliteration in the poem. The least valley of sackcloth, again metaphor, the kind of rhyme scheme that we have round, sound, bead, seed, corn and mourn. We have indicated.

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A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London



The majesty and burning of the child's **death**.

I shall not **murder**

The mankind of her going with a grave **truth** 15

Nor blaspheme down the stations of the **breath**

With any **further**

Elegy of innocence and **youth**.



Let us proceed further:

“The Majesty and burning of the child’s **death**,

I shall not **murder**

The mankind of her going with a grave **truth**

Nor blaspheme down the stations of the **breath**

With any **further**

Elegy of innocence and **youth**.”

Dylan Thomas was accused of indifference to death of a child in London when he was writing this poem. Actually, he has a higher purpose. What is death? How do we approach death? How do we think about death? How do we actually accept death in our life? That was a philosophical question that he raised in this poem. That is why he says,

“I Shall not murder

The Mankind of her going with a grave truth

Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath

With further

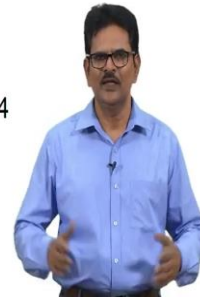
Elegy of innocence and youth.”

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A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London



Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,
Robed in the long friends, 20
The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother,
Secret by the unmourning water
Of the riding Thames.
After the first death, there is no other. [Epigram] 24



And lastly, we have this section:

“Deep with the first dead lies London’s daughter,
Robed in the long friends,
The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother,
Secret by the unmourning water
Of the riding Thames.
After the first death, there is no other.”

This is the greatest wisdom that we find in this poem in the form of an epigram “After the first death, there is no other.” Daughter, water, friends, Thames, mother, other, these are the rhyming words. This daughter, who dies because of this fire is un-mourned because by this riding

Thames. The attitude of the poet to the girl, the young child is not indifference but of profound concern but he shows his concern with dispassion or detachment that is why some readers have found this poem to be cold because of this kind of detached attitude of the poet towards the theme of death. This theme of death is further developed in his next poem “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night.”

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Impressions



Free verse form in 24 lines

Four stanzas of six lines each

Consistent rhyme: ABCABC

Alliterative and assonantal verse

Sound and sense mingle to make meanings

Vivid original images:

“the sea tumbling in harness” (6)

“the round Zion of the water bead” (7-8)

“the synagogue of the ear of corn” (9)

Epigram: “After the first death, there is no other.” (24)



Before we move to the next poem, let us see some impressions that we have about this poem. When we read this poem, we understand that, it is written in a free verse form in 24 lines. Of course, there are something like stanza patterns of six lines each, there is consistent rhyme in terms of ABCABC throughout the poem.

We have alliteration, assonance, consonance, everything relating to poetic devices we have here. The sound, sense mingle to make meanings in Dylan Thomas’s poem. We have very clear original images in some of these lines “The sea tumbling in harness,” “the round Zion of water bead,” “the synagogue of the ear of corn.” And lastly the epigram “After the first death, there is no other.”

There is only one death. Let us understand what it is, let us approach it, let us accept it, let us learn that this death is a continuation of the life that we had. Probably before that, there was

something else. This continuity of life, probably this is the kind of romantic strain love and death continuing in the river of life or river of time that is what we find in Dylan Thomas.

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The Villanelle Form



- One of the best villanelles in English language (Heaney)
- A villanelle is a poem of 19 lines divided into five tercets (aba) and a quatrain (abaa).
- It has two refrains in a specific pattern: lines 1 and 3 are repeated in 6, 12, and 18, and 9, 15, and 19, respectively
- Thematically obsessed with a problem/ an issue
- Popular in 16th century French literature
- Revived in 19th century and imported into England by Edmund Gosse, Andrew Dobson, Oscar Wilde, etc.
- Widely used in 20th century literature
- Originally a flexible and spontaneous form but now it is fixed



The next poem is in the form of villanelle. It is a special form. That is why we have chosen this particular poet and also this poem in our course to understand what a villanelle form is. This is the one the best villanelles in English language. A villanelle is a poem of nineteen lines divided into five tercets. That means we have aba and aba, scheme we have in this poem and also, we have a quatrain at the end abaa. It has two refrains in a specific pattern. Line 1 is repeated in six, twelve and eighteen. Line three is repeated in line number nine, fifteen and nineteen.

Thematically, the poem is obsessed with a serious problem or an issue. It was popular in sixteenth century French literature. Later on, it was revived nineteenth century and imported into England by Edmund Gosse, Andrew Dobson, Oscar Wilde and others at the end of nineteenth century. This particular form is widely used in twentieth century literature. Originally it was a flexible and spontaneous form but now it has a fixed form like nineteen lines, five tercets, a quatrain and all that.

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Modern Villanelles



- E A Robinson's "The House on the Hill"
- James Joyce's "Villanelle of the Temptress"
- William Empson's "Missing Dates"
- W H Auden's "If I Could Tell You"
- Theodore Roethke's "The Waking"
- Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art"
- **Dylan Thomas's** "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night"
- Sylvia Plath's "Mad Girl's Love Song"
- Seamus Heaney's "Villanelle for an Anniversary"
- Annie Finch's "Beach of Edges"
- Julie Kane's "Kissing the Bartender"



We have many examples; it will be surprising for us to know that many poets, twentieth century poets have used this form. Edwin Arlington Robinson has this poem, "The House on the Hill." James Joyce has his poem "Villanelle of the Temptress." Our well-known critic for Ambiguity William Empson has a poem called "Missing Dates." The Auden group poet Auden we mentioned, he has a poem called "If I Could Tell You." American poets, Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, they have their own poems like "The Waking," "One Art."

Then we have Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night." Further we have Sylvia Plath with one poem "Mad Girl's Love Song." Seamus Heaney also has a poem called "Villanelle for an Anniversary." Annie Finch is another poet who has a poem "Beach of Edges" and lastly, we have Julie Kane with a poem "Kissing the Bartender." Many other poets have written Villanelles in twentieth century and perhaps they are writing in twenty first century as well.

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Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night



- Composed in 1947
- First published in 1951
- Published in *In Country Sleep and Other Poems* in 1952
- Written for his father who died in 1952
- A threshold poem about death (Heaney)
- One of the best known **villanelles** in English language
- An influential poem which has affected and reflected the concerns of both common and elite people



Let us have some background information about this poem “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night.” This poem was composed in 1947 and published in 1951. Later on, it was collected in this volume in “Country Sleep and Other Poems” in 1952. Dylan Thomas specifically wrote this poem for his father who was dying of cancer in 1952.

Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet calls this poem, ‘a threshold poem about death.’ This threshold between life and death, the interaction between life and death. This is considered to be one of the best-known villanelles in English language. It became an influential poem and has affected and reflected the concerns of both common and elite people.

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Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night- I



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 5
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.



Let us read this poem now:

“Do not go gentle into that good night,

Old age should burn and rave at close of the 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 5

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.”

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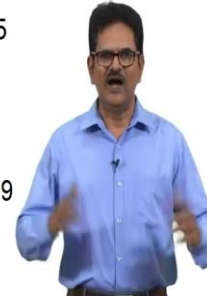
Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night- II



Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight, 10
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. 15

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. 19



“Wild men who caught and sand the sun in flight, 10

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 blaze like meteors and be gay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light. 15

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.” 19

This is a poem of 19 lines as we said 5 tercets and 1 quatrain, 19 lines.

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Thematic Contrast



- Old age and Youth
- Night and Day
- Dark and Light
- Death and Life
- Curse and Bless
- Father and Son
- The theme of separation from and farewell to a father



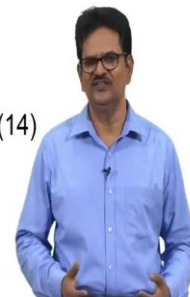
There is a thematic contrast between old age and youth, night and day, dark and light, death and life, curse and bless, father and son and the whole thematic contrast centers around the theme of separation from and farewell to a father by a son.

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Poetic Devices



- **Alliteration:** go, good (1)
- **Assonance:** Old age ... and rave at close of day (2)
- **Imagery:** forked no lightning (5)
Their frail deed might have danced in a green bay (8)
- **Oxymoron:** blinding sight (13)
- **Alliteration:** caught and sang the sun in flight
- **Simile and Paradox:**
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay, (14)
- **Refrain:** 1, 6, 12, 18 and 3, 8, 15, 19
Do not go gentle into that good night,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.



Many poetic devices are found in this poem. We have the example of alliteration in line one ‘go, good.’ Assonance in ‘old age and rave and at close of day.’ Imagery we have in ‘forked no lightening,’ ‘Their frail deed might have danced in a green bay.’ That kind of image comes to us in front of us. Then we have Oxymoron in ‘blinding sight,’ sight which blinds us therefore we cannot see.

Alliteration in ‘caught and sang the sun in flight.’ Simile and Paradox together we have in this line: ‘Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay.’ Refrain we mentioned already one, six, twelve and eighteen, they are repeated. That is a line “Do not go gentle into that good night” and then we have another set three, eight, fifteen and nineteen the same line “Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

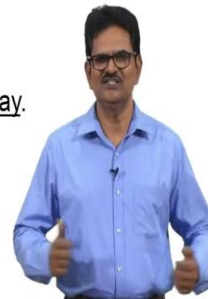
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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



- **Rhyme:** ABA in the five tercets and ABAA in the quatrain
- **Rhyming words:** night, **day**, light, | right, **they**, night, | bright, **bay**, light, | flight, **way**, night, | sight, **gay**, light, | height, **pray**, night, light |
- **Rhythm:** Iambic pentameter with variation of tetrameter
- **Caesura and End-Stopped Lines:**

And you, | my fa | ther, there | on the | sad height,
Curse, bless, | me now | with your | fierce tears, | I pray.
Do not | go gentle | into that | good night. (4 feet)
Rage, rage | against | the dy | ing of | the light.



When we come to rhyme and rhythm and meter, we can see a number of words, rhyming words. ABA is a scheme, that is found in the five tercets and in the last one, we have ABAA. Rhyming words are night day light, right they night, bright bay light, flight way night, sight gay light, height pray night light. Then we have rhythm which is found in the Iambic pentameter with variation of tetrameter with five feet and then four feet, that is the kind of variation we have.

Just one example for the rhythm and also a caesura and end-stopped lines we have in these four lines:

“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.

We have underlined those places where we have the stress, sad, height these are some the examples where we have spondee.

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Overall Impression



- The poem captures the anguish of a son about his father dying of throat cancer but unable to share the news with him
- It is a personal poem of despair and frustration and protest against death.
- Wise men have not explained the mystery of death.
- Good men's good deeds have not protected against death.
- Wild men have enjoyed life but have not learnt about death.
- Grave men have understood life and remained happy.
- The poet pleads with his father not to say the final good night as an image of departure and death.
- The meditatively musical poem reaches the heart of readers.



To give an overall impression of this poem, we can say the poem captures anguish of a son about his father dying of throat cancer but unable to share the news with his own father. It is a personal poem of despair and frustration and protest against the same common enemy for all of us that is death. Wise men have not explained the mystery of death.

How can they? Good men's good deeds have not protected them against death, how is it possible? Wild men who have enjoyed life but have not learnt about death. Is it possible for us to learn about death in this life? That is a kind of question that the poet has in front of us. Grave men have understood life and remained happy. Those who understand the arrival of death, those who accept death, they can alone be happy. The poet pleads with his father not to say the final

departing words 'good night' as an image of departure and death. The meditatively musical poem reaches the heart of the readers because we are also in the same position, when we have to say good night to our departing friends, family members.

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A Poet's Reading (Heaney, 1993)



- Heaney offers a poetic reading of Thomas's poem.
- Thomas's craft and his suffering are close.
- A threshold poem about death, it integrates imagery, diction and theme well.
- It portrays the remoteness of all fathers, as the poet protests against the separation from his father.
- The phrase 'good night' is a mixture of salutation and farewell, balancing grief and necessity.
- Heaney reads the son and father at two levels: one, Dylan as son to his father; two, the child poet and the old poet Dylan.
- It provides a vivid figure of the union of opposites, of the father in the son, the son in the father, of life in death and death in life.



We have a Poet's reading; Seamus Heaney is the poet who has discussed this poem in one of his essays. Heaney offers a poetic reading of Thomas's poem. Thomas's craft and his suffering are very close. A threshold poem about death; it integrates imagery, diction and theme well. It portrays the remoteness of all fathers as the poet protests against the separation from his own father. The phrase 'good night' is a mixture of salutation and also farewell balancing grief and necessity.

Heaney reads the son and the father at two levels, one, between Dylan the son and his father and the next, between the child poet and the old poet Dylan himself. It provides a vivid figure of the union of opposites, of the father in the son, the son in the father, life in death and death in life. That is why it is considered to be one of the best villanelle poems in English language.

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Summary



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- The Villanelle Form
- Modern Villanelles
- “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night”
- Analysis
- A Poet’s Reading



To give a summary of our discussion on Dylan Thomas, we can say we have looked into the historical and literary context against the background of this Second World War modernist poetry, movement poetry and all that. Dylan Thomas did not belong to any group and stood alone as a distinct voice as a distinct poet with his serious poems on life and death. The poem that we looked at very closely is “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” which is a good example of villanelle form, which has been used by many other poets in twentieth century.

We also referred to another poem “A Refusal to Mourn the Death by Fire, of a Child in London” to actually indicate the kind of obsession that Dylan Thomas had with his profound theme of death. It is a very interesting poem by itself though some critics have found some kind of indifference from Dylan Thomas towards a child’s death. I would consider this poem to be a dispassionate account of death of a child by Dylan Thomas.

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We have some references. Those of you interested may see some of these references and learn more about Dylan Thomas and his poems, thank you.