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Dylan Thomas' Wartime Plea

Diana Alatalo

World War II (WWII) darkened the entire globe. Peace and freedom trembled at the prospect of world

domination by the Axis nations. This situation did not escape the notice of the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas. Sometime between 1945, when he learned that his own father was dying (Napierkowski, et al. 49, Tindall 204), and 1950 (Maud, "Chronology" 296), Dylan composed the poem "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." Although critics credit Thomas's father's own mortality for the inspiration for the poem, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" chronicles the fight for freedom and peace during WWII and pleas with the world to never surrender freedom.

Thomas published "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" in 1952. Thomas explained in a letter to a friend, that the delay in publication was due to Thomas' desire that his dying father not see the poem (Napierkowski, et al. 49). The last stanza of the poem appears to be addressed to the poet's father. The poem also echoes aspects of the unfinished poem "Elegy" that critics claim Thomas wrote in memory of his father (Napierkowski, et al. 57, Tindall 206). The foregoing facts lead many critics to examine "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" in respect to the poet's father's terminal illness. For example, Tindall claims the grave men in the fifth stanza represent poets and the "blind eyes" lead Thomas back to his father; for, although no poet, he too was blind in his last years" (205-6). Kidder believes the poem to be an attempt by Thomas to understand death and the lack of religious imagery results from his father's agnostic views (Napierkowski, et al. 56). Hochman asserts that the poem's mention of "father" in the final stanza enables readers to realize "that the specific addressee is Thomas's sick father" (Napierkowski, et al. 56). The critics fail to explain Thomas's word choice within "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" that proves to be essential in understanding the poem's underlying message.

Julian Symons classifies Thomas's poetry as obscure because Thomas "endeavor[s] to conceal what is in fact very simple matter, though its writer [Thomas] may intend it to be very profound matter" (66). The word death occurs once in the poem, yet the aforementioned critics continue to reference the poem to physical

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death, especially the death of the poet's father. The obscurity of the poem lends itself to this assumption. This assumption clouds other factors that may have influenced Thomas's writings, namely, world events. The central event of that time was WWII, which inspired a plethora of war poems.

Thomas is credited with publishing only a "few war poems" (Magill 2882). "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" is not classified as a war poem. However, WWII greatly influenced Thomas's life and art. WWII's arrival "fostered an apocalyptic spirit among poets" (Kershner 118). The war's effect manifests itself in many of the

poet's broadcasts during and after the war. For example, in the January 1946 broadcast on Welsh poetry, Thomas notes how Alun Lewis, a fellow poet, died while serving in India during the war. Thomas comments on how Lewis acknowledged that "in war, poetry is in the pity... and, like Owen, he could never place himself above pity but must give it tongue" (Maud, *On the Air* 46). Thomas writes of the bombings of London in his play "The Londoner" recorded in July 1946 (82). In "Return Journey," he precisely reports "about the bomb damage from the air raids of February 1941" that occurred in his childhood town of Swansea (177). Thomas felt strongly about the war and circulated an anti-war petition in 1940 (Kershner 243). Considering the timeframe during which Thomas wrote "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," evidence suggests that the poem primarily references events specific to WWII, and that Thomas, by the end of the war, recognized the war's necessity and encouraged the world to fight for freedom and peace.

The first line of the poem addresses an individual characterized as "gentle." The archaic word "gentle" indicates a person of an upper, or superior,

class. The Axis nations committed great atrocities against weaker national groups, demonstrating that they embodied a debased, barbaric disposition. Conversely, the Allies liberated those oppressed like knights in shining armor. Thomas commands "gentle" not to enter "that good night." Thomas juxtaposes "good" and "night," indicating a paradox (Napierkowski, et al. 51). The oppressive governments of the Axis powers, as previously mentioned, exercised their power with evil intentions. Their rule brought darkness upon their subjects, essentially night. Hence, "good night" contradicts itself, proving false. Clearly, from the first line, Thomas addresses the political issues during WWII.



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The second line commences with advice for “old age.” Considering the word “age” refers to a generation, “old age” indicates the older generation alive during WWII. That generation experienced World War I (WWI), the Roaring Twenties, and the Great Depression. Thomas advises these elderly ones to continue to care, to “rave and burn,” concerning the principles of the war, even though they are “at close of day” and may not live to experience suffering if the Axis powers triumphed. The exhortation continues in line three when Thomas reiterates the need for “old age” to “rage” or fight against the “dying of the light.” The use of the rhyming pair of “night” and “light” emphasizes their dichotomy. If “night” refers to the dark rule by the oppressive governments of the Axis powers, then “light” indicates the divergent liberating rule offered by the Allies, which provides considerable freedom in comparison to the “night.”

The second stanza focuses on “wise men.” In June 1946 during a broadcast on the poetry of Wilfred Owen, Thomas stated that a “wise man...achieve[s], for himself, a true way of believing” (Maud, On the Air 101). This definition was not all inclusive because Thomas indicated that Owen was a “wise man” for a different reason, which he never defined (101). However, that definition aids in identifying the “wise men” in “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.” Thomas mentions Einstein in at least two of his broadcasts, “Margate-Past and Present” and “Return Journey” (105, 183). Albert Einstein epitomizes the “wise men.” Einstein publicly encouraged pacifism until the Nazi party came to power, prompting him “to urge the world to meet force with force” (Schwarz SM38). Einstein contributed to the war effort, most notably by aiding in the creation of the atom bomb that ended the war with Japan. The poem states that “wise men...know dark is right.” Since Thomas uses the word “dark” instead of “night,” he desires to convey a different connotation. In reference to Einstein, that “wise” man recognized before his “end” or death that war and the atom bomb, both “dark” in the sense of destructiveness, had an appropriate use in the world (“Einstein Urges World” 17). Similar to the rhyming pair in the first stanza, the second stanza contains the rhyming pair “right” and “night.” This pair forms a paradox comparable to the paradoxical “good night” with the same intent. The remainder of the stanza supports this conclusion. The reason the “wise men...know dark is right” stems from the fact that “their words had forked no lightning.” Referring to Einstein, as a pacifist, his words promoted abstaining from war for any reason. Yet, his “words” did not cause the nations to locate a means to peacefully halt Nazi terror. He was unable to divide or “fork” the powerful nations or “lightning” into another course of action. Thus, the stanza concludes with the “wise men,” like “gentle,” resisting the paradoxical “good night.”

The third stanza introduces “good” or moral “men” (Napierkowski, et al. 52). During WWII, Mohandas Gandhi, a highly-principled civil rights leader, continued his fight for India’s independence from Great Britain. Like Gandhi, Thomas possessed

no great love towards Great Britain (Van Wert 277), and Great Britain considered Gandhi's campaign a threat during the war ("Gandhi and India" 18). Gandhi's final attempt or "last wave" consisted of a fast while imprisoned, which contributed to his failing health. The war overshadowed the Indian Nationalist Movement, thus, Gandhi's fast failed (Matthews 10). Gandhi, capable of only "frail deeds" due to deteriorating health, mourned or "cr[ie]d" concerning the failed fast. If Gandhi's fast had occurred outside the confines of WWII, then his "bright" or luminous "deeds" or actions would have enabled the Indian Nationalist Movement to celebrate or "dance" in Bombay, the "green bay" and seat of the movement ("Gandhi's Release" 31). Unlike the previous two stanzas, the rhyming pair of "bright" and "light" in this stanza emphasizes their complimentary nature. The people of India desired the "light" of freedom and attempted to publicize their "bright...deeds" in regards to gaining that "light." Bombay derived its name from the Portuguese words Bom Bahia meaning "good bay" ("Mumbai: An Introduction"). The color "green" appears to have "normal adjectival associations with items of landscape (Harvard 814). This association of "green" with an ocean bay resembles how Thomas described the bay of New Quay as "green as grass" in a 1944 broadcast (Maud, On the Air 10). The stanza climaxes with the exhortation by Thomas for Gandhi to continue to fight and "rage against the dying of the light."

The "wild men" in the fourth stanza represent the soldiers fighting for the Allies. In particular, the "men who caught and sang the sun in flight" refer to the soldiers who delivered the atom bombs over the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki located in the Land of the Rising Sun, Japan. The atomic age affected Thomas, who mentioned it in his broadcast about Wilfred Owen (95). Those soldiers, or "wild men," aided in capturing the "sun" or Japan's surrender and initially "sang" or rejoiced in the success of their missions. The full consequences of their mission the men "learn[ed], too late" and "grieved it [the atom bomb] on its way" to the cities. The rhyming pair "flight" and "night" highlight the disparity between the Allies and Axis powers. Thomas ironically classifies "wild men" with "gentle" in the final line of the stanza, indicating both parties need to resist entering "that good night."

Thomas further develops the previous line of thought when he introduces the "grave men, near death," at the start of the fifth stanza. These men represent the individuals housed in the Nazi concentration camps and later liberated by Allies' forces, including the British. Their situation remained "grave," and their lives hovered "near death." The juxtaposing of "blinding" and "sight" introduces another paradox. As in the phrase "good night," "blinding sight" contradicts itself, proving to be a lie. Rather, these individuals "see" or understand their situation with "sight" or perception that is "blinding" or hidden from the rest of the world. The rhyming of "sight" with "light" underscores the importance of the "light" to these "grave men, near death." If the "light" dies, they die. Their circumstances "blind[s]" their "eyes" or sight from hope. However, if they possess hope, then their "blind eyes could blaze" or proclaim their "light" or

freedom as vividly as their literal liberators flying in the British fighter jets known as “meteors” (Vosser E4). Proof that their liberation nears, the “grave men...could...be gay.” In the final line of the stanza, Thomas pleads with these “grave men” and urges them to continue their fight “against the dying of the light.”

The final stanza addresses the reader’s “father,” or nation. Thomas believed “good poems...are ageless” (Maud, *On the Air* 99). A person may not be acquainted with his or her biological father, but everyone possesses a nation they look to as their fatherland. Thomas’ reference ensures “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” retains a timeless quality. In direct reference to WWII, Thomas notes that his “father,” Great Britain, looms “on the sad height.” Throughout the war, Great Britain suffered terrible losses. While she retained her “height” or stature as a world power, her physical and economical condition appeared “sad” or deplorable. The rhyming of “height” with “night” serves to emphasize how close the Axis powers came to usurping Great Britain’s position as a world power. The subsequent line begins with the direct address “curse,” as indicated by the punctuation. In this stanza, “curse” identifies with the previous direct address “father.” Thomas utilizes the derogatory term “curse” to express his anger at his “father,” Great Britain, who “offered scant praise for his poetry” (Van Wert 277). Additionally, when the war began, Thomas “determined not to be involved in it,” yet poverty required him to write “scenarios for war documentaries” (Magill 2882). Addressing Great Britain as a “curse” verifies Thomas’s resentment toward her and the war. Thomas proceeds to request an immediate, “now,” “bless[ing]” from “curse.” The juxtaposing of “curse” and “bless” indicates a dichotomy. This dichotomy illuminates the dramatic irony Thomas presents because only the reader is able to discern the aggrieved, but dependent, relationship between sovereign and subject. Thomas recognizes that despite his objection to war, like Einstein and Gandhi, he desires to live in a land fighting for the light. He, thus, beseeches Great Britain to utilize her “fierce tears” or violent destruction to benefit him.

The concluding two lines reiterate the opening plea. Thomas identifies “gentle” with “father” and “curse,” indicating their superior class despite their imperfections. The final line repeats the plea “rage, rage” for the fourth time. The repetition of the word “rage” indicates the poet’s desire to emphasize the importance of this fight. The poem concludes with the word “light,” leaving the reader with the positive images of liberation and freedom worth fighting for.

The events of WWII clearly influenced the composition of “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.” The poem illuminates the war’s effect on the author and the world. Thomas, thus, completes the themes of liberation and freedom that weave throughout the poem as it applies to the different populations and reinforces the need to “rage” or fight against the extinguishing of the “light.”

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