



A very popular poet during his lifetime, Dylan Thomas was a Welshman born in Swansea on the 27th of October, 1914.

Put differently, Thomas was born about three months after “The Guns of August” started booming, ushering in World War One.

Although he only wrote in English, Dylan Thomas became one of the most significant Welsh poets of the 20th century. He remains popular in the 21st century.

Living in London, at the time of the Blitz (in WWII), Thomas’ personal life was about as tempestuous for him as the Blitz was for England. A heavy drinker, he was also a womanizer (even though he married Caitlin Macnamara in 1937 and remained married to her until he died in 1953).

Although he was of military age, when WWII erupted, Thomas had a health problem—asthma—which kept him out of service. Instead of fighting, he spent the war-years writing scripts—including propaganda works—for BBC radio and for Strand Films.

After the war, between 1945-1949, he continued working with the BBC and “either wrote, narrated or took part in over a hundred BBC radio programs.” (See “Dylan’s Life - The 1940s,” at the official Dylan Thomas website.)

When it came to poetry, Thomas created poems which have their own rhythm and their own imagery (because he often wrote in free verse). One of his most-famous works—“Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night”—is a villanelle (a poetic form with nineteen lines of verse, including refrains where entire lines are repeated).

The BBC gives us this technical description of a villanelle:

A verse form with 19 lines, including two repeating refrains which appear at the end of every three-line stanza and then as a rhyming couplet at the end of the poem.

Since Dylan Thomas often used free verse, the poetic form he chose for “Do Not Go Gentle” is unusual for him. Yet, it really fits the message of the work in which he urges his father to resist—with all his might—a death which seems certain to soon occur.

If Thomas wants his father to push-back against death, why does he call the “night”—which likely symbolizes death—“good?” And what’s up with these two extremes—“curse, bless, me now”—in the last stanza?

*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.*

Here are some curse-and-bless issues to think about:

- Is Dylan urging his father (who died on December 16, 1952) to curse death but bless his son before he dies?
- Is he saying that if his father dies, he will—in effect—be cursing his son?
- Can one curse and bless at the same time?
- What do we make of a line which starts with “curse” but ends with “pray?”

Setting aside his obvious genius—and ability to create works of magic with English words—here’s something else which this poem makes us consider. Dylan Thomas himself had a very unhealthy lifestyle. Was that his

way of raging “against the dying of the light” and not going “gentle into that good night?”

The poem seems to be about the end of life—about facing death when a person is old—but Dylan Thomas died just two weeks after his 39th birthday (following a period of intense work and heavy drinking).

He was in America—to make appearances and attend rehearsals for his “play for voices,” called *Under Milk Wood* (which starred Richard Burton, as the First Voice, in both radio and film productions)—when the end came for him.

People who saw the rising-star poet, during the last part of his life, thought his behavior was self-destructive. The facts, however—stemming mostly from his autopsy report which shows that pneumonia was Dylan’s cause of death—suggest that he may have died of neglect (including an inappropriate dose of medically prescribed-and-administered morphine which exacerbated his breathing difficulties).

A physician—Dr. Milton Feltenstein—treated the Welshman in his New York hotel room (Dylan was staying at the Chelsea):

Dr Feltenstein administered ACTH, a steroid, but Thomas was still in pain from his gastritis and gout. The doctor returned and gave the poet more of the same medication.

Thomas slept again but it was a fitful sleep and he complained of visions. Feltenstein was summoned for a third time and gave Thomas a sedative.

According to hospital records, the sedative was half a grain of morphine sulphate; an abnormally high dose, and dangerous given his breathing complications. It was also unusual to administer such a drug to alleviate gastritis and gout.

Feltenstein again left the hotel, but soon afterwards Thomas fell unconscious. An ambulance arrived and took him to St Vincent's Hospital. The medical notes state he arrived in a coma at 1.58am.

Thomas never regained consciousness. He died on Monday 9 November 1953 at the hospital.

Shortly after his death rumors of the possible cause started to fly, with many incorrectly assuming it was largely alcohol related. (See “Did hard-living or medical neglect kill Dylan Thomas?,” at BBC Arts, published November 8, 2013.)

Part of the reason for these rumors is the partial release of Dylan’s medical records (which would be disallowed under 21st-century privacy rules):

At the time of his admission to the hospital, Thomas's medical notes stated that there was an impression of “alcoholic encephalopathy,” or damage to the brain by alcohol. News of this was released at the time, and no doubt helped to embed the myth that the poet ultimately died because of his drinking.

However, the post mortem tells a different story. The primary cause of Thomas's death was pneumonia, with pressure on the brain and a fatty liver given as contributing factors. (See the BBC's “Hard-living or medical neglect...”)

According to the BBC, no one had diagnosed a chest-infection or severe breathing difficulties:

Dr Feltenstein can be considered neglectful in the care of his patient. His failure to diagnose any sort of chest infection or to recognise the severity of Thomas's breathing difficulties make the injections of morphine - which only served to depress the poet's breathing further - seem all the crueller. (See the BBC's “Hard-living or medical neglect...”)

Current Thomas biographies reach a similar conclusion:

Paul Ferris is the author of “Dylan Thomas: The Biography.” In it he suggests that the true cause of death “was almost certainly the half-grain of morphine, which caused the breathing difficulties, deprived the brain of oxygen and set in train the fatal process. This was Feltenstein’s fault, and he and the hospital kept quiet about it.”

David N Thomas also criticizes the actions of both [Elizabeth] Reitell [Brinnin’s administrative assistant] and Thomas’s tour manager [John] Brinnin, and their failure in their duty of care to their client.

In addition to working the poet hard for the productions of “Under Milk Wood,” David N Thomas criticizes Reitell’s delay in calling for an ambulance as Thomas slipped into unconsciousness at the hotel.

He also calls into question the actions of Brinnin, who was a largely absent figure during Thomas’s final trip to New York. Brinnin had been shocked by the poet’s appearance at the final rehearsal for “Under Milk Wood,” but chose not to cancel any of Thomas’s appointments despite the obvious ill health he was suffering.

In “Fatal Neglect,” David N Thomas surmises: “John Brinnin was well-known for many things. Yet somehow, he managed never to be known as the man who helped send a famous poet to an early and avoidable death, and made a lot of money from doing so.” (See the BBC’s “Hard-living or medical neglect...”)

Dylan’s remains were buried in Wales, at the graveyard of St. Martin’s Church (in Laugharne). To mark the death of his friend, Vernon Watkins—another Welsh poet—wrote what became a famous obituary. Later, remarking on Dylan’s loss, Watkins said:

He was killed by his own mask, by the grimace which his entertainment produced, by a kind of disgust at the popularity of what he was not.

Richard Burton, also a Welshman who so beautifully voiced the words of Dylan Thomas, once commented on what it was like for a person to struggle with alcoholism. "It is," observed Burton during a Dick Cavett interview (in July of 1980), "no laughing matter."

Caitlin, who moved to Italy after her husband's funeral, survived him by four decades. She found sobriety in her later years and died, in Catania (Sicily), at the age of 80 (in 1994). She is buried next to Dylan at St. Martin's Church.

Although more than 100 years have now passed since the birth of Dylan Thomas, the words of this 20th-century poet still resonate with 21st-century readers. "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night" regularly appears on lists of most-favorite poems.

Credits:

Image of Dylan Thomas, at Gotham Book Shop, during his 1952 tour of America. Photo by Gabriel Hackett, [online via Wikimedia Commons](#). Fair use for educational purposes.

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