
Poetic Analysis on “Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night”

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Abstract: Dylan Thomas’s most famous poem “*Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night*” is known by its first line and its poetic form villanelle. This poem was Dylan Thomas written for his father when his father was seriously ill. Dylan wrote this poem to urge his father to fight against death. This paper focuses mainly on the poetic analysis on the poem. The poem “*Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night*” was analyzed from the perspective of poetic elements of poetry. The paper analyzed the poem from its images, metaphor and simile, symbol, rhyme and meter, alliteration and consonance, euphonies and cacophonies, and also its structure. Those analyses are general and rough, and profound analyses are needed.

Keywords: Dylan Thomas, Death, Elements of Poetry

1. Introduction

Dylan Marlais Thomas was a Welsh poet and writer. He was born on October 27, 1914 in a coastal city in south Wales, Swansea and died on November 9, 1953 in New York. He quitted school at 16 for poor academic performances in some subjects because he favored English and reading and neglected other subjects. He got known after he won a poem contest in a newspaper. He won fame early as poet when he was only twenty years old. He published his first book *Eighteen Poems*. He published other collections of poems in succession. His sudden death at the age of thirty nine was caused by his drinking eighteen glasses of whiskey.

Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night was written by Dylan Thomas to urge his dying father to fight against death. Dylan’s father, D. J. Thomas was a grammar teacher in a Swansea grammar school. D. J. Thomas has a great influence on Dylan Thomas. When Dylan was very little, his father often read Shakespeare’s poems for him and other children, and Dylan could read Shakespeare’s poem when he was only four years old. D. J. Thomas felt sullen over his whole life and he thought his talent unrecognized. D. J. Thomas was eloquent and towered the average in intelligence, but he could not stand out for his sharp words. D. J. Thomas was very strong, energetic and militant for the most part of his life, but he became amiable and genial when he got ill. Dylan’s father became very different and this was the reason why

Dylan urged his father to burn for life, to fight against death before he passed away.

Thomas's verbal style played against strict verse forms, such as in the villanelle “*Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night*”. His images were carefully ordered in a patterned sequence, and his major theme was the unity of all life, the continuing process of life and death and new life that linked the generations. Thomas's poetry is notable for its musicality. This paper aims to analyze this poem from the perspective of the elements of poetry and stylistics.

“*Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night*” is a villanelle. A villanelle is a nineteen-line poem of fixed form consisting of five tercets and a final quatrain on two rhymes, with the first and third line of the first tercet repeated alternately as a refrain closing the succeeding stanzas and joined as the final couplet of the quatrain [10].

This paper is divided into four parts. The first chapter serves as a brief introduction to the background information of Dylan Thomas, the writing background of the poem, and the writing style of Dylan. In chapter two, it examines the poem from the perspective of imagery, metaphor and simile, symbol, rhyme and meter, and sound and meaning. Chapter three adds two detail analyses on the poem, and it explores the poem from the perspective of persuasive essay and some lexical usage analysis. The conclusion part generally gives the main discoveries of the essay.

2. Analysis on the Poem from Elements of Poetry

Poetry is a multidimensional language. Poetry is a kind of language communicating experience, and it has at least four dimensions including intelligence, senses, emotions and imagination. Poetry achieves its dimensions through drawing on a number of language resources which are not peculiar to poetry. Among them are connotation, imagery, metaphor, symbol, paradox, irony, allusion, sound repetition, rhythm and pattern. This chapter mainly analyzes the poem "*Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night*" from some elements of poetry.

2.1. Imagery

Experience comes to us through the senses [1]. There are many different categories of sense experience. Imagery can be represented through language of sense experience. Generally, there are mainly seven kinds of imageries: visual imagery, auditory imagery, olfactory imagery, gustatory imagery, tactile imagery, organic imagery and kinesthetic imagery. Among them, visual imagery occurs most frequently in poetry. The imagery occurs mostly in the poem "*Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night*" is visual imagery.

In the second tercet, the speaker tells that "wise men at their end know dark is right, /Because their words had forked no lightning". Forked lightning is a kind of lightening that is in the line of light that divides into several smaller lines near the bottom. In this stanza, the speaker points out that wise men's attitude towards death: they know death is inevitable and they are wise enough to continue to leave a mark in their life by "their words" before they could influence this world. The words of the wise men haven't splitting the lightning reveals their failure to make some influence on the world.

In the third tercet, "Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright/Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay" also express their rage against death. The image "last wave by" vividly describes the last wave is about to crash the shore or die. The bay is green for it is brimmed with life, plants, and seaweeds. Last wave can be interpreted as this: the recent generation is like the wave about to crash onto the shore. When these good men are about to leave this world, they rage against death by "crying" their deeds may have danced brightly.

2.2. Metaphor and Simile

In the first line of the first tercet, the poet uses night as a metaphor for death. Then "close of day" and "dying of the light", the synonymous phrases of night are repeated in the next two lines of the first tercet. Night is the end of one's life and it represents death, while day is the lifespan of one's life and it represents life. In the second tercet, the metaphor of night as death continues, but this time the poet uses dark which is closely related to night as a metaphor for death. In the third tercet, "the sun in flight" is a part of the extended

metaphor in which day is a circle of life and the flying of sun represents the bright and beautiful part of life. "The sun in flight" also represents life is short and transient.

In the fifth tercet, the poet uses a simile in the second line of this tercet: "Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay". When those grave men are near death, though they could not see clearly, they still try their best to see the world. The poet compares blind eyes of grave men to meteors rather than extinguishing candles. This comparison is ill-matched, and the poet uses this ill-matched comparison on purpose to represent grave men's attitude towards death: though they know they will die, they still see with twinkle in their eyes and see as much as they can before death.

2.3. Symbol

A symbol is a kind of image, for it exceeds the image in the richness of its connotations [10]. Sometimes it's difficult to distinguish image and symbol, but generally an image means only what it is and a symbol means what it is and something more, too [1]. In the poem "*Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night*", the poet employs many symbols.

"Good night" in the first line of the first tercet symbolizes death or afterlife. At first readers may get puzzled when they read the apostrophe line "Do not go gentle into that good night", readers are confused that who the addressee is and why the speaker asks him to do that. The poet reveals the addressee is "my father" in the last tercet. It can be easily understood that the speaker's father is dying and he wants to urge his father to fight against death. "Close of day" symbolizes end of life and "light" in the "dying of light" symbolizes life, spirit or soul.

"The sad height" in the last tercet symbolizes the closeness of death. After listing many different groups of people on the verge of death who fight against death rather than just accept their death obediently, the poet finally mentions his father who is standing at the metaphorical mountain which is the edge of the mortal world.

2.4. Rhyme and Meter

"*Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night*" is written in a villanelle form. Villanelles were traditional poetic form of French. They became popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s in English-language poetry. A villanelle is divided into nineteen lines which comprises five tercets and a quatrain. Usually, a villanelle is written in iambic pentameter and so is "*Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night*".

The rhyme scheme of this poem is ABA ABA ABA ABA ABA ABAA. There are only two rhymes and there are two refrains. The refrains, the first line and the third line, are repeated four times in the poem: first line is repeated in the last line of the second and forth tercet and the last-to-second line of the sixth tercet, and the third line are repeated in the third line of the third and fifth tercet and the last line in the sixth tercet.

The use of repetition of the two refrains "Do not go gentle into that good night" and "Rage, rage against the dying of the

light” is one effective device. The two refrains work musical miracles in the poem and keep emphasizing and deepening the theme of the poem [10]. The first and third lines of the opening tercet alternate as a refrain in the four following tercets and the last two lines of the concluding quatrain. Such a demanding restriction requires poetic ingenuity to maintain a meaningful expression. Here the form provides the poet with a suitable framework for his four characteristic types-wise, good, wild, and grave men-and enables him to equate these types with his father’s character. This repetition expresses one of the major themes: one should not accept death without resistance.

2.5. Sound and Meaning

Poetry arranges words into patterns of sounds like music. The music of poetry may not be able to mean very much on its own, but it can certainly help make the poem’s meaning.

2.5.1. Alliteration and Consonance

Alliteration is the repetition of the initial consonant cluster in stressed syllables [8].

In the first line “Do not go gentle into that good night”, the alliteration here is used to call attention to the words go and good which carry the alliteration, thus giving great emphasis to these words. Night symbolizes death here. Night has a negative connotation, and the poet adds an adjective good to balance this kind of negative effect.

In the fifth tercet “Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight/ Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay”, the repeated /b/ sound echoes in the sense or meaning conveyed by the two lines. The connection among these three words forms a contrast: though grave men are losing their faculty of sight, they still use what they have to rage against death. The employment of alliteration here emphasizes the theme of the poem: do not accept death tamely.

Consonance is the repetition of the final consonant cluster in stressed syllables [8].

In the concluding quatrain “Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray”, the repetition of /s/ sound constituted consonance which effectively unites the key words of this line and reinforces the mood of the speaker to urge his father to fight against death.

2.5.2. Euphonies and Cacophonies

The poet can reinforce meaning through sound by choose and group sounds into smooth and pleasant sounding (euphonious) or rough and harsh sounding (cacophonous) [1]. When the sounds of words work together in harmony, they create euphony which pleases both mind and ear. When the sounds of words do not work together, they create a harsh, discordant effect called cacophony.

There is a large amount of cacophonous consonant /r/ in this poem.

Rage, rage against...

Though wise men know at their end know dark is right.

Because their words had forked no lightning...

Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

Many monosyllabic words are ended with plosives like /d/, /t/ and /k/. The plosives are harsher and sharper in their effect.

E.g. That, night, old, light, end, dark, right, bright, wild, blind, sad, height.

All these kinds of cacophonous sounds cause a severe feeling. One of the most obvious sound features of this poem is that the poet uses a great amount of “long” vowels or diphongs like /ai/ and /ei/.

E.g. /ai/ night, dying, light, lightening, crying, wild, blinding, blind, eyes, like /ei/ day, age, rave, wave, frail, wage, against, late, grave, blaze.

These “long” vowels appear frequently in this poem. Through these vowels readers could feel that the speaker’s voice cracked with grief. Besides, the end rhymes of this poem are /ait/ and /ei/. These two rhymes link the key word of this poem “night” and “day”, and “light” and “night”. They also echo the life and death theme of this poem. The sound repetition responds to the theme of the poem, and the sound and meaning of “rave”, “rage” and “against” shows the rebellious attitude toward death.

In the last tercet, the sibilance in the line: “Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray” feels softer and gentler. The speaker is pleading his father not to be surrendered to death and fight against death.

3. Analysis on the Poem from Other Aspects

On top of poetic analysis, some details of the poem could be analyzed from other aspects. The poem is written in a persuasive essay, and some words usage is worth analyzing further.

3.1. Persuasive Structure

This poem is written in a persuasive structure: the first tercet puts forward a statement, the second tercet to the fifth tercet apply it into specific situations, and the last tercet is the conclusion.

In this poem, the poet uses deductive reasoning. The poet puts forward his statement in the first tercet: old age should not accept death passively and they should fight against death. Then the poet illustrates different people’s attitudes towards death when they are near death. The poet describes wise men, good men, wild men and grave men’s attitudes when they are faced with death. All these men do not accept death submissively and they all rage against death. The poet’s premise is that the speaker’s father has merits like these men or his father is one of these men, so at the conclusion part the speaker urges his father to act like these men and rage against death.

3.2. On Gentle

The first line of this poem “Do not go gentle into that good night” is a best example of deviant phrase structure from stylistics. In this sentence, the phrase “go gentle” seems to be

a lapse. According to daily usage, the adjective is not proper to be used in a position where an adverbial phrase should be used.

Actually this usage is on purpose. The line is the poem's title and it is repeated six times throughout the whole poem. The deviant use of gentle here draws much attention to the line itself, and makes the reader pause to think seriously about the meaning of the line. If gentle is substituted by gently, there would be nothing unusual and the meaning of the line would not register in the mind of the reader. Thus the communicative effect of the line is greatly reduced [8].

4. Conclusion

This paper mainly analyzes the poem "*Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night*" from the perspective of elements of poem, and this paper also analyzes the poem on some details.

Firstly, imageries in this poem is all visual imagery, and the poet uses "lightening" and "wave" imagery to show the attitudes of wise men and good men towards death when they are faced with death. Then some rhetorical devices like metaphor, simile and oxymoron are employed in this poem. A series of symbols are employed in this poem like "night" "light" and "sad height", etc. The poem is written in a very specific form, the villanelle. The rhyme scheme of a villanelle very special: there are only two end rhymes and two refrains are repeated alternately. On the phonetic level, alliteration and consonance are used to emphasize some key words, and euphonies like "long" vowels are employed abundantly to enforce the emotion of the poem. Secondly, the structure of the poem is a persuasive structure, for the poem is written in a deductive form. The deviant use of gentle is analyzed from the perspective of stylistics.

Despite the findings presented above, this paper still has some limitations. For instance, it is roughly based on the elements of poetry level, lacking detail analysis, like the

exact meaning of "wave" symbol. Hopefully, symbol meaning and phonetic level can be analyzed for further study.

In brief, the analysis of the poem presents main elements of poetry, which contribute to readers' comprehension and appreciation of this poem and poetry. Also, it helps readers comprehend in a general way and provide some specific perspective for analyzing poetry. It's worth everyone's attention and needs further research.

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