

LESSON NOTE ON LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH WEEK 8

SUBJECT: Literature-in-English
TOPIC: Non-African Poetry; "Do Not Gentle Into That Good Night" by Dylan Thomas
CLASS: SS2
WEEK: 8

INTRODUCTION

This poem was written in 1947, two years after the Second World War. It is believed that the theme of death and struggle that pervades this poem is reflective of the chaotic events and the sadness that was an integral part of the first 40 years of the 20th century, especially between 1914 and 1945. It is believed that the poet wrote the poem to motivate his aged father, David John Thomas, who at the time was gradually losing his eyesight and was suffering from a great number of debilitating diseases.

The poem revolves around death and different reactions to it. The poetic persona urges an unknown listener not to accept death or defeat easily, rather, almost the speaker asks that people should struggle and fight for the right to live at all costs.

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

Lines 1-3

In line 1, the poet begins with the statement 'Do not gentle into that good night', the good night carries the literal (ordinary) meaning of sleep. This is because most of the time when one says good night, it is either the person speaking or the person being spoken to is about to sleep or would soon sleep. However, in this poem, 'good night' has a metaphorical meaning. Lines 2-3 give a hint to what the poet means when the poetic persona says: 'Old age should burn and rave at close of day/rage, rage against the dying of the light'. From the foregoing, 'good night', in line 1 and 'close of day' in line 2, just as they denote the end of day could metaphorically refer to the end of life. The 'dying of the light' refers to end of life. This entails that metaphorically, being alive is the same with a bright day or a bright light. The poetic persona is urging those that he is speaking to not to move so easily from that 'bright light' into a 'dying light'. In a nutshell, he is saying that people should not just see death as a phase of life that is to be expected or accepted as a ***fait accompli*** (something that has been done and cannot be changed). They must at all costs, fight for the right to live and enjoy life to the fullest. In other words, he insists that humans should face with anger and defiance and that they should 'rage against the dying light'.

Lines 4-9

In these lines, the poetic persona begins to refer to specific sets of people in an attempt to buttress his point that death should be resisted at all costs. The first people he refers to are the 'wise men'. The 'wise men' is a general reference to both men and women who are intelligent enough to assert their rights to self-determination by resisting death. In line 5, the point that the poetic persona is making is that such

humans who have not even made a noticeable impact during their journey through the 'road of life', whose 'words have produced no lightning' are wise because they 'do not gentle into the good night'. 'Forked lightning' in the literal meaning is a type of lightning that divides into smaller lines of lightning near the ground. At the figurative level of interpretation, these 'smaller lines of lightning represent enduring legacies. Therefore, despite the fact that these people lacked a tangible legacy or made a significant mark on the sands of time, this category of humans do not readily and easily yield to the stranglehold of death. In lines 7-9, the reference shifts from the 'wise men' to the 'good men'. The good men are also not fascinated with the thought of dying. They are also defiant as they see death as an obstacle, obstructing them from enjoying the dividends of spheres of human activities, legacies, which 'might have danced in a green bay' (line 8). The poetic persona talks about how these 'good men' 'rage against the dying of the light'.

Lines 10-12

The poet in these lines, moved from 'wise men' to 'wild men'. 'Wild' in this context can be understood in terms of being adventurous, brash, extroverted and spontaneous. 'Wild men who caught and sang the sun in light', which could mean that these men seized the day'. By this use of words, the poetic persona could be talking about people who live their every moment like it is their last.

Lines 13-15

The poetic persona talks about the 'Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight'. 'Grave men' here could mean very old people, who though advanced in age, still wanted to continue living. Their nearness to the end gives them a 'blinding sight'. 'Grave' apart from referring to a place where people are buried, also refers to people who are focused or who seem to be worried or sad about something. A man close to his death would obviously be grave in this sense. The poetic persona is talking about grave men who even though they are close to death, like the meteors (a piece of rock or metal that burns and glows brightly in the sky as it falls from outer space in the earth's surface) falling through earth's surface, they still fight for the right to live even if their time is almost up. They 'rage, rage against the dying of the light'.

Lines 16-19

This stanza is the conclusion of the poem. It is in this stanza that the poetic persona makes use of the pronoun 'you' to refer to that person that is being spoken to and whom the poem is about. The poet's father, David John Thomas, is the person the poetic person addresses directly. He pleads with him to face death with defiance. At the time, Dylan wrote this poem, he was watching his father slowly fade away due to his sickness and the sight stung him. This expressed in the poetic persona's anguished plea in the final stanza. He understands that his father is on the brink of death but passionately pleads with him to fight against losing his life; to try and extend his life, even if only for a few moments. In line 17, the poetic persona tells his father, 'curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.' The poetic persona knows that at this stage, in the struggle between life and death his father most likely want to utter curses, because of

the excruciating pain that he has been through .in the same breath, he also asks his father to turn these curses into blessings. In line 18, the poetic persona begs his father not to go 'gentle into that good night' and to 'rage against the dying of the light'. In lines 18 and 19, the poetic persona combines the refrains that he has been using alternatively in all the other stanzas in this last stanza. This could also mean that his father has all the characteristics mentioned in the different stanzas. That is, his biological father is wise, good, wild and grave. However, it should be noted, also that father in this context is both symbolic and universal, as he refers to people all over the world without respect to background, age, sex or status. This is because death is a universal occurrence.

SETTING

This poem was written in Italy but it does not have a physical setting into which it can be situated. There is no particular place described in the play neither is there any time mentioned in the poem. The setting is more psychological than physical.

It is perhaps intentional that this poem adopts a psychological setting and not a physical one, this is because a physical setting might limit the poem to a culture, a people or a time, while the psychological setting creates a poem without the limitations of a physical setting. Thus, the thematic preoccupations of the poem can fit into any time and any place because issues which revolve around death are universal.