

Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night



SUMMARY

Don't calmly and peacefully welcome death. The elderly should passionately fight against death as their lives come to an end. Resist, resist the oncoming darkness of your death.

Smart people at the end of their lives understand that death is inevitable—but, because they haven't yet said anything startling or revolutionary, nothing powerful enough to shock the world like a bolt of lightning, refuse to peacefully accept death.

Good people, seeing the last moments of their lives pass by like a final wave, mourn the fact that they weren't able to accomplish more, because even small actions might have moved about joyously in a "green bay"—that is, could have made a difference in the world. So they resist, resist the oncoming darkness of their deaths.

Daring people who have lived in the moment and embraced life to the fullest, metaphorically catching a joyful ride across the sky on the sun, realize too late that the sun is leaving them behind, and that even they must die—but they refuse to peacefully accept death.

Serious people, about to die, realize with sudden clarity that even those who have lost their sight can, like meteors, be full of light and happiness. So they resist, resist the oncoming darkness of their deaths.

And you, dad, are close to death, as if on the peak of a mountain. Burden and gift me with your passionate emotions, I pray to you. Do not go peacefully into the welcoming night of death. Resist, resist the oncoming darkness of your death.

not go gentle into that good night." They resist death, trying to win more time and more life. The speaker treats this as a model for other people to emulate. The speaker wants people to "rage, rage" against death: they should "burn and rave"—fight fiercely and bravely—as their lives approach the end.

One might wonder, though, why the speaker wants people to fight against death if it is ultimately inevitable. The speaker answers this question by describing a series of different people—"wise men," "good men," "wild men," and "grave men"—who *do* fight against death. When these people are confronted with death, they realize that they haven't accomplished everything they want to—and they fight for more time. For instance, the "wise men" in lines 4-6, realize that "their words" have not "forked [...] lightning." In other words, wise as they may be, they haven't changed the world or created new knowledge. They fight against death so that they can have more time and make a bigger impact on the world.

Similarly, the "wild men" that the speaker describes in lines 10-12, have spent their lives in a joyous and reckless fashion: they "caught and sang the sun in flight." But, when they face death, they realize that that they "grieved it on its way." In other words, they realize that they have regrets about the frivolous way they spent their time on Earth. Thus they fight for more time so that they can do something more worthwhile.

In both cases, then, death helps these very different people realize that their lives are precious—and that they need to use their time on earth as best they can. Death offers a kind of corrective, helping them reconnect with what really matters in life. So even though death is inevitable, it's worth fighting bravely against, because doing so helps reveal what really matters in life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19



THEMES



DEATH AND DEFIANCE

In "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," the speaker acknowledges that death is inevitable—everyone dies, sooner or later. But that doesn't mean that people should simply give up and give in to death. Instead, the speaker argues that people should fight, fiercely and bravely, against death. Indeed, the speaker suggests, death helps to clarify something that people too often forget—that life is precious and worth fighting for.

"Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" tries to teach its readers how to face death. It starts with a basic fact: death is inevitable. As the speaker says in line 4, "wise men at their end know dark is right." In other words, they recognize that they can't escape from death. But that doesn't mean that these "wise men" simply *accept* death. Instead, the speaker, notes they "do



FAMILY, GRIEF, AND OLD AGE

In the final [stanza](#) of "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," the speaker suddenly switches things up. Although he's spent most of the poem talking in general terms—about "wise men" and "good men," among others—he suddenly addresses someone specific: his "father." This changes the way one reads the poem: it feels deeply personal. The poem offers universal advice about how to face death with dignity, but it is also an intimate and heartfelt message from a son to his dying father.

For most of the poem, it's not clear who the speaker is addressing. The speaker talks about death in general terms,

discussing how different groups of people—"wise men," "good men," "wild men," etc.—come to realize that life is precious and that they should fight to use their time on earth as well as possible. This makes the poem feel universal: its advice about how to face death with dignity applies to everyone.

But in the poem's final stanza, the speaker reveals that he or she is addressing his or her "father." The poem feels much less universal after that moment. Instead, it seems like Dylan Thomas, the poet, is talking directly to his father, trying to offer him encouragement as he faces death. Instead of being a poem about death in general, it is a poem about family, grief and old age.

The challenge for the reader will be to balance the two faces the poem presents. The reader might wonder whether it is really a universal poem or more specific and personal. But the speaker delays revealing that the poem is dedicated to his or her "father" until the very end of the poem for a reason. The speaker wants to give the reader space to identify with the poem, to think about how it applies to *their* life, before situating in the specific, personal context of the speaker's own life. In other words, it is best to think of the poem as both specific and universal at the same time.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*Do not go ...
... of the light.*

The first three lines of "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" establish the poem's themes and its form. This is a poem about death, and it makes a passionate argument about how people can face death with dignity.

The speaker lays out the essence of this argument in the poem's opening lines. He or she doesn't think that people should "go gentle into that good night." The speaker uses this phrase as a metaphor for dying. That is, the speaker compares the acceptance of death to the peaceful transition from day to night. The speaker argues *against* this acceptance, saying that people should always choose light, or life, over the darkness of death. The word "good" in the phrase "good night" is ironic: the speaker definitely doesn't think death is a good thing! The strong [consonance](#) in the line—the /n/ and /t/ sounds in "Do not go gentle into that good night"—underscores the speaker's bristling, fierce passion: his or her fighting spirit.

So, in the poem's first line, the speaker says that people shouldn't just give up when they face death; the speaker

doesn't want them to be "gentle" about it. Instead, as the speaker clarifies in the next two lines, he or she wants people to fight bravely and fiercely against death. Old people should "burn and rave" when they face death—which the speaker calls "the close of day" (using the same metaphor as the previous line: death is like darkness).

The speaker emphasizes the passion that he or she wants to see by using another metaphor: the speaker wants "old age" to "burn." In other words, the speaker wants old people to be as passionate as fire when they fight against death. The speaker underlines this in line 3, where he or she tells them to "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." The repetition of the word "rage"—an instance of [epizeuxis](#)—underscores the intensity that the speaker hopes to cultivate against death, here represented through another metaphor that uses darkness and light: "the dying of the light." Further, the [assonant](#) long /i/ sound that links together "dying" and "light" gets at one of the problems the poem will wrestle with: no matter how hard one fights, death is still inevitable. "[D]ying" and "light" are linked together.

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is a [villanelle](#)—a strictly patterned kind of [formal poetry](#). Villanelles are written in [tercets](#) and follow an interlocking, repetitive structure. The first stanza of a villanelle is very important because its first and third lines establish the two [refrains](#) that will repeat throughout the poem. Here, those two lines are "Do not go gentle into that good night" and "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." This specific villanelle is also written in [iambic pentameter](#) and follows the standard [rhyme scheme](#) for a villanelle, ABA.

"Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" is one of the most famous villanelles in English; it's often the poem that people offer as an example of the form. But every so often the speaker's passion gets a little out of hand, and the poem slips out of its own boundaries. For instance, a [spondee](#) opens line 3 instead of an iamb: "Rage, rage." The speaker's passion overflows here, introducing a little strain into the poem's otherwise masterful form. Elsewhere, the speaker's control is fully on display: for example, each of the poem's first three lines are [end-stopped](#), which makes them feel all the more definite, all the more full of conviction.

LINES 4-6

*Though wise men ...
... that good night.*

In the poem's first [stanza](#), the speaker makes a strong, direct argument: people shouldn't peacefully accept death; they should fight against it, passionately. In lines 4-15, the speaker provides a series of examples of different kinds of people who fight death. The speaker also explores their motivations for fighting death. Each stanza has a [paralle](#) structure: it introduces a group of people, describes their regret—often in highly [metaphorical](#) terms—and then describes how they fight

back against death.

In stanza 2, the speaker talks about “wise men”—that is, people who seem to have a deep understanding of life. If anyone could be counted on to live their lives fully, one might think it’d be these people. And indeed, these “wise men” do recognize something fundamental: that “dark is right.” In other words, they know that they have to die, that death itself is inevitable. (This is another metaphor that makes death into a kind of darkness). But they still “do not go gentle into that good night.” Even though death is inevitable, they don’t just give in to it.

These “wise men” have regrets about what they’ve accomplished—and they want to accomplish more. Their “words,” the speaker notes, have “forked no lightning.” Lightning here [symbolizes](#) for inspiration and change. Since lightning splits into branches or forks as it travels from a storm cloud to the ground, to “fork” lightning is to create or generate lightning. In other words, this line is saying that these “wise men” haven’t had a burst of inspiration that would change or transform the world, the way that lightning does. Nor have their words inspired anyone else. So they fight for more life, in the hope that such inspiration will come.

The poem is a [villanelle](#), and this stanza continues to uphold the restrictive formal requirements of the villanelle, following the [rhyme scheme](#) ABA. In keeping with the villanelle structure, the first line of the poem reappears as the last line of this stanza, line 6. It serves as a [refrain](#), but its function has also changed a little. In the first stanza, the refrain tells people what to do, how to face death. Here it describes what people *actually* do, how the “wise men” face death.

This stanza also introduces a new formal wrinkle: lines 4 and 5 are both [enjambéd](#), while line 6 is [end-stopped](#). Enjambment increases the tension and energy of the poem, as if it’s trying to capture a sense of vitality in the face of death. Each of the next 3 stanzas will follow the same pattern of enjambment and end-stop. The poem also continues to follow [iambic pentameter](#).

LINES 7-9

*Good men, the ...
... of the light.*

Like lines 4-6, lines 7-8 describe how a certain group of people respond to death. In this case, the speaker focuses on “Good men.” They are near death—“the last wave” has gone by them. The last wave is a [metaphor](#), it describes the last significant moments of life. All that the “good men” have in front of them is death. But they aren’t satisfied with their lives; they are “crying” out in pain and protest.

Their “frail deeds”—the weak or insignificant things these good men have done—could’ve been “bright”: that is, glorious or worthwhile. If their deeds had been “bright,” they would’ve “danced in a green bay”—in other words, they would’ve celebrated, been full of joy, and spent their time in a peaceful,

happy place.

But since their deeds weren’t bright, these men “Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” In other words, they fight passionately for more time, more life. Once again, the [refrain](#) line works a little differently than when it first appeared in the poem’s opening [stanza](#). Here it describes how the “Good men” actually act, rather than how one should act.

This stanza follows the pattern that began in the previous stanza: it’s written in iambic [pentameter](#) and [rhymed](#) ABA. The first two lines of the stanza are [enjambéd](#); the last one is [end-stopped](#). It’s all one sentence, and it has a roughly [parallel](#) structure to the previous stanza. Like lines 4-6, it introduces a group of people (“Good men”), describes their regrets, and then explains how they fight against death.

There are two new formal elements that pop up here. First, line 7 opens with a [spondee](#), “Good men.” This is a metrical variation the speaker likes and uses often: the extra stress mimics his or her passion, his or her dedication to the poem’s argument. And second, the speaker uses two [caesuras](#) in line 7 to highlight the phrase “the last wave by.” This phrase means that the “good men” are on the brink of death. But by bracketing it, the speaker suggests that it isn’t that important, at least not to the speaker. It’s as if the speaker would prefer to ignore the certainty of death and instead focus on the possibility of fighting against it.

LINES 10-12

*Wild men who ...
... that good night.*

In lines 10-12, the speaker introduces another group of people who regret the way they’ve spent their lives and want to fight back against death: “Wild men.” The “wild men” have lived lives full of passion and gusto; they “caught and sang the sun in flight.” This is a [metaphor](#): it describes how the “Wild men” have pursued pleasure and joy with reckless abandon, going so far as to fly with the sun. But they “learn, too late” that they’ve made a mistake: “they grieved it on its way.” In other words, they regret the time they’ve spent chasing the sun—and now they can’t get that time back.

This can be read as an [allusion](#) to the myth of Icarus. Using wings his father made for him, Icarus flies up toward the sun. However, because the wings are made of wax, they melt and Icarus plunges into the sea. Like the “Wild men,” Icarus ends up “griev[ing]” his own wild pursuit of the sun.

Note how, once again, the speaker uses [caesuras](#): he or she isolates the phrase “too late”—a phrase which suggests that the “Wild men” are out of time, facing death. But, by bracketing the phrase with caesuras, the speaker pointedly suggests that he or she wants to *ignore* death, as if setting it aside. The thing the speaker really cares about is the way that the “Wild men” *live* once they realize that they aren’t happy with their lives. In other words, the focus is on the way they resist death: the fact

that they “Do not go gentle into that good night.”

Along with these caesuras, this [stanza](#) is almost identical to the previous stanza in its form. It is written in iambic [pentameter](#), with a [spondee](#) in the first [foot](#) of line 10: “Wild men.” It is [rhymed](#) ABA and it closes with a [refrain](#) line, drawn once again from the poem’s first line—all in keeping with the poem’s [villanelle](#) form. It moves through the same sentence structure as the previous two stanzas, an instance of [parallelism](#): describing first the men’s regrets and then how they fight against death.

LINES 13-15

*Grave men, near ...
... of the light.*

In lines 13-15, the speaker introduces yet another group of people, “Grave,” or serious, “men.” As in the previous [stanzas](#), the speaker describes their regrets and their passionate fight for more life.

The “Grave men” have made an error of judgment—an error they only recognize when they are “near death.” They thought that “blind eyes” were dull and lifeless, that they had no light in them. But they suddenly “see with blinding sight” that they were wrong. In other words, these serious men have a powerful revelation. They learn that “blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay.”

This [simile](#) compares the intense expression in a blind person’s eyes to “meteors.” A meteor is a chunk of space rock burning up as it enters the Earth’s atmosphere—it’s extremely bright, even if it only lasts for a few moments. And “gay” here means full of joy and happiness. The meteors thus act as a [symbol](#) for a flash of intense feeling or inspiration, similar to the lightning in line 5. So, this simile implies that the “Grave men” have learned that “blind eyes” can be full of light and happiness. In other words, these men who have preferred seriousness over joy have learned that anyone can find happiness. They realize, almost too late, that they could have found happiness too.

The [assonance](#) between “blaze” and “gay,” and the [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) between “blind” and “blaze,” reinforce the grave men’s revelation. These effects connect happiness and light—and light, in turn, has symbolized life throughout the poem. The speaker now connects the symbolism of light with [blindness](#), a state usually associated with darkness. Thus (despite the prejudices of “Grave men”) even those who cannot literally see light can still be filled with the symbolic light of life, as long as they’re fully committed to living. Realizing this, these serious men “Rage, rage against the dying of the light”—fighting for more life so they can try to find happiness, too.

Like the previous three stanzas, this one is in [iambic pentameter](#) and is [rhymed](#) ABA. It has a [spondee](#) in the first foot of line 13 (“Grave men”), just like the first two lines of the previous two stanzas. And the speaker uses [caesuras](#) again to

bracket out an important phrase, in this case, “near death.” As in the previous stanza, by setting that phrase off to the side, the speaker suggests that his or her true focus is on the way that the “grave men” fight back *against* death.

This stanza also follows the same structure as the previous stanzas, starting with the “Grave men,” explaining their regrets, and then ending with a refrain that shows them fighting against death. (This is an example of [parallelism](#).) Further, its first two lines are [enjambéd](#) and its last line is [end-stopped](#), just like the previous three stanzas.

By this point, the poem has surveyed a wide range of people and a wide range of regrets—and finds that all of these people fight for more life, hoping to right their wrongs. In the stanza that follows, the speaker applies this information, using it to convince his or her own father to fight against death.

LINES 16-19

*And you, my ...
... of the light.*

The speaker spends lines 4-15 describing how different groups of people confront death. In lines 16-19, he or she changes things up. The speaker starts speaking directly to his or her “father,” who is facing death: he is “on the sad height.” (This is a [metaphor](#) for old age, for the point in one’s life when one confronts death.) The [enjambment](#) at the end of line 16 emphasizes how precarious his position is: the line break feels like a precipice, a break between life and death. The speaker wants his or her father to resist death with the same passion and intensity as the “Good men” or the “Grave men”—or anyone else.

In line 17, the speaker asks his or her father to “Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.” The speaker is encouraging his or her father to be “fierce,” passionate in his battle with death. The speaker doesn’t particularly care what form that passion takes, whether his or her father “curse[s]” or “bless[es]” him or her. Even though these are opposite acts, the speaker doesn’t explain the relationship between them—instead, he or she uses [parataxis](#), so they stack up, one on top of the other. Ultimately, the reader’s left to ponder the relationship between these two words.

This [stanza](#) closes the poem by following the standard formula for the end of a villanelle: it is four lines rhymed ABAA. As is standard for villanelles, the poem ends with its two [refrains](#) in order: line 1 and line 3 reappear as lines 18 and 19. The stanza continues to follow [iambic pentameter](#)—though the repetition of line 3 as line 19 reproduces the line’s opening spondee, “Rage, rage.” The poem ends, in other words, by reiterating the same point it’s been making all along: people shouldn’t just give into death, they should fight against death.

These lines are also strongly [end-stopped](#), underlining the speaker’s conviction. The speaker feels this advice to be urgent

and necessary, and has no doubts about it. But something important has changed in this iteration of the refrains. The speaker is no longer talking to the reader or giving general advice to anyone who will listen. Instead, the speaker is directly addressing his or her own father, trying to convince him to fight death. The poem thus ends on a very personal note.



SYMBOLS



LIGHT

In the poem, “light” is a [symbol](#) for life itself. In line 3, the speaker instructs the reader (and his or her father) to “rage, rage against the dying of the light.” In other words, the speaker wants the reader to fight against death, to try to preserve life. In contrast to life, the speaker thinks of death as a kind of darkness, or “night.” Though that night might appear “good,” an invitation to rest and peacefulness, the speaker urges the reader to look to the light.

More broadly, then, “light” serves as a symbol for the good and vibrant parts of life: joy, inspiration, and happiness. The light represents a *reason* to live. The speaker offers the light-filled symbols of lightning, bright water, and meteors, each of which is discussed in the following entries of this guide, as examples of these vibrant parts.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “light”
- **Line 9:** “light”
- **Line 15:** “light”
- **Line 19:** “light”



LIGHTNING

In this poem, lightning [symbolizes](#) inspiration, a flash of insight that could change the world, at least one's own life. In lines 4-5, the speaker notes that “wise men” realize that their “words had forked no lightning”—and so they fight against death. In other words, the “wise men” haven't had a big moment of inspiration, something that would allow them to use their wisdom to help themselves or others. They fight for life in the hope that they might get such a moment before they die.

As a flash of light against the darkness of the sky, lightning thus symbolizes a reason to live in the face of death. Furthermore, there's a sense of power, even violence associated with lightning. This calls back to the speaker's urge to “burn and rave” and to “Rage, rage” against death. In other words, the symbol of lightning harnesses the powerful vitality that the speaker urges one to adopt.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “lightning”



GREEN BAY

The “green bay,” a coastal inlet of water that appears green, [symbolizes](#) fulfillment and calm. In lines 7-8, the speaker describes

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay

These lines could be visualized quite literally as depicting old men standing along a beach or on a boat, watching the waves roll in to shore. Symbolically, the waters of this bay can be thought of as life itself, their brilliant green color capturing the light that symbolizes the will to live throughout the poem.

Thus, the “last wave” that passes the “Good men” represents their last chance at living fully. Yet all these men have in life are their “frail deeds,” or ineffectual actions. Still, they imagine they still have a chance to make those actions mean something, for their deeds to have symbolically “danced” in the water in the water like reflected light or choppy waves.

The “green bay” is a tranquil place, a place without anxiety or despair for those who have achieved something. The “Good men” wish that they could've enjoyed such fulfillment and calm during their lives, but they've been unable to do so. They have been good, but they haven't done anything truly great.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** “green bay”



METEORS

In the poem, meteors [symbolize](#) inspiration and an intensity of feeling, such as joy. In lines 13-14, the speaker describes how “Grave men, near death” suddenly realize that “Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay”—that is, joyful. Meteors, which are chunks of space rock falling through Earth's atmosphere, are bright; they flash across the sky as they burn up. In their brightness and speed, they represent thinking and feeling—the way that thoughts and emotions suddenly burst forward.

Additionally, “Grave men” puns on the word *grave*, which can also mean a tomb or burial site. This suggests that “Grave men” are people who have chosen seriousness as the only way to deal with the fact that they're going to die. They have given up on the possibility of happiness.

Yet even those cannot see light (which symbolizes life) can still be filled with it. That is, blind people's eyes can light up with the

joy of living. The possibility of happiness—contrary to the expectations of "Grave men"—is available to everyone who's willing to embrace it. Whereas serious men choose the certainty of a gravestone, those who choose life become like meteors—shining rocks flying through the sky. Realizing this, serious men regret their decisions and reject death, hoping to find happiness.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "meteors"



POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is very heavily [end-stopped](#). The end-stops throughout the poem help these lines convey the speaker's confidence and self-assurance, the passion and intensity with which he or she offers this advice.

The first three lines of the poem are all end-stopped, for example, as are the last three lines. These lines are definite, determined, full of bravery. They offer strong, passionate advice to the reader about how to face death: for example, "Old age should burn and rave at close of day." The final line in each stanza is strongly end-stopped as well. These end-stops firmly separate each stanza from its neighbors, emphasizing that they are each discrete, describing a single kind of person and their relationship with death. In other words, the end-stops in the center of the poem help to emphasize the structure of the poem, separating out its parts and creating a forceful sense of pacing.

Line 17 is a particularly evocative end-stop, since it is the only period to appear in the second line of a stanza. It ends with a full stop after the speaker has made a powerful request to his or her father. The strong end-stop here makes the line again feel definitive, full of passionate conviction.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "night,"
- **Line 2:** "day;"
- **Line 3:** "light."
- **Line 4:** "right,"
- **Line 6:** "night."
- **Line 8:** "bay,"
- **Line 9:** "light."
- **Line 10:** "flight,"
- **Line 11:** "way,"
- **Line 12:** "night."
- **Line 14:** "gay,"
- **Line 15:** "light."

- **Line 16:** "height,"
- **Line 17:** "pray."
- **Line 18:** "night."
- **Line 19:** "light."

ENJAMBMENT

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" employs [enjambment](#) sparingly; most of its lines are [end-stopped](#). There's no enjambment in the poem's first stanza at all, and its final three lines are also all end-stopped. Where enjambment does appear, it might seem more a product of the speaker trying to make the lines fit into the strict villanelle form. Some moments of enjambment are fairly evocative though—such as that between lines 5 and 6:

Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go ...

The wise men know that they have to die—that "dark is right"—but they are frustrated because "their words had forked no lightning"—in other words, because they didn't have a flash of insight that would change the world. So they refuse to die peacefully: they resist, fight back against death. The enjambment here underlines the wise men's sense of restlessness and frustration, which breaks out of one line and overflows into the next. The other enjambments may give a similar feeling—of frustration spilling out of the poem's strict form.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "they / Do"
- **Lines 7-8:** "bright / Their"
- **Lines 13-14:** "sight / Blind"

CAESURA

The poem has [caesuras](#) in almost every stanza, though they're not always all that important thematically. For instance, the comma between "Rage, rage" is simply grammatically required by the repetition of the word "rage." However, there are some caesuras that are important to the poem conceptually. Take a look, for example, at the caesuras in line:

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright ...

Line 11:

And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way ...

And line 13:

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight ...

Each of these caesuras brackets a phrase in which the speaker reveals the fact that the people they describe are about to die: “the last wave by,” “too late,” “near death.” The speaker does admit that the people he or she describes are dying or about to die, but does so only in a series of asides, in parenthetical phrases. This helps the reader get a sense of what the speaker’s true priorities really are. The speaker is less interested in dying and more concerned with the way people fight against it. By cutting these phrases off with caesuras, the speaker shows that he or she is more interested in life—in the way people live—than in death.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “ ”
- **Line 7:** “ ” “ ”
- **Line 9:** “ ”
- **Line 11:** “ ” “ ”
- **Line 13:** “ ” “ ”
- **Line 15:** “ ”
- **Line 16:** “ ” “ ”
- **Line 17:** “ ”
- **Line 19:** “ ”

ALLITERATION

The speaker uses [alliteration](#) throughout the poem. This alliteration often serves to reinforce the speaker’s passionate argument about death. For example, in line 1 (one of the poem’s [refrains](#), which reappears as lines 6, 12, and 18), the speaker uses an alliterative hard /g/ sound and /n/ sound:

Do not go gentle into that good night

The /g/ sound links together “go” “good night.” In doing so, it reinforces one of the line’s underlying ideas. To “go” is a [metaphor](#) for dying; and the “good night” the speaker describes is a metaphor for death. The word “good” is thus ironic: after all, the speaker definitely doesn’t think death is good. The /n/ sound, meanwhile, links “not” with “night,” reflecting that this night—a.k.a. death—is *not* a place people should want to go.

The speaker uses alliteration elsewhere to surprise and challenge the reader, to connect words that might otherwise seem unrelated. For example, line 14 has an alliterative /bl/ sound:

Blind eyes could blaze ...

The speaker is playing with an old cliché here: often people say that “blind eyes” are lightless or dim. The speaker says just the opposite is true: they can “blaze,” be full of fire and light. This is something the “grave men” realize only as they approach

death—and it makes them rethink the way that they’ve lived their lives. The /bl/ sound in the line emphasizes the grave men’s realization—and suggests that they’ve finally recognized something deeply true. Even though these words seem like they don’t belong together, the alliteration suggests that they really do, and in that way it challenges the reader and the “grave men” to examine their prejudices and assumptions about blindness.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “n,” “g,” “g,” “n”
- **Line 3:** “R,” “r”
- **Line 6:** “n,” “g,” “g,” “n”
- **Line 7:** “b,” “b”
- **Line 8:** “d,” “d”
- **Line 9:** “R,” “r”
- **Line 10:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 11:** “l,” “l”
- **Line 12:** “n,” “g,” “g,” “n”
- **Line 13:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 14:** “Bl,” “bl,” “b”
- **Line 15:** “R,” “r”
- **Line 18:** “n,” “g,” “g,” “n”
- **Line 19:** “R,” “r”

ASSONANCE

“Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” uses [assonance](#) to reinforce the passionate argument its speaker makes about death. The speaker argues that people should fight bravely against death—even though death is inevitable. The poem’s use of assonance underscores this argument. For instance, in line 3, one of the poem’s [refrains](#), there’s an assonant long /i/ sound:

Rage, rage against the dying of the light

The /i/ sound links together “dying” and “light.” This phrase, “dying of the light” is a [metaphor](#) for death. It works because “light” is often associated with positive, happy things—like joy or insight. If light dies, that means that all the best things in human life are evaporating, disappearing. By bringing the two words together, binding them with the same sound, the assonance suggests that death is inevitable—it’s part of the light. So the “rage” the speaker urges, earlier in the line, is ultimately ineffective—but it’s worth it anyway. This might seem like a [paradox](#), but the speaker goes on to explain why it’s not in the next several stanzas of the poem.

Later, in line 14, the speaker uses an assonant long /a/ sound to tie together two otherwise unrelated words:

Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay

One might not necessarily put these two words together.

“Blaze” describes something burning, bright and hot—like a fire. “Gay” describes something happy or joyful. The two words seem different, but they describe the same thing: the fire and the joy the “grave men” suddenly discover in “blind eyes.” The assonance helps the reader recognize the underlying link between these words. Assonance thus supports the poem’s metaphors and its argument—helping the speaker build a passionate case for fighting back against death.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “O,” “a,” “a,” “o,” “a”
- **Line 3:** “a,” “a,” “y,” “i”
- **Line 4:** “ou,” “i,” “o,” “i”
- **Line 7:** “y,” “y,” “i”
- **Line 8:** “ai,” “ee,” “ee,” “a”
- **Line 9:** “a,” “a,” “y,” “i”
- **Line 10:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 11:** “a,” “i,” “i,” “ay”
- **Line 13:** “e,” “ea,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 14:** “i,” “eye,” “a,” “i,” “e,” “e,” “e,” “ay”
- **Line 15:** “a,” “a,” “y,” “i”
- **Line 19:** “a,” “a,” “y,” “i”

CONSONANCE

“Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” uses [assonance](#) and [alliteration](#) often—but the poem isn’t swamped with those devices. They appear at crucial, key moments; they never saturate the poem. By contrast, the poem is practically overflowing with [consonance](#) (which always overlaps with alliteration. Tellingly, the poem never alliterates on a vowel sound). The first line of the poem, for instance, contains consonant /n/, /g/, and /t/ sounds, which overlap each other in a dense web:

Do not go gentle into that good night,

Every word in the line contains some kind of consonance; most contain multiple instances of the device. There’s a good reason why the speaker favors consonance over the other devices. Assonance tends to be lulling, soothing: the soft vowel sounds run together forming a warm sonic soup. But this is not a lulling, soothing poem: it’s a poem that argues its readers should fight bravely against death. So it turns to consonance. The clanging, harsh consonants that run throughout the poem, give it a tough sound, bristling, full of fire. Though not every line in the poem is as heavy with consonance as the first line, many are: and every line contains some consonance which adds to the poem’s overall force and punch.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “D,” “n,” “t,” “g,” “n,” “t,” “nt,” “t,” “g,” “d,” “n,” “t”

- **Line 2:** “l,” “d,” “r,” “r,” “l”
- **Line 3:** “R,” “g,” “l,” “g”
- **Line 4:** “n,” “n,” “l,” “k,” “r”
- **Line 5:** “c,” “s,” “r,” “r,” “s,” “r,” “k”
- **Line 6:** “D,” “n,” “g,” “nt,” “nt,” “t,” “g,” “d,” “n,” “t”
- **Line 7:** “b,” “r,” “b,” “t”
- **Line 8:** “r,” “r,” “d,” “d,” “d,” “n,” “r,” “n”
- **Line 9:** “R,” “r”
- **Line 10:** “s,” “s,” “n,” “n”
- **Line 11:** “n,” “l,” “n,” “l”
- **Line 12:** “D,” “n,” “g,” “nt,” “nt,” “t,” “g,” “d,” “n,” “t”
- **Line 13:** “r,” “n,” “n,” “r,” “d,” “s,” “bl,” “n,” “d,” “s”
- **Line 14:** “Bl,” “nd,” “c,” “d,” “bl,” “l,” “k”
- **Line 15:** “R,” “r”
- **Line 16:** “th,” “r,” “th,” “r,” “th”
- **Line 17:** “r,” “s,” “ss,” “r,” “c,” “l,” “s,” “r”
- **Line 18:** “D,” “n,” “g,” “nt,” “t,” “g,” “d,” “n,” “t”
- **Line 19:** “R,” “r”

SIMILE

The poem contains a single [simile](#), which appears in line 14. In that line, “grave men” realize that “blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay.” In other words, the “grave”—or serious—“men” have realized something important, something that changes the way they think about life. They thought that “blind eyes” were dark and dull, that they didn’t contain any light. But they realize that they can be full of light—they can “blaze.”

In describing this light, the speaker compares it to the light of a “meteor.” Meteors are very bright things: when they enter earth’s atmosphere, they burn up, releasing a bright, white light. The speaker is thus saying that the light in these “blind eyes” is very intense. But the speaker is also suggesting that the light only lasts a brief moment—like a meteor, it burns up quickly, in a flash. The speaker thus suggests that the light in “blind eyes” is fragile, ephemeral—like life itself.

The poem’s sole simile thus supports the poem’s broader in argument in several important ways. It helps explain why the “grave men” have regrets at the end of their life—they have seriously misjudged “blind eyes.” And it also underlines the poem’s fundamental argument about life itself: it is brief, and therefore precious. Because its light burns up with all the brilliance of a meteor, in a brief moment, it should be cherished—and fought for.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** “Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay”

METAPHOR

The speaker makes a passionate, direct argument about how to

deal with death: people should fight fiercely against it. It's perhaps surprising, then, that the speaker consistently uses [metaphor](#)—an indirect, figurative device—to support that argument.

The speaker's metaphors can be divided up into three broad groups. First, the speaker uses metaphor to describe dying and death. For instance, in the poem's first line the speaker describes death as "that good night" and the process of dying as "go[ing]" into it. In other words, the speaker's metaphors turn dying into a journey, a process of "go[ing]" and death itself into a kind of darkness, a "night." (The "good" part is ironic—after all, the speaker definitely doesn't think death is good!). The speaker picks up that metaphor in line 3, describing death as "the dying of the light." Once again, death is a kind of darkness, the loss of light. And so, metaphorically, life is associated with light, and all the joy and vitality that light implies.

Because these lines are the poem's two [refrains](#), these metaphors repeat throughout the poem, becoming touchstones, something the poem returns to over and over again as it makes its argument about death. (And the speaker adds in one other, different metaphor to describe dying: in line 16, he describes it as "the sad height"—as though death were a mountain that one walks up).

Second, the speaker uses metaphor to describe the fight against death—the ferocity and bravery that the speaker wants people to bring to their battle with death. In line 2, the speaker says that "old age should burn ... at close of day." "Close of day" is another metaphor for death—and like the others, it relies on the idea that death is a loss of light. Against this loss of light, the speaker encourages the elderly to "burn." He or she doesn't want them to literally catch fire. Instead, "burn" is a metaphor for passion and intensity: the passion they should bring to their fight against death.

Third, the speaker often uses metaphor to characterize the regrets that people have about the way they've spent their lives. For instance, the "wise men" in line 4 are sad because their "words forked no lightning." Here, "forked no lightning" serves as a metaphor for inspiration and insight: they haven't had a burst of inspiration that would transform or change the world. In this sense, metaphor supports all of the pieces of the speaker's argument: the way the speaker thinks about death, regret, and the fight for life. Though it is an indirect, figurative device, it is key to the speaker's argument about how to face death.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Do not go gentle," "good night"
- **Line 2:** "Old age should burn," "close of day"
- **Line 3:** "the dying of the light"
- **Line 5:** "forked no lightning"
- **Line 6:** "good night"

- **Line 7:** "the last wave by"
- **Line 8:** "danced in a green bay"
- **Line 9:** "the dying of the light"
- **Line 10:** "caught and sang the sun in flight"
- **Line 15:** "the dying of the light"
- **Line 16:** "the sad height"
- **Line 18:** "good night"
- **Line 19:** "the dying of the light"

EPIZEUXIS

The speaker of "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" uses [epizeuxis](#) in the poem's third line: "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Repeating the word "rage" puts a lot of emphasis on it: it becomes a key word for the poem, at the very heart of the speaker's argument. (And it also messes up the poem's [meter](#): "Rage, rage" is a [spondee](#), where one expect an [iamb](#)). Indeed, the speaker's argument might be summarized as encouraging rage: instead of passively accepting death, the speaker wants people to fight with anger, passion, and determination against death.

Further, because this is one of the poem's [refrains](#), the line—and with it, epizeuxis itself—reappears in lines 9, 15, and 19. This makes the device important to the poem: it keeps showing up. The first time it happens, one might ignore it or write it off—maybe it's just a rhetorical excess; maybe the speaker doesn't *really* mean that people should be full of "rage." But the [repetition](#) of the word underscores the speaker's deliberation: this is something he or she has thought about carefully. And it's something so important to the speaker that he or she is willing to put it at the center of his or her poem.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Rage, rage"
- **Line 9:** "Rage, rage"
- **Line 15:** "Rage, rage"
- **Line 19:** "Rage, rage"

REFRAIN

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is a [villanelle](#), which is a highly structured kind of [formal verse](#). And one of the keys to its complex structure is that its first and third lines repeat throughout the poem, becoming [refrains](#). This puts a lot of emphasis on these lines, each of which says something similar: line 1 and line 3 both encourage the reader to fight passionately—with "rage"—against death. (The use of [epizeuxis](#) in line 3, with the repetition of "rage," puts particular emphasis on that word and the passion it implies: the speaker wants the reader to be *angry* about death).

As the poem progresses, however, the way the speaker uses these refrains changes slightly. When they first appear, lines 1

and 3 are commands: they instruct the reader on how to face death. In lines 4-15, however, they become descriptive. The speaker describes different groups of people—"wise men," "good men," etc.—and how they all end their lives with serious regrets. Because of those regrets, they fight back, trying to extend their lives: they "do not go gentle into that good night"; they "rage, rage against the dying of light." In other words, the speaker uses the refrains to describe what these people actually *do* as they face death. The speaker is no longer offering instructions; he or she is describing how people really act.

That changes again in the final stanza of the poem. The poem ends by repeating the two refrain lines. Now, however, the speaker is offering instructions to a specific person, his or her "father," telling him how to face death. The refrain thus structures each part of the poem: from its opening instructions, to the description of regret and defiance that runs through the middle of the poem, and finally, shaping the advice that the speaker offers directly to his or her father as the poem comes to a close.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Do not go gentle into that good night"
- **Line 3:** "Rage, rage against the dying of the light"
- **Line 6:** "Do not go gentle into that good night"
- **Line 9:** "Rage, rage against the dying of the light"
- **Line 12:** "Do not go gentle into that good night"
- **Line 15:** "Rage, rage against the dying of the light"
- **Lines 18-19:** "Do not go gentle into that good night. / Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

PARALLELISM

The speaker uses [parallelism](#) repeatedly and in a regular pattern. Each stanza except the first and last starts with a parallel phrase; each phrase describes a different group of people, "wise men," "good men," "wild men," and "grave men." These stanzas then go on to describe the regrets these men feel as they approach death, specifically about the ways they've spent their lives. In turn, these regrets serve as inspiration for them, helping them fight against death with passion and bravery.

These parallel phrases thus play an important role in the poem: they allow the speaker to survey a broad range of different groups of people, from wise, scholarly people to more frivolous, "wild" people. As the speaker surveys these very different groups, he or she discovers that—whatever their differences—they all have something in common: they all have serious regrets about the way they've lived their lives, the assumptions they've made about other people. And they all want more time: time to fix their mistakes, to have new ideas, to live better. The parallel constructions that run through these lines echo this underlying similarity: just as all these people

share important experiences and attitudes, they also share common grammatical structures, which subtly bind them together.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Though wise men at their end know dark is right"
- **Line 7:** "Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright"
- **Line 10:** "Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight"
- **Line 13:** "Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight"

PARATAXIS

"Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night" uses [parataxis](#) in line 17, when the speaker instructs his or her father to "curse, bless, me." "Cursing" and "blessing" are opposite acts. A curse condemns someone; a blessing praises and encourages someone. The speaker wants his or her father to do both. And the speaker doesn't take the time to explain why. As a result, the line is surprising, even confusing. And that confusion is amplified by the use of parataxis. If the speaker used a word like "and," "or," or "then," which might give some hints about why the speaker wants his or her father to do *both* of these things. The speaker refuses to do that, so the reader is confronted by the [juxtaposition](#) between these two opposite acts—and has to figure out their relationship by him or herself.

But the use of parataxis, the refusal to explain the connection between these two acts, is also suggestive. It suggests that the speaker doesn't really care whether his or her father "curse[s]" or "bless[es]." What matters to the speaker is that his or her father exhibit passion, anger, energy as he faces death. Whether that passion takes the form of joy or rage doesn't matter: the speaker doesn't even care if he or she becomes a target as a result. In other words, the parataxis underlines the speaker's central point about death: he or she wants his or her father to resist it with passion and bravery, whatever form that passion and bravery takes.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "Curse, bless"

ALLUSION

In lines 10-11, the speaker describes "wild men," who lived their lives recklessly and joyfully. The speaker describes how they "caught and sang the sun in flight"—a [metaphor](#) that describes their recklessness and joyfulness—but also how, eventually, they end up "griev[ing] it." Underlying this description is an [allusion](#) to a Greek myth, the myth of Icarus.

In the myth, Daedalus, a great inventor, creates a pair of wings made out of wax and gives them to his son Icarus. He warns

Icarus not to fly too close to the sun—but Icarus ignores him and flies up and up. He gets so close to the sun that its heat melts the wax in his wings and he falls from the sky, plunging into the sea.

Like the "wild men," Icarus is reckless, careless in pursuit of the "sun"—though in his case, he literally pursues the sun. (The wild men pursuit of the sun is more metaphorical: they're interested in bright, beautiful things.) And Icarus's fall is almost proverbial: it's a kind of cautionary tale for what happens when people don't act with caution and deliberation, when they pursue their ambitions or pleasures without regard for the consequences. So the "wild men" are Icarus-like figures: like Icarus, they pursue pleasure without worrying about what will happen to them.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-12:** "Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight, / And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way, / Do not go gentle into that good night."



VOCABULARY

Go (Line 1, Line 6, Line 12, Line 18) - To travel or enter. In other words, since "that good night" is a [metaphor](#) for death, the speaker wants to make sure his or her father doesn't simply give in to death.

Good Night (Line 1, Line 6, Line 12, Line 18) - This phrase [metaphorically](#) treats death as a kind of night, thereby associating it with darkness. The adjective "good" suggests, perhaps ironically, that there's something comforting or peaceful about the darkness of death.

Rave (Line 2) - To cry out in protest against something.

Rage (Line 3, Line 9, Line 15, Line 19) - The most familiar definition of *rage* is "to be full of anger." It can also mean "to continue intensely," as in the phrase "a raging fire." Here, the word suggests both definitions: to passionately, even angrily, persist in the face of death.

Forked (Line 5) - The speaker uses *forked* here to mean "generated or created," effectively inventing a new definition. The speaker's use of this word is thus a bit odd and requires some unpacking. Lightning serves here as a [metaphor](#) for a flash of inspiration—some brilliant idea that changes the world. Since lightning often splits into several branches, it's sometimes called *forked*. So, the speaker is saying that the "wise men" haven't had that flash of inspiration that could be compared to a forked lightning strike.

Wave (Line 7) - A surge or swell of water. [Metaphorically](#), the "last wave" represents the last swell of enthusiasm or energy before death.

By (Line 7) - In line 7 of the poem, *by* means "passed." In other words, the wave has passed the "Good men"; it's already gone by them.

Frail (Line 8) - Weak or unimportant.

Bay (Line 8) - A coastal area where the land curves around the sea, creating an inlet.

Flight (Line 10) - Flying, moving quickly or joyfully. In other words, the "Wild men" love the joyful way the sun moves across the sky, and they sing about it.

Grave (Line 13) - Serious or somber. In the context of the poem's struggle against death, the word also puns on the noun *grave*—that is, a "tomb" or "burial mound."

Gay (Line 14) - Bright or happy.

Height (Line 16) - Mountain, high point. This is a [metaphor](#): the speaker's "father" is facing death—and so, metaphorically, finds himself alone, isolated, like someone on a mountain.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" is a [villanelle](#). (In fact, it's one of the most famous examples of the villanelle written in English, alongside poems like Elizabeth Bishop's "[One Art](#).") The villanelle started as a French form, but most villanelles have been written in English. It's a fixed poetic [form](#): it not only has a set [rhyme scheme](#), it also has a pre-determined pattern of [refrains](#) and a set number of lines, which are in turn organized into a set number of stanzas.

A villanelle is a 19-line poem. Its first five stanzas are each [tercets](#), which are three lines long. Its final stanza is four lines, a [quatrain](#). In the first stanza, lines 1 and 3 establish the poem's [refrains](#), or repeating lines. The first line of the poem repeats at the end of stanzas 2 and 4, and as the second-to-last line of the poem. In other words, line 1 is also line 6, line 12, and line 18. In turn, the third line of the poem repeats at the end of stanzas 3 and 5, and as the poem's final line. Thus line 3 is also line 9, line 15, and line 19. As a result, in the final two lines of the poem, the two refrain lines are paired up, forming a rhyming [couplet](#).

A villanelle is thus a complex, demanding form with an ornate, repetitive structure. It is well suited to obsessive, anxious poems—poems where the speaker is working through a consuming fear, where the speaker can't get some idea out of his or her head. "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" is one of those poems. It's about one of scariest things of all—death. And though the speaker urges the reader to fight bravely against death, the obsessive repetition of lines like "Rage, rage against the dying of the light" suggests that the speaker hasn't quite mastered his or her fear of death—that the speaker has to keep reminding both the reader and him or

herself to fight against it.

METER

In English, [villanelles](#) are often written in [iambic pentameter](#), a [meter](#) with a **DA DUM** [rhythm](#) that goes on for five [feet](#) (making ten syllables total per line). “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” follows this tradition. One can hear that rhythm in the poem’s fifth line:

Because | their words | had forked | no light- | ning
they

Though the poem is written in iambic pentameter, it has a lot of metrical variation: places where the meter gets rougher and its iambic rhythm has hiccups and syncopation. For instance, line 3 opens with a [spondee](#):

Rage, rage | against | the dy- | ing of | the light

The extra [stress](#) in the first foot of the line is eventually balanced out: the fourth foot of the line is a [pyrrhic](#), a metrical foot that has no stress. So the line still has the usual five stresses that one expects in a line of iambic pentameter, but it takes a while for it to sort itself out. The line is thus a little awkward, a little off.

But this awkwardness is part of the speaker’s point: he or she wants to emphasize “rage,” to encourage people to fight against death with all their bravery and ferociousness—even if that means upsetting propriety, going a little too far. Because this metrical variation comes in one of the poem’s [refrains](#), it happens over and over: four times total in the poem. As a result, the reader feels its disruption—its insistence—again and again.

Though the poem has lots of different metrical variations, the speaker seems to particularly like to use opening spondees. He or she uses them in lines 7, 10, 13, and 14 (in addition to the 4 “Rage, rage” lines): “**Good men,**” “**Wild men,**” “**Grave men,**” and “**Blind eyes.**” The result is that the poem feels very insistent: one feels the force of the speaker’s passion in these repeated opening spondees. The meter thus echoes the energy and pain of the poem—the intense energy with which the speaker makes his or her argument.

RHYME SCHEME

“Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” is a [villanelle](#). Villanelles follow a very tightly controlled and limited [rhyme scheme](#). Indeed, there are only two [rhymes](#) in the whole poem: words end in either “ight” or “ay.” The first five stanzas of the poem (lines 1-15) are all rhymed ABA. For example, in the first stanza the final words are “night/”day/”bright.” The final stanza of the poem (lines 16-19) is rhymed ABAA.

This is pretty unusual for a poem in English. Since English is a hard language to rhyme, poets writing in English tend to favor

poetic forms that use lots of different rhymes: they’re easier to write, easier to manage.

“Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” doesn’t give itself that freedom: instead it focuses on the A and B rhymes insistently. And despite the difficulty of sustaining its rhyme scheme, all of its rhymes are [perfect rhymes](#). The speaker also exclusively rhymes single syllable words. There are no tricky, complicated rhymes in the poem. Its rhymes are straightforward, forceful.

The poem’s rhymes thus give the reader some complicated, ambiguous messages. Because of the limited number of rhymes, the poem feels obsessive: as though the speaker is stuck on a single idea and can’t get past it. But because the rhymes are so strong, the reader allows feels like the speaker is being direct and straightforward. It feels as though the speaker is talking to the reader without ambiguity or equivocation: saying exactly what he or she thinks without beating around the bush.



SPEAKER

The speaker of “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” is anonymous. The poem doesn’t tell its readers much about the speaker: his or her gender, class, profession. In fact, there’s only one personal detail in the poem. In line 16, the speaker reveals that the poem is dedicated to his or her “father,” who is on “the sad height.” In other words, the speaker’s father is close to death.

Though the poem talks about a lot of different people—“wise men,” “Good men,” “Wild men,” and “Grave men”—the poem is really only for one person. The speaker wants to help his or her father face death, wants to give him instruction and guidance. This helps explain why the poem contains so few details about the speaker: this poem isn’t about the speaker. It’s about the speaker’s father; it’s about death; it’s about learning how to face death with dignity.

If there are details about the speaker, then, they emerge through the poem’s form—not its content. Though the poem doesn’t tell the reader much directly about the speaker, its form contains some key hints about the speaker’s frame of mind. With its [refrains](#), its very limited [rhyme scheme](#), and its forceful [metrical](#) substitutions, the poem feels passionate and obsessive. Perhaps the form (known as a [villanelle](#)) even betrays some anxiety on the speaker’s part. Though the speaker is trying to give advice and encouragement to his or her father, some part of the speaker is also terrified by death—and hopes to find encouragement in the poem itself.



SETTING

“Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” is a poem about

death. Its speaker offers advice to his or her father about how to face death with dignity, bravery, and defiance. So, the poem emerges from a specific, personal relationship between real people. But though the poem emerges from this specific relationship, it gives the reader almost no information about where or when it happens; the speaker tells the reader almost nothing about the poem's setting.

The speaker does mention specific places: a “green bay” in line 8 and a “sad height” in line 16. And he talks about specific times: the “close of day,” for example. But the speaker uses these places and times [metaphorically](#). For example, the “close of day” is a metaphor for death. In other words, the speaker is talking about dying, not about night. The same is true of the “sad height” in line 16: it’s a metaphor for old age and illness, not a real place. Instead of using details of place and time to portray the poem’s setting, the speaker uses them as metaphors for death.

In other words, it’s not particularly important to the speaker where or when the poem happens. The poem is meant to offer advice not only to the speaker’s father, but also to anyone who reads the poem. It’s supposed to be universally applicable, and for that reason it doesn’t really matter where or when it happens

the late 1940s and early 1950s—the years just after the end of World War II. For Thomas, a Welsh poet, the war would’ve been an important presence in his life: throughout the war, the Nazis bombed towns and cities across the United Kingdom. The years after the war were dedicated to rebuilding—a project that sometimes required reconstructing entire cities from the rubble. Thomas would have seen the human cost of the war firsthand, both in terms of soldiers who died in battle as well as the civilians who died in air raids.

Thomas does not directly address that context in “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.” Rather, the poem aims to be universal. Though it is dedicated to Thomas’s father, who died several years after the poem was written, it offers advice to all readers in all times about how to face death with dignity. That said, one might speculate that the intense human suffering in World War II underlies the poem. The war seemed to show that human beings are expendable, and the poem meditates on how fragile and precious human life is. At the same time, the defiance with which England refused to give in to its enemies is also captured in the poem's spirit of vitality.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Go Gentle Into That Good Night](https://www.heraldmillmedia.com/opinion/columns/do-not-go-gentle-into-that-good-night-why-not/article_d518c4db-c46d-548e-9d5d-5df9835521ab.html) — An article at the Herald Mail calls into question the advice Dylan Thomas gives to his dying father. (https://www.heraldmillmedia.com/opinion/columns/do-not-go-gentle-into-that-good-night-why-not/article_d518c4db-c46d-548e-9d5d-5df9835521ab.html)
- [Dylan Thomas Reads "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night"](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mRec3VbH3w) — In this brief video, the poet Dylan Thomas reads aloud his own poem, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mRec3VbH3w>)
- ['Rage Against The Dying Of The Light': How Entrepreneurs Can Persevere](https://www.forbes.com/sites/miketempleman/2015/08/13/rage-against-the-dying-of-the-light/#6480244930ad) — At Forbes Magazine, Mike Templeman thinks about how Thomas's poem might serve as an inspiration to contemporary business leaders. (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/miketempleman/2015/08/13/rage-against-the-dying-of-the-light/#6480244930ad>)
- [Dylan Thomas's Life](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/dylan-thomas) — A detailed biography of Dylan Thomas from The Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/dylan-thomas>)
- [The Story Behind "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night."](https://www.brainpickings.org/2017/01/24/dylan-thomas-do-not-go-gentle-into-that-good-night/) — Maria Popova tells the story behind "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." (<https://www.brainpickings.org/2017/01/24/dylan-thomas-do-not-go-gentle-into-that-good-night/>)



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

“Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” is a [villanelle](#). The villanelle was originally invented by French poets during the 16th century, but it really only became popular much later and in a different country: England. English poets started writing lots of villanelles in the mid-1800s. The form is thus connected to the Victorian period, with its strict social and sexual norms, and its relatively conservative poets. It is not a favorite form for the modernists—the generation of poets who, starting around 1870, attempted to develop new ways of writing that responded to the rapid urbanization and industrialization of society.

To write a villanelle in the late 1940s or early 1950s, then, was to be a bit out of step with the times. In Dylan Thomas’ case, this was self-conscious and intentional. He rebelled against the ways of writing that modernist poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound developed; he sought to revive older forms and tones. The villanelle is a perfect form for this project: associated, as it is, with a generation of poets who came before the modernists. Writing a villanelle is a way for Thomas to signal his commitment to those older poets and the ways that they wrote—and a way to signal his rebellion against the modernists.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“Do Not Go Gentle into That Night” was written sometime in



HOW TO CITE

MLA

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<https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/dylan-thomas/do-not-go-gentle-into-that-good-night>.