



## ARTICLE

# A Functional Stylistic Analysis of “Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night”

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### ABSTRACT

As two main approaches to analyzing literary discourses, literary criticism and stylistic analysis have been employed for a long period of time. With the application of the theories of Functional Grammar, this paper is written for the purpose of being helpful for the readers of Dylan Thomas' poem “Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night” to understand the poem's theme better as well as appreciate the artistic adaptation of language. Furthermore, because the poem is analyzed with the application of Functional Grammar, it helps the readers to appreciate “Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night” from a new perspective.

## 1. Introduction

Poetry is a rhythmic composition, especially an organization of words in prose; sometimes it is a rhymed organization of which could express facts, emotions, or ideas in a more focused imaginative style, and it is more powerful than that of usual speech, some poems are in free verse and some poems are in meter.

Generally speaking, Dylan Thomas is regarded as a modern poet, but what kind of poetry he wrote were not agreed about by many literary critics. Being described as a surrealist, a primitive, a Welsh scop, and a metaphysical poet, Dylan Thomas has been generally considered as a twentieth-century Romanticist because of the death and the afterlife after death appealed to him. However, during the process of his growing up, death did not surround Dylan Thomas. On the contrary, being spoiled and pretty, he was regarded as the favorite child of the family. As

far as love and attention are concerned, he seems to have lacked nothing.<sup>[3]</sup> Being the second child and the only son of his family, Dylan Thomas was born on October 27, 1914 in Swansea, Wales. And he experienced his childhood in Wales, and his desire to enjoy his happy younger years was given back in his later works. The retrospective of his childhood was included in his poems and gone with his innocence. However, themes of death and life pervade in most of Dylan Thomas' early writings.

## 2. Formal analysis on the poem

The poem “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night”, is described about dying as well as death. Death develops a distinct and sharply private notion for Dylan Thomas: The poem was considered as his own farewell; something was mentioned in that poem, including his own denial to reveal his declining health condition and exhaustion of his

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inner peace<sup>[7]</sup>. In the year 1945, D. J. Thomas, the father of Dylan Thomas, was fighting against cancer. “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” was conceived while however, this poem was not published until his father’s death on December 16, 1952. In four of the six stanzas of this poem, there are various kinds of men who are close to their death.

For the four kinds of men, the first kind is the “wise men”. We can regard the wise men as scholars or intellectuals. Dylan Thomas says, “Because their words had forked no lightning / Do not go gentle into that good night,” that indicates because they did not complete all the life they wanted, that they would not surrender if they did not fight (lines 5-6).

In the four stanzas, for the second stanza, Dylan Thomas believes that good people like those wise people, fail to give full play to their lives and still are to have achievements. Dylan Thomas said, crying how bright/ their deeds might have danced in a green bay/Rage, rage against at the death of the light (lines 7-9). This line means that at the end of his life, a good person should finally show enthusiasm and finally get others’ attention. Dylan Thomas believed that the good men’s behaviors could not stand out. His idea is that, rather than die without being noticed by this world, they should do something.

In those four stanzas, the third stanza is stated as for the “wild men”. Those people are quite distinguished from the people which were mentioned in the previous stanzas. The wild people have lived a fulfilling life, unlike those people similar to them. Wild people who catch and sing the sun in flight, / And learn, too late, they grieved it on the way, the meaning of this stanza is that these men’s lifestyle in this poem is without any reservation but they do not realize that they would soon become older and pass away (lines 10-11). When facing death, they do not give a wink because they have accomplished everything that they desired to do with their lives.

The final kind of people that Dylan Thomas mentions in this poem are the “grave men”. Dylan Thomas describes the grave people saying, Grave people, near death, who see with blinding sight/ Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay (lines 13-14). That sentence means that although being blind, those grave people cannot see by their own eyes, they hold the idea that death is near better than men with sight. Dylan Thomas is holding the opinion that even if they know what will happen later to them, they should be still happy. In the last sentence Dylan Thomas is having a direct conversation with his

father who is close to death. Dylan Thomas suggested that father is to pray now with your fierce tears, Curse and bless me, I / Do not go gentle into that good night/ Rage, rage against the dying of the light (lines 17-19). As for those preceding poem stanzas, Dylan Thomas intends that until his father’s breathe ceases, he would not go into death without any difficulty but to struggle with death

Being separated into five paragraphs with three stanzas, this poem has a sixth paragraph with four stanzas that closes the poem. The musicality that the poet plays with caused the repetition of a sentence, the repetition of two different sentences in this poem; in this poem the first one: Do not go gentle into that good night, this is also the title of the poem. It occurs in lines: 1, 6, 12, and 18. It begins paragraph 1 and it concludes paragraph 2, paragraph 4 and paragraph 6. And the second one is: Rage, rage against the dying of the light. It occurs in sentences 3, 9, 15 and 19 and it concludes paragraph 1, paragraph 3, paragraph 5 and paragraph 6. There is a rhyme in two stanzas and two similar words are used to conclude the stanza: Night and Light, it only changes the first letters of the words: N -- L. The rhyme is A-B-A / A-B-A / A-B-A / A-B-A / A-B-A / A-B-A-A.

### **3. Context in Systemic Functional Linguistics: Halliday’s View**

The estimate of style has a close relation with context, because the appropriateness of style is in accordance with the acceptability of the context. Just as a fact having long since been accepted by the semantics, the meaning is influenced by the linguistic context and the situational context. Therefore, to do stylistic analysis to Dylan Thomas’s poem cannot break away from the study of context.

Halliday (2001) provided the concept of context in still more abstract terms. The context of situation is not perceived of as specific situation but as situation type, which could be called as a social framework. Thus, it is a socio-semiotic frame in the sense that it is a sequence of connotations evolving from the semiotic system that composes the culture<sup>[5]</sup>. According to Halliday, context is a higher-level semiotic system in which language is ‘embedded’. More explicitly, language is embedded in a context of culture or social system and any exemplum of language as text is embedded in its own context of situation<sup>[4]</sup>. The context of situation consists of three variables: field, tenor and mode. These three variables are neither kinds of language use nor merely components of

the speech framework; preferably, they provide an abstract structure that could represent the semiotic setting, people could interchange meanings in this setting.

Field is the total event functioning in the text. Together with deliberate activity of the writer or speaker <sup>[6]</sup>. In a word, it is connected with what's happening — the social courses and the realms of subject matter which was created by language in the accomplishment of these social courses. Tenor is connected with whose taking part, that is, the social roles and relationships of those participating in the intercommunication and the roles of speech and relations produced in the fulfillment of these social relations and roles by language. The former roles or relationships are steady while the latter is odd relationships of a kind or another <sup>[7]</sup>. Mode involves what role and in what situation language is playing, suggesting the symbolic arrangement, the status and the semiotic function of the discourse in a context. The symbolic organization involves both the medium in which the discourse is encoded: phonic/spoken or graphic/written, and the channel by which the text is communicated: visual or aural. The semiotic function of the discourse in the context, according to Halliday <sup>[5-7]</sup>, is realized in its rhetorical mode or genre: expository, didactic, persuasive, descriptive, illustrative, argumentative and so on. When it comes to the status of the discourse in the context, it involves the relationship between text and the social event: the discourse is either auxiliary or constitutive.

Halliday and Hasan once narrated, Field, mode and tenor are applied together to outline the context of situation of a discourse <sup>[7]</sup>. Therefore, as for systemic functional linguists, context of situation is a conceptual construct to explore functions of language through these three variables. They are collectively called register. Register, simply stated as “variety according to use” <sup>[7]</sup>, is an important notion to define the influence of the immediate context of situation's dimensions of a language case on the way of language application <sup>[2]</sup>.

Since Dylan Thomas' works are usually fertile in images and transmit complicated and diversified themes. Context is an essential element in understanding his poems.

### **3.1 A Study of the Context of Situation of This Poem**

In the poem “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night”; the analyses of context of situation are as follows:

Field:

1) Theme: attitude toward how an individual lives in the face of imminent death.

2) Thesis: an entreaty to his father, an appeal for him to die with anger not humbleness, by regulating different attitudes of four kinds of people towards death.

Tenor:

1) Poet and readers/reciters: poet as an artist convinces the readers to face death with a tough attitude.

2) Character and character: father and son. The son tries to comfort his father not to bend to death but to confront it bravely.

Mode:

1) Text as “self-reliant”.

2) Written medium: to be read either silently as a private act or vocally as a talk to the poet's father. The former one is through visual channel while the latter through aural one.

After reading the first stanza, the poem's theme will be clearly shown to us, because the readers could easily manage to find out the referent of “good night”. Afterwards, the image of “good night” is followed by a series of relevant images such as “old age”, “end of day” and “dying and death of the light”, and so on.

All of these help the readers make sure about the symbolic meaning of “the good night” -- death. While the verbs combined together with these nouns are “burn”, “rave”, and “rage”, which imply the determined attitude of the poet towards death. So assuredly the whole poem is about the attitudes of man in the face of death. Then, about the tenor of the poem. Looking through the whole discourse, we may be deeply impressed by the imperative mood fulfilled by the verb forms of “Do not go gentle into that good night”, “Rage and rage against the dying of the light”, and “Curse, bless me” and so on. Via these expressions, the poet's earnest expectation and sincere appeal to his father are transmitted keenly and vividly to a great degree. Besides this, the relation between the poet and his father is embodied in the Biblical implications to Dylan Thomas's asking in line 17, as he required a final blessing or curse; the male heads extended such departing messages to their sons.

Since in many Biblical proses, curses and blessings are combined together with their parallel structure. “I pray” part emphasizes pictures of Bible; nevertheless, the prayer is forwarded not to God, but to his father who is an atheist. What's more, the exalted religious symbolism of the Father and the Son, signaled in “I pray” part, is also interpreted in the imagery of “the sad height” part. It is

the Father who is near his death, looks down from the sad height to the son, rather than the dying Son who looks up on the Cross from this sad height to the Father.

For the mode of this poem, it is worthy of mentioning the language applied in this poem which is full of contrast and paradox. The first stanza states a good example for us:

L1 *Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

This part not only presents the theme of the poem but also proposes the two recurrent melodies that end alternating parts. Despite these two sentences, the first sentence and the third sentence, both the two sentences state Dylan Thomas's basic theme about opposing death, they are different from each other in a few ways. Each of the prominent words in line one finds its opposite in line three. "Gentle" is combined with "rage", "good" with "dying", and "night" with "light". The tone of the two lines is also quite different. Line one is diminished; the verbs are deliberately simple, vague. Dylan Thomas uses the predicate adjective "gentle", shifting it to refer to the personality of the individual, rather than the more obvious choice "gently", an adverb which would only describe the action of the verb. "Good night" when it describes dying becomes a paradox for Thomas, meaning a good death. Though this line may be an urging to resist death, its tone is gentle. If this is compared to the beginning of line 3 where the word "rage" is repeated twice, the poet urges an extremely fierce resistance to death.

Now let's take a look at the last stanza given below:

L16 *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, rage against the dying of the light.*

As an exhortation and an appeal to his father, the poet does not appeal in an unfriendly manner, but clarifies his viewpoints and ideas with four types of people's attitudes towards death. To his father, a man who is in the face of pressing death, it is much comfortable to accept this kind of strain. The method of contrasting can also be found in this stanza, which is illustrated in the image of "fierce tears": the tears recognize the inevitable death, while the use of "fierce" demonstrates resistance until the end. Through this sort of external contrast, the theme of the poem is increased and expanded.

### 3.2 A Study of Context of Culture of This Poem

After that study of "context of situation" on the above

poem, we would like to go on with the study of "context of culture" of Dylan Thomas's poem. This poet develops the "context of situation" for us to comprehend and picture, and then appreciate. But when we experience these processes by ourselves, we are more often not conscious of doing so. In the meantime, as for a better and absolute understanding of his poem, "context of culture" in them should be studied.

The adoption of context of culture can find good evidence in Dylan Thomas's poems, especially Thomas's religious beliefs and his Welsh heritage, life, and thought. Therefore, for the sake of understanding Dylan Thomas's poem, we ought to comprehend the context in which this poem is created.

Dylan Thomas went through two world wars. He was born in October 1914, the year the First World War broke out, and therefore war deeply rooted in his heart and greatly impressed young Thomas' inner world. Then Thomas himself witnessed the cruelty of war and the weakness of life during World War II. Therefore, his poems are always covered in the shadow of war.

In addition to those external factors, his health had a control over his works. Dylan Thomas suffered physical weakness during his whole life. His family members all tended to his health. This leads to his living in constant anxiety and fear of death. As a result, the themes of his poems often hang over life and death, creation and destruction. The effect of personal experience on the choice of themes is obvious.

While we talk about the context of culture, Thomas's religious belief cannot be neglected. Just as what Karl Shapiro states, if we want to know what Dylan Thomas's thoughts are reflecting on and from where those thoughts are coming, it is important for us to recognize Dylan Thomas's religious beliefs.<sup>[1]</sup> From this we can notice that it is religion rather than anything else from which Dylan Thomas could have got inspiration when his poems were written.

All in all, context of culture is a powerful and forceful function in revealing the potential themes of literary works.

## 4. Conclusion

Stylistic analysis is a potent and convincing tool for literary criticism. It promises to offer useful understandings into literary criticism with its precise aims and effective techniques and discusses the relationship between style, themes and aesthetic effects, in other words, how the

author uses language devices to transmit the themes and aesthetic appeals. Functional stylistic analysis can present a firm base and scientific evidence for the interpretation of a literary discourse; thus, it is more objective and sensible.

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