

Death and mortality in poetry

[Life](#), [Death](#)



Death and Mortality in Poetry P. Morgan ENG 125 Instructor Saake June 11, 2012 Death is a part of life. This is a cliché that has resonated throughout society since the beginning of time. Some hate the thought of dying and some welcome its tender relief, but whatever the feeling towards it Death still comes to everyone eventually. Two poems, in particular, speak of death very differently. In the poem *Because I could not stop for Death* by Emily Dickinson, Death is a courteous guide to a place of peace and tranquility. However, in *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night* by Dylan Thomas, death is something to fight and struggle against as long and as hard as possible until death finally overcomes. Both Dickinson and Thomas paint a picture of the end of life and death by the use of language, rhyme and vivid imagery though their interpretation of death differs greatly. In the poem *Because I could not stop for Death*, the main character is met by death on an ordinary day of “labor and leisure” (Dickinson 1890), busy with life she had no time to stop, so like a gentleman caller he stopped for her. After death stops for her they start on their way through her town to her grave. It is not until the end of the poem that the main character tells that she has been dead for centuries and the reader realizes that she has been remembering the day she died and how clear those memories are still. In contrast, *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night*, Thomas writes about death as an adversary engaged in a continuous war with man. The author believes man should never willingly succumb to death, but should go kicking and screaming into death. Though both poems deal with death, they do so in drastically different ways. Thomas paints death as an enemy while Dickinson shows death as gentle guide to eternity. Thomas’ poem writes about living as well as dying

and talks about death in the present tense, dying instead of dead. He also speaks of death in terms of the elderly whereas Dickinson does not clearly tell the age of her main character. Both poems deal with the themes of mortality and love, however while *Because I could not Stop for Death* also deals with immortality and spirituality *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night* also deals with old age wisdom and knowledge. Dickinson as well as Thomas wrote about death in these two well-known poems, however it is very easy to see that their views on mortality varied greatly. While Thomas seemed to view it as an end, Dickinson gives the impression that it is the beginning of something else. Dickinson in the same manner as Thomas allows the reader to experience their main characters feelings and emotions through the use of language, imagery and the use of first person. In Dickinson's poem the imagery starts when death is personified, taking the form of a man. No longer is he the scary robe-clad figure of demise complete with scythe, he is a chivalrous gentleman who might have tipped his hat at the main character as he pulled up to call on her. The author continues this extended metaphor through the entirety of the poem. Dickinson carries on her use of imagery by describing the ride taken by Death and his fare throughout the town " We passed the school where children played, Their lessons scarcely done; We passed the fields of gazing grain, We passed the setting sun. " (Dickinson, 1890). The writer's use of language also plays a critical part in making the reader invest in the main character her grave is described as "...a house that seemed A swelling of the ground; The roof was scarcely visible, The cornice but a mound. " (Dickinson, 1890). The way Dickinson describes death, leaves little room for fear or unrest, death is just a part of a journey that all have to

take and it leads to a timeless tranquil place. In the last stanza the character reveals that she died centuries ago, yet it feels like a short amount of time. She does not seem to be in pain nor have any regrets and remembers the day of her death as one might remember the first day of school or place of employment, “ Since then 'tis centuries; but each Feels shorter than the day I first surmised the horses' heads Were toward eternity". Thomas tells a very different tale in Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night, still beautifully using imagery and language to immerse the reader in the poem. Unlike Dickinson, Thomas uses words to express his metaphor of death in this poem he is “ Night", dark, somber and something to wait through until the dawn finally breaks. From the beginning of the poem the reader can feel how Thomas feels about death, “ 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. " there is no peace, no tranquility, only a battle to wage and a war to win. Images of bolts of lightning, blazing meteors, and other images of light and fire are used to captivate the attention of the reader in this poem about living with intensity. Thomas lets it be known that life is no “ candle in the wind" in this poem; it's a blazing bonfire or a towering inferno. Lastly, Thomas uses descriptive words in this poem to describe men that, it can only be assumed, remind him of his father “ Good men, wild men, grave men", and never forget his steady refrain “ Rage, rage against the dying of the light". Because I could not Stop for Death, is a poem that is written in first person narrative, using five quatrains, an iambic tetrameter rhythm. The first and third line in every stanza is made up of eight syllables, or four feet. A foot is made up of one unstressed and one stressed syllable. The rhyme isn't

regular (meaning it doesn't follow a particular pattern) but there is rhyme in this poem. " Me" rhymes with " Immortality" and, farther down the poem, with " Civility" and, finally, " Eternity." Scattering this same rhyme unevenly throughout the poem really ties the sound of poem together, (Harrison 2009). Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night is written in a very specific form, the villanelle. The villanelle is a French form of poetry that is not commonly used in the English language; in fact Thomas' poem is the most famous example of this form of poetry in English. Villanelles have nineteen lines divided into five three-line stanzas and a sixth stanza with four lines. In English, villanelles tend to be written in the common metrical pattern called iambic pentameter, which means ten syllables per line, with every other syllable stressed, starting with the second syllable (Harrison 2009).

Villanelles are difficult to do in English because they are required to have an intricate rhyme scheme and two lines that are refrains — like refrains in songs, they get repeated over and over. Since the English language has fewer rhyming words than other languages it makes this form of poetry difficult to produce in English. However, different their poetry styles both Dickinson and Thomas used rhyme and meter to tell a first person narrative that rivets their audience yet both of these poems were not published until after death. The subject of death and mortality has been a part of myth, legend and poetry among other forms of literature since the beginning of time. This paper has discussed two well-known poems and the route each author took to breach this subject. Though each authors' thought on the matter differs, one looks on death as a beginning and the other chooses to fight it to the end, both use imagery and language to take their readers on

an unforgettable journey. References Clugston, R. W. (2010). Journey into literature. San Diego, California: Bridgepoint Education, Inc. Retrieved from <https://content.ashford.edu/books> Dickinson, Emily. "Because I could not stop for Death--." *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. New York: Little, 1960. Harrison, J. L. (2009, October 27). [Web log message]. Retrieved from umbc.edu/~jamie/html/on__do_not_go_gentle_into_that.html Johnson, Thomas H. *Readings on Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Bruno Leone. San Diego: Greenhaven, 1997. McLaughlin, D. (1999, August 12). Villanelle. Retrieved from <http://www.uni.edu/~gotera/CraftOfPoetry/villanelle.html> Melani, L. (2009). *Emily Dickinson--death*. Informally published manuscript, English, Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, NY. Retrieved from <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/stop.html> Thomas, D. (Writer) (1952). *Do not go gentle into that good night*. Caedmon. [Audio] Retrieved from <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15377>