

# [Death across modern literature: dylan thomas, wilfred owen, and hardy’s "the mayo...](https://assignbuster.com/death-across-modern-literature-dylan-thomas-wilfred-owen-and-hardys-the-mayor-of-casterbridge/)

Death has been a prominent theme across literature, with its countless interpretations showcasing the diverse ways it has influenced different authors. Thomas Hardy’s novel The Mayor of Casterbridge is described by Hardy as “ The life and death of a man of character”, and commences as events begin to lead Henchard to his death. Dylan Thomas, however, was able to base his depiction of death on how it was affecting his own life at the time of his writing. He wrote his poetry across a large expanse of time, from a young man unaffected by personal death, to an adult who had lost his father and experienced war. Wilfred Owen on the other hand was surrounded by loss as he wrote his poetry, in which he recounted the horrors of death that he and his comrades experienced. He is revered as one of the highest acclaimed poets of the Great War, the same war that took his life.

Thomas began to write when he was a teenager and his poems were quickly inspired by death, most notable within “ And death shall have no dominion”, his first published poem. Thomas used the theme of death to inspire the conception that no matter what kind of life you lead, death would never truly have control of you. This is demonstrated within the line “ when their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone” followed by “ they shall have stars at elbows and foot”; as it implies that although death has claimed your earthly body, part of you will always remain. This spectral afterlife bares closer resemblance to scientific theory, rather than the Christian beliefs that were a majority in Thomas’ time. The image of becoming stars mirrors the scientific theory that all matter, including the matter of our own bodies, was produced in stars. This could be interpreted as Thomas writing about an afterlife in which we return to the stars once again to continue the cycle.

Death appears many times within Hardy’s novel, most pointedly at the demises of Susan, Lucetta, and Henchard. Through Susan’s death, Hardy explores the idea that the dead have no dignity. Mother Cuxsom, while talking about Susan’s last wishes said, “ and things a’ didn’t wish seen, anybody will see”, meaning that all the secrets Susan had tried to keep would be revealed and any dignity she had would be shattered. This is effective in changing the atmosphere in the novel, giving it an air of anticipation regarding the contents of a letter that Susan had written in her last day of life, with the instructions “ not to be opened until Elizabeth Jane’s wedding”. This begins the build-up of Henchard’s slow fall from power, as not only has he lost Susan but, as the letter would reveal, his own daughter had died years ago and he was not Elizabeth-Jane’s father.

The idea that all of Susan’s secrets would be revealed illuminates a new meaning in Thomas’ line, “ when their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone”, as picking someone clean is another way of saying ‘ taking everything they have’. Once she was dead, all Susan had left were her secrets, yet the reader knew that they would inevitably be taken from her as well.

Not all of Thomas’ poetry shares the optimistic view demonstrated in his earlier work. His later famous portrayal of death, “ Do not go gently into that good night”, takes on a more pessimistic and violent approach, as it was written for his father who was approaching blindness and death. The poet implores his father to “ rage” and not accept his fate without a fight. Thomas writes “ curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray”, as his father had been of a strong independent mind, yet had been weakened and tamed by his illness. The afterlife promised within this poem is simpler than the one previously portrayed, described only as “ that good night”. Yet within that one line, the poet pours forth his fear of death as an unknown force that is attempting to take his father away from him. By comparing death to the night, Thomas creates many images, one being a description of the helplessness he feels, as night is an inevitable part of the day, just as death is an inevitable part of life. Another interpretation is that Thomas is embracing a childlike fear, as the fear of night and darkness is a phobia shared by children across the world. Both interpretations create an atmosphere of foreboding about the poem as, unlike ‘ And death shall have no dominion’, the reader is offered no silver lining to death.

Sleep is a common comparison used to refer to death in poetry, yet within Wilfred Owen’s poem ‘ Asleep’, the poet implies that death is easier than life. The line, “ He sleeps less tremulous, less cold, Than we who wake, and waking say Alas!” refers to the act of dying as less painful than the grief of those who were left behind. Unlike Thomas, who focuses on death as a concept, and Hardy, who accuses the living for many of his written demises, Owen uses his poem to blame death itself. Both the lines “ Sleep took him by the brow” and “ Death took him by the heart” use death and sleep as names rather than states of being, personifying them as the causes of his poems suffering. Another interpretation of these lines can be found by looking at them through the lens of war. While Owen was writing, everyone was looking for a scape goat on which to blame the damage caused by the war and, due to the magnitude of events that started WW1, everyone was able to blame different people. Owen, instead of looking to a leader or a country to blame, offers the reader the choice of blaming death itself.

The illnesses suffered by his family members significantly altered how Dylan Thomas viewed death. His first poem had been calm and controlled in its choice of wording. For example, lines like “ Shall be one”,” “ Windings of the sea” and “ Where blew a flower”, use soft and tranquil language, attempting to create a placid view of death within his reader. However, in his later poem, Thomas writes with more ferocity, producing lines like “ forked no lightning” and “ who sees with blinding sight”. Although both poems use natural imagery, the latter creates a far more forceful effect, which could show how Thomas wanted to inspire his father into fighting death and is an example of how, like Owen, Thomas describes the painful effect death has on those who are left behind.

Susan’s death also allows Hardy to explore the way death affects the living, through the effect she had on the townsfolk. It was once traditional to place coins on the eyes of the recently departed in order for them to pay the ferryman who took them into the afterlife. Susan asked for her coins to be buried after their use and for them to be left alone, “ don’t ye go spending ’em, for I shouldn’t like it”, however despite her request it is revealed that “ Christopher Coney, went and dug em’ up, and spent ’em”, with the excuse that, “ why should death deprive life of fourpence?”. This question acts to undermine death’s effect on life, as once Susan was gone there was nothing she could do to affect their decisions and the living characters, though some thought it wrong, “’twas a cannibal deed”, agreed that there was no way it could affect her now, “ she’s helpless to hinder that or anything now”. Hardy’s portrayal of life verses death views death and the afterlife as less significant than life and the living. He focus’ almost solely on the townsfolk and their views directly after her passing as, where Susan’s close family would be mourning more deeply, these characters focused on how they had been personally involved her last moments.

Lucetta’s death was drastically different to Susan’s just as Thomas later poem was different to his first. Where Susan died calmly, “ After this her mother was silent, and dozed”, Lucetta’s illness is described as, “ being in great mental agony”. Hardy seems to use their deaths to reflect how the women lived; Susan is often described as, “ simple” and, “ meek”, by Henchard and as “ not what they’d call screwed or sharp”, by Newson. These mannerisms were reflected in her death, as very little is explained about her illness. The reader is only told that she became weaker and weaker until she quietly passed.

Lucetta, on the other hand, was killed almost directly by her past. For Hardy’s contemporary reader, sex out of wedlock was considered deeply shameful and, although the extent of their relationship is not made clear by Hardy, it is implied that Lucetta and Henchard have had a sexual relationship in the past. When reading the love letters written by Lucetta the townsfolk’s reactions are not of anger or disgust, but of pride. They suggest a skimmity-ride, creating effigies of the involved parties and parading them around town on a donkey, as if it were a form of social justice. This suggests Hardy is linking their reactions to the social structure of the time. Many of the townsfolk do not like Lucetta as she puts on airs and acts above them, “ she’s never been one to thank me”, giving their actions an air of petty spitefulness, which adds to the tragedy felt when Lucetta both miscarries and dies from their resentment.

Hardy used death to illuminate the slow downfall of Henchard, as his world appears to be crumbling around him. Hardy’s own description of the novel is ‘ The Life and Death of a Man of Character’, setting the events of the plot out to be a slow build up to an inevitable death. The loss of Susan leads to Henchard, by way of her letter, discovering that Elizabeth Jane was not his daughter. The passing of Lucetta acted to fortify his depression. While contemplating his losses, Hardy writes “ Susan, Farfrae, Lucetta, Elizabeth – all had gone from him”, which acts as a reminder that these figures had almost entirely made up his life in the eyes of the reader, as the years without them were skipped by Hardy. This writing technique illuminates the loss of self that Henchard is going through and creates a vivid sense of dread for the reader as it foreshadows his upcoming death. Another interpretation of this time skip is that it was used to humanize Henchard. Before this point he comes across as detached, a man able to sell his wife and child to a stranger and risk Lucetta’s reputation by abandoning her as well, yet his dependence on those he loved begins to deteriorate his unlikable characteristics, leaving only pity from the reader, as he has nothing left.

The Mayor of Casterbridge was said to be about “ a man of character” and, throughout the chapter of Henchard’s life that Hardy writes about, we see Henchard take on many different characteristics that can be illuminated in comparison to the deaths of the various men in ‘ Do not go gentle into that good night’. Dylan Thomas’s poem focuses on “ wise”, “ good”, “ wild”, and “ grave” men, as well as finally on Thomas’s own father. Henchard is wise and good mostly in his years during the novels time lapse. He was able to raise himself up from the shame of selling his wife and having almost nothing in life, to a respected mayor. When he sees Susan again he tells her “ I don’t drink now – I haven’t since that night” as if desperately trying to prove that he has become a better man. The wise men of Thomas’ poem fear for their actions in life, as though they were wise, they, “ forked no lightning”. Like Henchard, these men long for life so that they may prove their worth, a contrast that creates a vivid sense of fear, as although the wise men knew their time was coming, Henchard is yet unware of his impending death.

However, as the book progresses and problems occur he becomes increasingly wild. His argument and fight with Farfrae reveals an almost bloodthirsty side to his character, with the line “ this is the end of what you began this morning. Your life is in my hands”. Within the poem, Thomas writes that wild men “ learn, too late, that they grieved it on its way”, this could be interpreted as the men learning, too close to death, of their many mistakes and the consequences of them. Henchard, after the fight, “ became possessed by an overpowering wish to see Farfrae again”, to gain pardon for his madness, however, as events continue he is unable to restore his former friendship or write any of his wrongs. The critic Laurence Mazzeno wrote that, “ his failure to understand and his lack of moderation in his desires incite him to brutal aggression followed by pain and regret”; this sheds new light on the wild men who “ caught and sung the sun in flight”, as the power and majesty the sun represents shows the lack of moderation in the lives of the men.

Nearing his death, Henchard mostly suits the description of the grave men, as he begins to think desperately of all he could have done, however his death itself it is most closely related to Thomas’s description of his father. Thomas begs his father to “ curse, bless, me now”, as he fears he will go gently into death. When told of Henchard’s final moment, it is revealed that he was quiet and, after wondering for hours in misery, he “ got weaker; and today he died”. This calm, almost pathetic, death comes as a shock for the reader after the vibrancy of his life. Just as Dylan Thomas could not believe it of his father, both the reader, and his fellow characters, find it hard to believe that Henchard would “ go gentle into that good night” and succumb to his death without a fight.

After the tragedy of World War II, including the events of the Holocaust and the use of the H-bomb, Dylan Thomas feared both war and for the future of mankind. Within the war itself he was classified as a grade III, meaning he would be among the last to be conscripted, due to his lungs and history of illness. Thomas drank excessively during war time, as his friends all left to fight and he was struggling to support his family. The poem that best illuminates Thomas’ views on war is ‘ A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by fire, of a Child in London’, written in 1945 during WWII. Thomas uses a rhythmical writing techniques, filling his poem with alliteration such as, “ mankind making”, “ last light,” and “ sow my salt seed,” as well as rhyming every third line. This rhythm allows readers to immerse themselves within the imagery of the poem despite its violent nature. The line, “ the dark veins of her mother” holds many connotations, for example, her mother could be taken to mean her birth mother, who has lost her daughter to war. This would make sense with Thomas’ fear of what would become of mankind and his refusal to mourn her would refer more to a refusal to disgrace her death with further war propaganda, implied by the line, “ nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath with any further elegy of innocence”. It could also refer to the line “ London’s daughter”, where her mother is the city itself. Here her vines are either the rivers that run through the city, or the fire that ran through the streets after the bombing.

Many theorists have argued over whether Thomas’ poetry was religious; W. S. Merwin said that he found Thomas to be a religious writer because “ that which he celebrates is creation, and more particularly the human condition”, yet Thomas portrayal of death and afterlife does not appear to fit into any conventional religion. R. B. Kershner wrote that “ his God has been identified with Nature, Sex, Love, Process, the Life Force, and with Thomas himself”. This comes into effect in ‘ A Refusal to Mourn’ as Thomas juxtaposes natural imagery with religious symbolism within the poem, for example, “ the synagogue of the ear of corn”, and “ the last valley of sackcloth to mourn”.

The poem ‘ Dulce et Decorum est’, by Wilfred Owen, also refuses to indulge in the patriotic view of war spread about by propaganda. Owen details the gruesome death of a soldier, using language such as, “ he plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning”, as well as descriptions of his surroundings, “ cursed through sludge” and, “ under a green sea”, to immerse the reader in the reality of war. During WWI, when this poem was published, it would have held immense power, as the majority of men had gone off to fight, making this their reality. Owen condemns this cruelty, comparing the innocence of the boys who wanted to join to nativity, with the line, “ to children ardent for some desperate glory, the old lie; Dulce et Decorum est pro patria mori”, which translates to, “ it is sweet and glorious to die for one’s country”, an idea spread around by propaganda to convince young men to sign up.

Throughout their works, all three authors refer to death not only as natural, but as one of the most powerful forms of nature. Thomas focuses his work on how each of us becomes one with the world once we are dead; his writing often refers to his own fears and views on the afterlife. Hardy however, while writing prose as opposed to poetry, focuses on the personal nature of death. He includes the opinions of characters both close to the deceased, as well as characters who did not know them well, as this allows him to illuminate the consequences of life brought about by death. Owen on the other hand, as a war poet, writes mostly about the violence of war, using his own experience to create blunt contrast between life and death.