

Task 1 - Speaking

Discuss the following questions in pairs or small groups:

- In your community, what are the traditions, celebrations, and ceremonies associated with **birth**, **marriage**, and **death**?
- Which words do you immediately associate with the word *death*?
- What do most people in your culture and religious tradition believe happens to human beings after death?



Dylan Thomas was born in the first year of WWI (1914). He was 25 when WWII started. He could not go to war because he had poor health but he probably saw many of his young friends and acquaintances going to war and perhaps never return. In 1941, his hometown, Swansea, was bombed for three nights by the Luftwaffe. Death was a constant personal and social presence during Thomas's life. His father died when he was 38, just one year younger than the age Dylan passed on. Death is continuously present in Dylan Thomas's poetry.

Task 2 - Reading

Here are two of Dylan Thomas' most famous poems about death. Work in pairs. Read **one** of the poems and complete the table for the poem you read. Find words and phrases associated to:

| | Nature | Life | Death |
|--|--------|------|-------|
| A. And death shall have no dominion | | | |
| B. A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child In London | | | |

Now talk to your partner and complete the table for the other poem.

A. And death shall have no dominion

And death shall have no dominion.
 Dead men naked they shall be one
 With the man in the wind and the west moon;
 When their bones are picked clean and the
 clean bones gone,
 They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
 Though they go mad they shall be sane,
 Though they sink through the sea they shall rise
 again;
 Though lovers be lost love shall not;
 And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.
 Under the windings of the sea
 They lying long shall not die windily;
 Twisting on racks when sinews give way,
 Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break;
 Faith in their hands shall snap in two,
 And the unicorn evils run them through;
 Split all ends up they shan't crack;
 And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.
 No more may gulls cry at their ears
 Or waves break loud on the seashores;
 Where blew a flower may a flower no more
 Lift its head to the blows of the rain;
 Though they be mad and dead as nails,
 Heads of the characters hammer through
 daisies;
 Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,
 And death shall have no dominion.

B. A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London

Never until the mankind making
 Bird beast and flower
 Fathering and all humbling darkness
 Tells with silence the last light breaking
 And the still hour
 Is come of the sea tumbling in harness

And I must enter again the round
 Zion of the water bead
 And the synagogue of the ear of corn
 Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound
 Or sow my salt seed
 In the least valley of sackcloth to mourn

The majesty and burning of the child's death.
 I shall not murder
 The mankind of her going with a grave truth
 Nor blaspheme down the stations of the
 breath
 With any further
 Elegy of innocence and youth.

Deep with the first dead lies London's
 daughter,
 Robed in the long friends,
 The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her
 mother,
 Secret by the unmourning water
 Of the riding Thames.
 After the first death, there is no other.

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Task 3 - Speaking

- In your opinion, what does 'Though lovers be lost love shall not' mean?
- In your opinion, what does 'After the first death, there is no other' mean?
- What is the poet's attitude towards death in each poem?
- Which lines tell you so?

Task 4 - Listening and reading

Now listen to Jeremy Harmer reading a poem Dylan Thomas wrote for his father. Complete the lines.

C. Do not go gentle into that good night

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of (1);
Rage, rage against the dying of the (2)

Though wise men at their end know dark is (3),
Because their words had forked no lightning (4).....
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how (5)
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green (6).....,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

(7) men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And (8), too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

(9) men, near death, who see with blinding sight
(10) eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad (11),
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I (12)
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

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Task 5 - Speaking

- In your opinion, what does 'Do not go gentle into that good night' mean?
- Which of the three poems do you like the most, if any?
- Life and death are recurrent themes in English poetry, perhaps even more than love. Do you know any other poems on the same themes?
- Do people write similar poems in your language?

*Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end;
Each changing place with that which goes before,*

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 60, In S. Wells and G. Taylor (eds), 1988. *William Shakespeare. The Complete Works*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.



Task 6 - Language

Dylan Thomas was born in Swansea, on the south-west coast of Wales. The sea is also a constant presence in his poetry. Look at the three poems again. In each of them there is at least one word or phase that refers to **water** and, especially the **sea**. Find them and write them in the table below.

| | |
|---|--|
| A | |
| B | |
| C | |



There is no life without water. Water symbolises life, renewal, motion, purification, and transformation.

In Dylan Thomas' great 'death poems', water - the element of life - is also constantly present.

Task 7 - Speaking

- What does the expression 'circle of life' mean?
- Have you seen Walt Disney's *The Lion King*? The main song is called *Circle of Life*. Why do you think the film producers have chosen it?
- Have you seen any films where life and death are important elements in the story?

Homework

In all areas of popular culture, death is a significant element and a major part of the narrative in many different ways. Choose a film or a play where these themes are explored and write a **300 word review**. Your teacher can give you some suggestions if you need help. Submit your review to your teacher or write it as an entry to your class blog.