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Varying Perspectives on Death in Poetry

“Vulture” by Robinson Jeffers and “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night” by Dylan Thomas both explore the theme of facing death, though do so quite differently and from two very different perspectives. While both poems use similar structural and linguistic devices, Jeffers keeps a much more optimistic and kind feel to his piece, whereas Thomas displays strong feelings of desperation and melancholia throughout his poem.

In “Vulture,” Jeffers maintains a slightly nervous yet still hopeful tone, and incorporates strong imagery and figurative language in his poem to help the story that he is telling come to life. Jeffers primarily focuses on the many complex thoughts he is having as he begins with a description of realization and possible fear and slides into a much more accepting and optimistic tone by the end. The writer begins with a usage of narrative which makes the poem much more personal right from the start. Jeffers appears to find beauty in the vulture, an animal that is often thought of as unattractive or strange. This admiration becomes clear when the author uses metaphors of sea and land to describe the vulture, “On those great sails, how beautiful he looked, veering away in the / sea-light” (Jeffers lines 16-17). In this quote, the vulture essentially overwhelms his surroundings and becomes nearly everything that the author can see and think about. The author also relies on repetition somewhat throughout “Vulture,” such as when he repeats the phrase “how beautiful he looked” (Jeffers lines 13-16). He also begins many of his

lines with “I,” adding a subtle utilization of anaphora which brings the separate ideas together and makes the poem feel more complete. Jeffers uses imagery throughout the entirety of his poem, specifically when describing the vulture: “I lay death-still and heard the flight- / feathers / Whistle above me and make their circle and come nearer. / I could see the naked red head between the great wings / Bear downward staring” (Jeffers lines 7-11). Thomas explores figurative language as well, though does not use nearly as much imagery as Jeffers.

In “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night,” Thomas mostly expresses feelings of sadness, loneliness, and even slight distress. He primarily focuses on the most negative and scary parts of dying. Like Jeffers, the poet uses repetition, specifically in the form of epistrophe, to add a dramatic and emotional tone (Thomas lines 3-18). Thomas repeatedly counters any positive thoughts with negativity and pessimism; for example, when he speaks of “Good men” (Thomas line 7), he becomes melancholy with the assertion that “their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay.” (Thomas line 8) In this metaphor, the speaker tells of men knowing that their good doings will be forgotten after death in spite of their supposedly great and important accomplishments. While Thomas uses far less imagery in his poem, “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night” and “Vulture” hold many similarities relating to style and tone.

Similar strategies are used in each poem such as varying types of repetition and figurative language. Jeffers speaks about himself dying in his poem whereas Thomas is speaking about others dying in his piece. Jeffers is desperate to let the vulture know that he is not dead yet, and therefore, is not ready to be eaten (Jeffers lines 11-13). Similarly, Thomas is desperate to fight against the inevitability of death, even though he begins his poem with what seems like acceptance that everyone eventually must die--“Though wise men at their end know dark is

right...” (Thomas line 4). Both use varying forms of repetition, and create a similar rhythm with short lines and many commas; however, Thomas relies much more heavily on rhyming schemes to maintain this rhythm. Jeffers and Thomas each use metaphors, though Thomas utilizes figurative language to increase the negativity and sadness of his poem, whereas Jeffers uses figurative language to describe beauty and fascination. The two poems are similar in that the writers of both are extensively contemplating death, though in very different ways.

While both poems are focused on very similar core ideas, Jeffers maintains a much more optimistic, kind, and even humorous feel to his piece; whereas Thomas reveals intense feelings of desperation, depression, and general pessimism throughout his poem. “Vulture” by Robinson Jeffers and “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night” by Dylan Thomas both deeply and emotionally explore the concepts of death and dying; though do so wildly differently, from varying perspectives, and make use of both similar and different stylistic and structural strategies.