tip sheet

From Imitation Or, How Dylan Thomas Taught Me to Write Poetry

BY DANA CRUM

The Spanish painter Salvador Dalí once said, "Those who do not want to imitate anything, produce nothing." I agree. Early in my development as a writer, I learned I could improve my writing by imitating my favorite authors. Among the first poets I mimicked was Dylan Thomas, the most famous literary figure of Wales.

One morning as birds twittered outside, I sat at my desk and read his poem "Do Not Go Gentle Into

How did Dylan Thomas's poem about his father serve as a model for my original poem? Read my color-coded margin notes to find out.

What I Learned from Dylan Thomas:

In this poem, Thomas addresses his father, who, after exhibiting fierce independence all his life, has grown "gentle" and submissive now that he's approaching death. Thomas urges his father to leave life the same way that he lived it.

The poem is based on just two rhyme sounds—*night* and *day*—each of which rhymes easily and naturally with many words.

Assonance is the repetition, at close intervals, of the same vowel sound. Thomas creates assonance with three words—*age, rave,* and *day*—emphasizing the letter *a.*

In stanzas 2 through 5, Thomas discusses dying men who do not go quietly. He wants his father to imitate them. When describing their failures, Thomas repeatedly uses powerful metaphors from nature—*lightning, green bay, sun,* and *meteors.*

Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night

BY DYLAN THOMAS

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.

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

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

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

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

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 against the dying of the light.

To Originality

That Good Night." Afterward, I gutted the lines, removing all major words so that nothing was left but the **rhyme scheme** at the ends of line; the **iambic pentameter** rhythm that features five units, each consisting of an unstressed syllable and stressed syllable; the **syntax** or structure of individual sentences; and the minor words such as *a, the, and, of.* Then I plugged in my own words and subject matter.

That exercise taught me more about the craft of writing than any writing session ever did. By using language the way Thomas did, I gained a deeper understanding of his poem. I also learned new techniques and made word choices I'd never made before.

Incidentally, rewriting Thomas's poem was no act of plagiarism. In the process, I created a new work. The exercise can benefit you too. Pick your favorite short poem and get started.

But keep in mind that imitation is a means, not an end. The goal is to learn from famous writers and then to move on and find your own voice and style. Remember the words of the 19th-century French novelist Honoré de Balzac: "You may imitate, but never counterfeit."

Do Not Go Sulk and Munch on a Daffodil

BY DANA CRUM

Do not go sulk and munch on a daffodil.
Cat limbs should streak and scratch at lack of food;
Mew, mew against the ending of the meal.

House cats with different bowls know not to steal,
So they—when one draws near, growling and green-hued—
Do not go sulk and munch on a daffodil.

Waking to typing and a bowl bare still,
Dull cats, though master's sick from words he'd spewed,
Mew, mew against the ending of the meal.

Wild cats that caught and ate rats on the hill,
Then collapsed, guts chewed by what teeth had chewed,
Do not go sulk and munch on a daffodil.

Fat cats, near sloth, that learn with an aching feel
Large limbs can't flit like Hermes' when pursued,
Mew, mew against the ending of the meal.

And you, my kitty, there on the sunlit sill,
Curse, bless, me now with your fanged hiss. Be rude.
Do not go sulk and munch on a daffodil.
Mew, mew against the ending of the meal.

How I Imitated the Master Poet:

While Thomas addressed his father, who was old and near death in his poem, I addressed my kitty, who was young and hungry. I removed most of Thomas's major words, but kept a few. They are highlighted in lines 1, 10, 16, and 17.

Like Thomas, I tried to end lines 1 and 2 with words that rhyme with many others. I was happy with the five words I rhymed with *food;* I didn't force them.

In line 2, I created assonance with the letter *a* by using the words *cat, scratch,* and *lack.*

While Thomas's poem couldn't be more serious, mine couldn't be sillier. In line 3, where Thomas wanted his father to "rage, rage," I wanted my cat to "mew, mew," like a greedy cat in quest of food.

In stanzas 3 and 4, I borrowed from Thomas's use of metaphors when I compare a cat owner's unsuccessful writing session to vomiting and describe the gastric challenges wild cats endure after eating rats.

Dana Crum writes poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Go to **www.readandwriting.com** to listen to one of his short stories.