

Thanatopsis

by William Cullen Bryant

Read with a Purpose

Read to discover what nature can teach us about life and death.

Build Background

When Bryant was only sixteen years old, he coined the word *thanatopsis* by combining two Greek words, *thanatos*, "death," and *opsis*, "sight." The poem defines his new word and offers a different way of looking at and thinking about death.

To him who in the love of Nature holds
 Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
 A various language; for his gayer hours
 She has a voice of gladness, and a smile
 5 And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
 Into his darker musings, with a mild
 And healing sympathy, that steals away
 Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts
 Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
 10 Over thy spirit, and sad images
 Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,^o
 And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,^o
 Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart;—
 Go forth, under the open sky, and list^o
 15 To Nature's teachings, while from all around—
 Earth and her waters, and the depths of air—
 Comes a still voice.— **A**

Yet a few days, and thee
 The all-beholding sun shall see no more
 In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,
 20 Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears,
 Nor in the embrace of ocean, shall exist

A Literary Focus Theme Notice how the speaker contrasts the "narrow house" in line 12 with the "open sky" in line 14. What feelings do these images evoke? How do these contrasting images work together to reflect the poem's theme?

Vocabulary blight (blyt) *n.*: anything that takes away hope or causes ruin.

11. **pall**: coffin cover.

12. **narrow house**: grave.

14. **list**: archaic for "listen."



Analyzing Visuals

Viewing and Interpreting

How does this painting connect to the theme of *Thanatopsis*? How do the images, the color scheme, and the composition as a whole reflect elements from the poem?

Stratton Notch, Vermont (1853) by Asher Brown Durand (1796–1886). Oil on canvas.

Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim **B**
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
25 Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix forever with the elements,
To be a brother to the insensible rock
And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain^o
Turns with his share,^o and treads upon. The oak
30 Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mold.

Yet not to thine eternal resting place
Shalt thou retire alone, nor couldst thou wish
Couch more magnificent. Thou shalt lie down
With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings,
35 The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good,
Fair forms, and hoary seers^o of ages past,
All in one mighty sepulcher. The hills
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,—the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between;
40 The venerable woods—rivers that move
In majesty, and the complaining brooks
That make the meadows green; and, poured round all,
Old Ocean's gray and melancholy waste,—

B Reading Focus Identifying Inverted Sentences The main clause in this sentence, "shall exist thy image," is inverted. Identify the subject and verb, and then rewrite the clause in normal English word order. Why do you think Bryant inverted this clause?

Vocabulary **clod** (klahd) *n.*: lump of dirt or soil.

28. **rude swain**: uneducated country youth.

29. **share**: short for "plow-share."

36. **hoary seers**: white-haired prophets.

Are but the solemn decorations all
 45 Of the great tomb of man. The golden sun,
 The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,
 Are shining on the sad abodes of death,
 Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread
 The globe are but a handful to the tribes
 50 That slumber in its bosom.—Take the wings
 Of morning,^o pierce the Barcan wilderness,^o
 Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
 Where rolls the Oregon,^o and hears no sound,
 Save his own dashings—yet the dead are there:
 55 And millions in those solitudes, since first
 The flight of years began, have laid them down
 In their last sleep—the dead reign there alone.
 So shalt thou rest, and what if thou withdraw
 In silence from the living, and no friend
 60 Take note of thy departure? All that breathe
 Will share thy destiny. The gay will laugh
 When thou art gone, the solemn brood of care
 Plod on, and each one as before will chase
 His favorite phantom; yet all these shall leave
 65 Their mirth and their employments, and shall come
 And make their bed with thee. As the long train
 Of ages glides away, the sons of men,
 The youth in life's fresh spring, and he who goes
 In the full strength of years, matron and maid,
 70 The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man—
 Shall one by one be gathered to thy side,
 By those, who in their turn shall follow them. ©

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
 The innumerable caravan, which moves
 75 To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
 His chamber in the silent halls of death,
 Thou go not, like the quarry slave at night,
 Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
 By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
 80 Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
 About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams. ⓓ

© **Literary Focus Theme** In lines 58–72, what comfort does the speaker offer? Do you find the images in these lines disturbing or comforting? Explain.

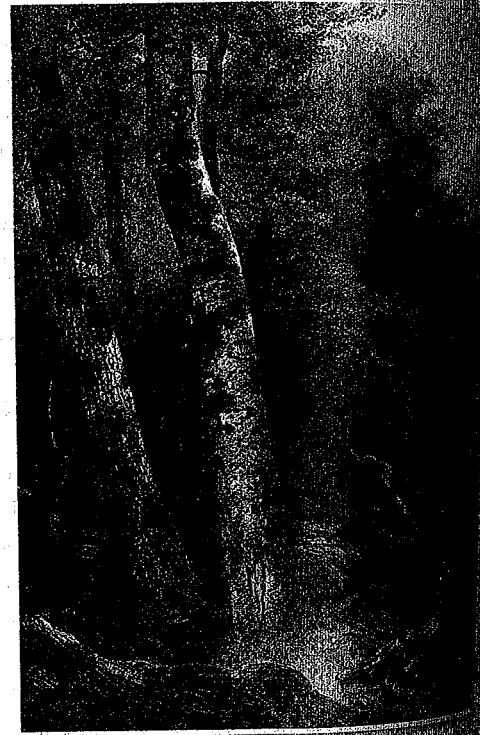
ⓓ **Literary Focus Theme** What claims does the speaker make about how we should live?

Vocabulary **plod** (plahd) *v.*: walk slowly or with difficulty.
mirth (murth) *n.*: happiness.

51. **Take . . . morning:** allusion to Psalm 139:9: "If I take the wings of the morning . . ."

Barcan wilderness: desert near Barca (now al-Marj), in Libya, North Africa.

53. **Oregon:** early name for the Columbia River, which flows between Washington and Oregon.



Birch and Maples (1855), by Asher Brown Durand (1796–1886). Oil on canvas.