

Thanatopsis

William Cullen Bryant

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
5 To Nature's teachings, while from all around—
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air—
Comes a still voice.—

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
Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
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;



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? 8. Ere means "before." What does Nature do for those who communicate with her?

- 11. pall (pól) n.: coffin cover.
- 12. narrow house: grave.

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

? 17. Here the voice of Nature begins to speak. When you get to line 30, sum up Nature's advice to those who think sad thoughts of death.

- 28. rude swain: uneducated country youth.
- 29. share n.: short for "plowshare."

36. hoary seers: white-haired prophets.

? 37. A sepulcher is a burial place. What does Nature say to those who fear the solitude of death?

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,—

A 45 Are but the solemn decorations all
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,

B 50 Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread
The globe are but a handful to the tribes
That slumber in its bosom.—Take the wings
Of morning, pierce the Barcan wilderness,

C 55 Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregon, 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

D 65 His favorite phantom; yet all these shall leave
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.

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

? 45. What decorates the "tomb of man"?

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.

? 57. What examples does the speaker use to explain that the dead are everywhere?

? 72. What comfort does Nature offer in lines 58–72?

? 73. The speaker's voice resumes here. When you get to the end of the poem, sum up the speaker's message in lines 73–81.

Response and Analysis

Thinking Critically

1. As the poem opens, Nature is **personified** as someone who speaks “a various language.” How does Nature speak to us in our “gayer hours”? How does Nature respond to our “darker musings”?
2. Lines 17–30 have a sad, tragic **tone**. Describe the shift in tone that occurs in line 31. What **metaphors** and **images** in this section of the poem reinforce the change in tone?
3. After Nature’s speech (lines 17–72), the human speaker’s voice resumes for the concluding section, or summing up. In your own words, summarize the speaker’s advice in lines 73–81. What **images** does the poet make you see in these lines?
4. Do you find this speaker’s attitude toward death comforting or disturbing, or do you have some other reaction? Explain.
5. How does “Thanatopsis” reveal the Romantic conviction that the universe, far from operating like a machine, is really a living organism that undergoes constant cyclical changes? How does the human speaker feel about this view of the universe?

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