# Thanatopsis

## POEM TEXT

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
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
Over thy spirit, and sad images
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,
And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,
Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart;—
Go forth, under the open sky, and list
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,
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
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix for ever with the elements,
To be a brother to the insensible rock
And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak
Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.
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,
The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good,
Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,
All in one mighty sepulchre. The hills
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,—the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between;
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,—
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,
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,
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound,
Save his own dashings—yet the dead are there:
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
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
Their mirth and their employments, and shall come
And make their bed with thee. As the long train
Of ages glide away, the sons of men,
The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes
In the full strength of years, matron and maid,
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
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,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

## SUMMARY

To someone who loves nature, and feels a sacred relationship with all natural things that can be seen, nature seems to speak to that person in a rich and expressive language. In that person's happier moments, nature reflects that happiness as if speaking in a warm and happy voice. In those happy moments, the natural world seems to smile, and all its sounds are like poetry. When this person is sad, nature flows into his bleak thoughts, offering a gentle feeling of understanding. This understanding takes away the pain of those bleak thoughts before the person even realizes it. Sometimes this person starts of think angrily about the moment of death, and such thoughts hurt their soul like a disease. They picture the depressing image of their final, painful moments, and the cloth their body will be wrapped in, and the blanket draped over their coffin. Then they imagine what it's like to be buried in total darkness, unable to breathe, in that claustrophobic container. These thoughts will make you shiver, and feel incredibly unhappy. When that happens, you should go out under the sky and listen to nature's wisdom. All around you, from the ground and the water and the air, there will come a calming voice.

In a few days, the sun (who sees everything) won't see you anymore, no matter where he is in the sky. Not even in the cold dirt, where your pale body was buried (while all your loved ones cried), and not even in the hug of the ocean, will it be possible to find your face anymore. The earth, which fed you, will take back your full-grown body. You'll become part of the earth again. Having lost all trace of being human, and giving up being an individual person, you'll mix with the natural elements for the rest of time. You'll be the sibling of unthinking stones and lazy little lumps of dirt, which farmers unearth with their plows and walk on. An oak tree will grow roots that travel a great distance underground, poking through your body.

However, you won't go alone to your place of eternal sleep, nor could you ask for a more impressive bed. You'll lie down with the earliest rulers of human history—with kings, the most powerful people on earth—and with wise people, virtuous people, beautiful people, and the white-haired prophets of ancient times, all in one magnificent tomb. Hills lined with rocks like rib cages, old as the sun; valleys arcing in thoughtful silence between those hills; the old, respectable woods; rivers the flow with grace and dignity; the chattering little streams that keep fields green; and, flowing around all of these, the ancient ocean's sad and colorless emptiness—all these things are only cheerless decorations on a tomb that contains all of humankind. The yellow sun, the planets, and the endless stars in the sky are all glowing over the bleak homes of death. They have been doing this for all time, as if nothing's changed. Everyone that walks on the earth is only a small fraction of all the people sleeping in the earth's chest. Fly on wings of morning light, fly through the desert's massive sand dunes; or lose yourself in the unending woods where the Oregon river flows, and can't hear anything except its own splashing—the dead are in all these places too. Millions of them are in those lonely places. Since history began, people have been lying down to their final rest. The dead rule the realm of dead, where there are only dead people. And so you too will have your final rest. So what if you die without a word, and no one, not even your friends, notice that you're gone? All people who live and breathe have the same fate—to die. The happy will continue to be happy and laugh when you are gone. The serious and worried people will continue to trudge on through life. And people, as always, will continue to pursue whatever illusions seem to give their lives meanings. But all these people will have to leave their joys and their tasks, because they will die and rest with you in the earth. Historical periods pass like a train going off into the distance. Future generations; young people at the beginning of life like green stems; people at the height of their powers; mothers and virgins; infants who can't speak; and old white-haired men—all these people will be buried next to you, one at a time, by people who will also die.

So live your life in such a way that—when you are called to join that endless train of dead people on its way to the unknown realm of the dead (where each person gets their own room in the silent buildings of death)—you don't go like a rock-mining slave who is sent to a dungeon. Instead, you should be fulfilled and calmed by an unwavering faith. This will let you go into death like someone wrapping themselves in blankets on their bed, lying down to sweet dreams.

## THEMES

### THE INEVITABILITY OF DEATH

To put it bluntly, “Thanatopsis” is about death. The word *thanatopsis* itself derives from the Greek roots *thanatos* (death) and *opsis* (sight). In other words, the poem always has death in its sights. One of the speaker’s main goals seems simply to make death—and its inevitability—vivid for the poem’s readers. The poem hammers home the fact that death comes for everyone, and voices the despair that such knowledge can cause.

The speaker begins by describing an idyllic scene, in which the natural world itself seems to reflect a person's joyful state of mind. Suddenly, though, frightening thoughts of death intrude on this peace "like a blight"—or disease—over "thy spirit." These "thoughts / Of the last bitter hour," of the moments immediately before death, will cause anyone to “shudder, and grow sick at heart." In other words, thoughts of death can come on suddenly and are extremely disturbing. What's more, these thoughts are unavoidable; the speaker doesn't say "if" such thoughts come, but rather "when."

As if this weren't dark enough, in the second stanza the speaker strikes an even bleaker note, saying that the reader is going to die soon: "Yet a few days, and thee / The all-beholding sun shall see no more," the speaker says, meaning the sun won't shine on the addressee because they'll be buried in the earth. Continuing with this vivid description, the speaker next invites the reader to imagine their body decomposing: "The oak / Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould." In other words, the dead body will turn into dirt, through which different plants' roots will grow.

Next, to underscore that this fate awaits us all, the speaker reflects on all the people who have already died. The speaker frames this discussion by describing the realm of the dead. First, the speaker makes clear just how *big* this realm is. The dead outnumber the living: "All that tread / The globe are but a handful to the tribes / That slumber in its bosom." When someone dies, they join an enormous realm that will exist for all eternity.

All people throughout history end up with the dead, from "patriarchs of the infant world" to those who have yet to be born. No one escapes death, not "the kings, / The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good," nor "matron and maid, / The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man." The realm of the dead is a crowded place indeed, underscoring the poem's point that death comes for *everyone*.

The speaker also reminds the reader that none of the joys of living can continue in the realm of the dead. Everyone, eventually, must "leave / Their mirths and their enjoyments." Human emotions and sensations—the speaker seems to say—don't exist beyond the grave. The poem thus summons the immensity, strangeness, and scariness of death, impressing the weight of mortality upon the reader. It's a dark take, to be sure, but the speaker isn't necessarily trying to make readers feel bad. Instead, the poem seeks to acknowledge the sharp pang of dread that accompanies thoughts of death, without turning away. That is, the poem pushes its readers to actually think about the process of dying because such understanding is the first step towards making peace with death (more on that in this guide's discussion of "Finding Peace in Death and Nature").

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 8-13
- Lines 18-82

## THE UNITY OF NATURE

In the speaker's vision of death, nature plays a central role. Instead of dealing with abstract entities like God, angels, souls, or Heaven, the speaker focuses on the physical objects that make up the mortal world—think: dirt, rivers, trees. In doing so, the speaker suggests that human beings aren't all that different from these physical things—that each dead person is "brother to the insensible rock / And to the sluggish clod." Though this comparison might seem glib or frightening at first, the poem ultimately suggests that death reveals the essential unity of nature—in which humans, rocks, and rivers are all connected.

The poem imagines the process of death and decomposition as a loss of humanity and individuality. The dead are no longer *people* in the normal sense of the word; dying entails the loss of "each human trace," as well as "surrendering up / Thine individual being [...] To mix for ever with the elements." Instead, the dead become a part of nature, a part of the "elements" that allow other things to grow.

And although people cherish having a mind, the dead, having mixed "with the elements," have no more use for minds. Instead, the dead are more like "the insensible rock" and "sluggish clod," things that don't have brains or cultures in any human sense. All in all, this transformation suggests that people aren't separate from nature. In fact, as the word "brother" implies, all natural things are connected, as if nature were a giant family.

In keeping with this idea, as the speaker begins to consider all the people who have already died, the natural world becomes like an ornate tomb. Because all the dead ultimately return to the ground, the speaker views the earth itself as "one mighty sepulchre"—that is, as a giant crypt. Seen in this light, the beautiful elements of nature, like rivers and meadows, "Are but the solemn decorations all / For the great tomb of man." Rather than seeing death as an unfortunate side effect of nature, here the speaker metaphorically suggests that the *whole point* of the natural world is to house people after they die. Again, this idea emphasizes the essential unity of nature, suggesting that death is a crucial ingredient in the cosmic order. All living things come from the earth, and thus must return to it when they die.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-31
- Lines 38-49
- Lines 51-55
- Lines 79-80

## FINDING PEACE IN DEATH AND NATURE

Ultimately, the speaker ties together the poem's interest in mortality and the unity of nature, arguing that people must find peace in death. Because death is inevitable, it is better to face it with dignity and serenity rather than despair. Both by bringing the natural world to life and by listing all the sorts of people who have already faced death, the speaker envisions death as part of the universe's harmonious order. People should have an "unfaltering trust" in death, viewing it as a destiny, rather than a curse.

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker describes how nature both reflects human feelings and can act as a source of wisdom. More specifically, the speaker describes a "love of Nature" that leads to "communion." In other words, people who deeply appreciate nature enter into a sacred relationship with it. For such people, nature "speaks / A various language." This language varies with the observer's mood, so that the natural landscape often seems to mirror how people are feeling.

Additionally, nature doesn't just capture people's feelings; it also helps people find peace and understanding. The speaker says that if one is ever feeling despair (such as the fear of death), one should "Go forth, under the open sky, and list / To Nature's teachings." Looking up at the night sky can bring a sense of calm, as if nature is providing wisdom for how to face death with serenity.

Just as nature can seem like a companion to the lonely, the dead are also companions. The speaker treats the realm of the dead as a glorious community where everyone is equal. The realm of the dead contains both "the powerful of the earth" and "the speechless babe." *Everyone* ends up here. As the speaker emphasizes, when someone dies, they are clearly do not "retire alone." Since being around other people is so important for humans, this sense of community may help alleviate the anxiety around death.

Furthermore, the speaker emphasizes all the impressive people that a dead person shall be surrounded by: "the wise, the good / Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past." It's as if death is a giant hall of fame. For this reason, one could not "wish / Couch more magnificent." In other words, the realm of the dead is basically the most spectacular place you could end up. Normal people are elevated to the same stature as kings, in a manner that makes death *more* magnificent, not less.

At the end of the poem, the speaker urges both dignity and trust in nature. One shouldn't approach death with fear, but instead as a source of serenity. The speaker urges the reader to "go not like the quarry-slave, at night, / Scourged to his dungeon," when it is time to die. In other words, the dying shouldn't perceive death as a terrible injustice or punishment. Instead, the dying should be "sustained and soothed / By an unfaltering trust." Just as nature can sooth people's despair, the speaker here suggests that it's important to trust in death as a natural phenomenon. It's not a punishment, but rather a harmonious—even good—part of life.

Death, according to speaker, should be thought of as "wrapping the drapery of [one's] couch" around oneself, before drifting off to "pleasant dreams." That is, death is a like a warm blanket, a final and soothing state of rest after all the turbulence of life. Thus, for those who can see the harmony of nature, there is nothing to fear in death.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-17
- Lines 18-23
- Lines 23-29
- Lines 29-31
- Lines 32-43
- Lines 43-51
- Lines 51-54
- Lines 54-58
- Lines 59-82

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-5

*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*
*And eloquence of beauty,*

"Thanatopsis" is a poetic meditation on human beings' relationship with death. The title comes from the Greek roots *thanatos* (death) and *opsis* (sight). In other words, the poem is literally about looking at death. This wasn't Bryant's original title for the poem (he didn't have one, in fact), but rather was added by the editors who first published the poem. These editors were so impressed by the poem they couldn't disbelieve that an American could have written it! This impressive sounding title captures some of that feeling. It lets the reader know that this is going to be a lofty-sounding poem, one whose rhetoric is reminiscent of earlier European masterpieces.

The poem begins by discussing the relationship between an individual "him" (i.e., anyone) and "Nature." The speaker references the ability for people to have a sacred relationship with nature:

> [...] him who in the love of Nature holds
> Communion with her visible forms

"Communion" is a term with Christian overtones. Most broadly, it suggests a relationship between God and the faithful. The most concrete example is when Christians consume the "body and blood" of Christ in the form of bread and wine. Here, however, there are none of the trappings of church. Instead, the speaker suggests that one can achieve a similar kind of grace simply looking by at nature. This is a form of "love."

Throughout the history of Christianity, some theologians have claimed that God is *immanent* in nature, making nature itself holy. That is, God is directly present *in* the physical world, even *part* of that world, rather than removed in Heaven. The speaker seems to be suggesting something similar here. This places Bryant at the start of a line of American writers, such as Ralph

Waldo Emerson, who depicted the relationship between people and nature as divine (a movement called American Romanticism, or Transcendentalism).

Romantic writers, both English and American, have also emphasized how nature seems to both reflect and modify peoples feelings. That's exactly what the speaker depicts here. Nature "speaks / A various language." This personification of nature as a speaking "she" captures the sense of communion mentioned earlier—it's as if nature responds to her observers, like one friend to another. The speaking is, of course, metaphorical. For people looking at nature, the sights it offers *are like* responses to their feelings. And it's always just the right response. During someone's "gayer hours," that is, moments of happiness, nature seems to join in that happiness like a good friend: "She has a voice of gladness."

Furthermore, nature doesn't just mirror happiness, it also adds "a smile / And eloquence of beauty." One reason for "the love of Nature" is that nature always enriches people's experiences. Throughout the poem, the speaker will use natural imagery to enrich the reader's understanding of death.

Notice that all of this is written in the third-person ("him"). The speaker never comes out and speaks in the first-person "I." This has two, almost paradoxical effects. On one hand, instruction manuals employ a similar strategy, so that the poem can be thought of instructions for thinking about death. On the other hand, the "I" is *implied*. There's no "I" because it's as if the reader is inside the speaker's head, listening to the speaker's thoughts. People don't need to say "I" in their own heads! Either way, the poem has the effect of enveloping both speaker and reader in an engrossing line of thought.

The beginning of the poem also establishes the poem's meter, which will remain consistent through. This meter is iambic pentameter, or five da-DUM feet per line:

To him | who in | the love | of Na- | ture holds

The first line begins with this crystal-clear meter, which the speaker will vary dexterously throughout the poem. These line are also unrhymed, making them blank verse.

## LINES 5-11

*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*
*Over thy spirit, and sad images*
*Of the stern agony,*

Now the speaker describes how nature "speaks" to someone when they are sad:

[...] she glides
Into his darker musings, with a mild
And healing sympathy

First, nature seems to enter into one's mind, where "darker musings" (i.e., bleak thoughts) are taking place. Once in that person's mind, nature offers "healing sympathy." This sympathy, the feeling that nature keeps one company even in the loneliest sadness, is very powerful. It takes away the "sharpness" of dark thoughts, making them bearable.

This is all very abstract, but it represents a pretty concrete phenomenon. Someone might be feeling down, but as soon as they go out for a walk in nature, it begins to soothe them. In this sense, nature does seem to directly engage with people's minds.

This will become even more important as people confront one of the greatest sources of despair: mortality, or "thoughts / Of the last bitter hour." These thoughts are "like a blight / Over thy spirit." Blights are diseases that affect plants, and they can be especially devastating when they wipe out people's crops, dwindling their food supply. A blight of the spirit, then, is a thought that spreads like a disease, preventing someone from living fully. Obsessed by this blight, people begin focusing on "sad images / Of the stern agony," continually trying to imagine how awful the moment of death will be.

So far it's been 11 lines, but the speaker is only on the poem's second sentence! Employing hypotaxis, layering one clause after enough, the speaker is able to craft really robust sentences. The syntax of the first sentence unspools like a taut rope, coiling intricately around itself. Writing like this requires presence of mind, because certain phrases aren't completed until much later, their meaning hanging over the poem like suspended clouds. For instance, line 8 begins with "When thoughts / Of the last bitter hour come," but the clause that completes this phrase doesn't come until line 14 ("Go forth, under the open sky"). That is: *when these thoughts come, go out into nature*. In the intervening lines, the speaker is busy filling in vivid details.

Sentences like this capture how the speaker thinks, the way thought drifts and gets caught up in themselves. Such sentences also make the poem feel *big*. Poets like Milton (*Paradise Lost*) wrote like this for their epic poems, because hypotaxis makes sentences feel epic, as if they're capable of taking in the whole world. In "Thanatopsis," the speaker is going to be concerned with humanity's relationship to nature and death on a massive scale.

The poem also continues its use of blank verse here. Blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) is often used to depict the intricacies of thought, as exemplified by poets like Shakespeare and Wordsworth. Without the need to rhyme, it becomes easier to engage in the kind of hypotaxis employed

here, as well as enjambment. Indeed, every line so far has been enjambed. This helps emphasize the poem's varied syntax. Rather than stopping at each line break, the poem's language twists and flows down the page, following more intricate, intuitive, and less predictable patterns.

## LINES 11-17

*and shroud, and pall,*
*And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,*
*Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart;—*
*Go forth, under the open sky, and list*
*To Nature's teachings, while from all around—*
*Earth and her waters, and the depths of air—*
*Comes a still voice—*

The speaker continues to represent the thoughts of someone obsessed with death. This person now imagines the burial shroud they'll be wrapped in when they die, and the pall that will be draped over their coffin. They even imagine the coffin as a "narrow house," a metaphor that emphasizes how claustrophobic it would be to get buried. Such things are enough to make one "shudder, and grow sick at heart." Picturing one's death leads to a pretty bleak outlook. As the word "sick" again emphasizes, this outlook preys upon one like a disease.

In line 14, the speaker completes the phrase begun way back in line 8: "When thoughts / Of the last bitter hour come," began the speaker earlier in the poem. Now, completing that phrase, the speaker says, "Go forth, under the open sky." That is, when these feelings start to overwhelm someone, they should go out outside. Nature will help soothe the fear of death: "from all around [...] Comes a still voice." The stillness of this voice represents its tranquility. Again, this is both personification and a metaphor, capturing how it feels like nature speaks to those who are willing to listen.

This voice comes "from all around— / Earth and her waters, and the depths of air." The whole globe seems is full of the single voice of nature. The imagery of earth, air, and water sets up the speaker's idea of nature as a unified whole. The entire earth is ultimately connected; humans are part of a vast system that speaks to them and encourages them. The poem's continued use of hypotaxis mimics this gigantic interconnectedness. The syntax, with its multiple em-dashes, forms a complex, web-like structure—just like the web of life and death.

## LINES 18-23

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

In the second stanza, the speaker abruptly changes tone. The speaker addresses "thee," an old way of saying *you*, as if talking directly to the reader. Here, the speaker makes a bold poetic move, saying that the reader (or whoever the *you* is) will die in "a few days":

> Yet a few days, and thee
> The all-beholding sun shall see no more
> In all his course

In other words, no matter the position of the sun in the sky, it won't be shining on "thee," because that person will be dead and buried.

What makes this shift so bold and abrupt? Well, the speaker goes from reassuring the reader about the soothing effects of nature in the first stanza to somberly predicting the reader's death in the stanza—and in pretty pessimistic terms at that. Not only will the reader die, but their face will disappear entirely from existence: "nor yet in the cold ground [...] Nor in the embrace of ocean, shall exist / Thy image." When people die, it's as if they are wiped from the face of the earth.

By setting up the image of "the breathless darkness, and the narrow house" in the first stanza, the description here takes on an added level of grimness: "cold ground, / Where they pale form was laid with many tears." Here, it's all too easy to imagine being lowered into the ground in a suffocating coffin while loved ones cry in the cemetery above. Although in the first stanza the speaker suggested that nature would ease the pain of such thoughts, the second stanza is more interested in representing the full scope of how scary and painful such thoughts can be. That is, it gives voice to despair, rather than to the soothing powers of nature.

Additionally, the speaker continues to use images that conjure the immensity of the world. First, the speaker imagines the sun traveling through the sky. Then, the speaker imagines the expansive ocean, varying the meter to help capture its size:

> Nor in | the em**brace** | of o- | cean, **shall** | ex**ist**

Here, the first few feet mix up the meter. But adding an extra syllable to the second foot ("the em**brace**"), and making the first foot a trochee ("**Nor** in"), the speaker creates three unstressed syllables in a row. These syllables create a swooping, rushing effect that helps the reader image being in the embrace of the ocean, caught up in the sweep of its powerful waves.

## LINES 23-27

*Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim*
*Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,*
*And, lost each human trace, surrendering up*
*Thine individual being, shalt thou go*
*To mix for ever with the elements,*

In this section, the speaker elaborates on the process of decomposition. The speaker says that when the reader dies, all

traces of them will be wiped from the earth because they will become *part of* the earth. Additionally, the speaker continues to employ blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, in these lines.

In line 23-24, the speaker employs a special device called epanalepsis, in which a word at the start of a phrase is repeated at the end:

> [...] Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
> Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,

The word "Earth" begins the phrase as the subject, and ends it as the object of a preposition. What the speaker is saying here is that the earth nourishes people as they grow up (its ground provides food, shelter, water, etc.), and then when people die the earth takes them back, decomposing them and making them part of it again. That's the circle of life.

So, using epanalepsis, the speaker construct a *grammatical* circle in order to capture that effect. This structure can also be thought of as related to chiasmus, in which the grammatical order of a sentence is reverse in the second half—again mirroring a repetitive circle.

When you die, you lose "each human trace, surrendering up / Thine individual being." This sounds abstract, but it represents a very concrete reality. When living things they, they slowly fall apart, eaten by different organisms that turn their remains into dirt. In this sense, when people die, their individuality—and anything that could distinguish them as human—slowly disappears. They "mix for ever with the elements."

To grasp how deeply the speaker is thinking here, note the word "individual." It's a familiar word to modern ears, and it has often informed how modern people think of themselves. At least since the American Revolution, *individuality* has often been a central concept in American culture; American *individualism* stresses the rights and powers of *individual* citizens. Relatedly, the Romantic writers stressed the importance of individuals' private emotions and perception in relation to nature. The original roots of *individual* are the Latin *in* (not) and *dividuus* (divisible). In other words, the individual that which cannot be divided.

Yet here in the poem, that's exactly what's happening—the individual is divided up, "mix[ing]" with the other elements of nature. Individuality may be very important to people, the poem seems to be saying, but it won't last forever. It's more a temporary state that death undoes.

## LINES 28-31

> *To be a brother to the insensible rock*
> *And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain*
> *Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak*
> *Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.*

At the end of the second stanza, the speaker describes what happens now that the "thou" has "lost each human trace." In other words, what it's like when people die and cease to be human individuals.

First, the speaker describes how a dead person becomes "brother to the insensible rock." The word *insensible* means "lacking senses," i.e., being unconscious, not having a functioning mind. This strangely personifying word captures how humans commonly perceive rocks to be totally devoid of consciousness. Rocks aren't alive. When people die, they no longer have minds either. So, rocks and the dead are both of the same metaphorical family that includes the ground of the entire earth.

Additionally, this sense of family suggests that even though rocks and dead people aren't alive, they still have some sort of experience of being connected. Here, the speaker is trying to get at something at the limits of human knowledge—what it's like to be dead. On one hand, dead people decompose and their minds disappear. On the other hand, the speaker paradoxically hints that even this is a kind of experience. It seems that when people die, what remains is a feeling of unity with the humble things of the earth, with rocks and dirt.

Progressing with this description, the speaker says that the dead person will also be brother "to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain / Turns with his share, and treads upon." A "clod" is a lump of dirt. Such lumps can't move on their own, and so are "sluggish." Instead, these lumps only get moved when a farmer (a "rude swain" as the speaker archaically calls them) plows the ground. Instead of being among the humans who till the soil and grow crops, dead people are now in that soil itself, providing nourishment to future generations.

As the phrase "treads upon" suggests, this is a humbling and pessimistic vision. In becoming united with nature, the dead seem to become as low and undignified as can be. Furthermore, a dead body gets torn apart by natural processes: "The oak / Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce they mould." It's as if, even in death, people are wounded, even tortured, by the natural world they are now a part of.

This is an unexpected sentiment to end the second stanza on, considering that the first stanza presented such a reverential attitude towards nature. In that stanza, nature seemed to be the solution to all human problems. Now, it seems like the source of those problems. However, rather than taking lines 28-31 as representing the speaker's permanent opinions, these lines should be seen as a stage in a thought process. Here, the speaker is giving full voice to the despair people feel when they think about death. Only after this despair has been fully acknowledged can the speaker then move past it.

The use of blank verse continues here, with a few modifications. For instance, line 30 starts off with a trochee (DUM-da), before returning to iambic pentameter:

Turns with | his share,| and treads | upon. | The oak

The disruption of the rhythm here captures the feeling of "turn[ing]" as the farmer's plow churns the soil.

Next, here is line 28:

To be | a broth- | er to | the insen- | sible rock

This line has two extra syllables in the form of the anapests (da-da-DUM) at the end of the line. These unstressed syllables might be read as capturing the dullness of what it's like to be a rock. Or, this line can more simply be seen as a subtle change used to add variety to the poem.

## LINES 32-38

*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,*
*The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good,*
*Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,*
*All in one mighty sepulchre.*

In the third stanza, the speaker transitions from depicting the unity of nature to thinking about all the people who have died throughout history. In these opening lines, the speaker considers all the illustrious people who have died. Because the dead join these people when they die, death shouldn't be thought of as a lonely state.

The speaker begins:

Yet not to thine eternal resting-place
Shalt thou retire alone, nor couldst thou wish
Couch more magnificent.

In other words, when people die they don't enter death alone. As the speaker shall demonstrate, death is full of all the people who have died before. Furthermore, playing on the clichéd metaphor of death as an "eternal resting place," the speaker suggest that there is no "Couch more magnificent." In other words, death is the most fabulous bed possible.

Why? Because all the greatest people from human history end up dead. First, the speaker references the "patriarchs of the infant world." Here, the infant world refers to the early days of human history, ancient civilizations whose rulers are still famous, like Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, or the Pharaohs. And it's not just rulers who are among the illustrious dead. There are "wise" people, "good" people, "fair" (i.e., beautiful) people, and the gray-haired "seers" (or prophets).

In listing all these fantastic people, the speaker views death through a decidedly different lens than that of previous stanza. Whereas in that stanza death was all about ceasing to be human, here the speaker emphasizes the wealth of humanity present in death. These two approaches *could* be taken as contradictory. *Or*, they could be read as suggesting that the unity of nature includes all of these people, and that when someone becomes "brother to the insensible rock," they also become brother to "The powerful of the earth."

To some modern readers, the idea that when you die you get to "mix for ever" with people like Charlemagne or Genghis Khan might seem cool, but not exactly worth the price of death. The speaker's point, however, is bigger than that. The poem is saying that death is a form of community (or "communion," to use a word from the first stanza). In fact, it's probably the most fulfilling form of community possible—the dead are surrounded by the people they would find most inspiring. In this sense, death reveals not only the unity of nature, but the unity of humankind, in which all people are uplifted by others' greatness.

In addition to the continued use of blank verse, the poem also employs alliteration and sibilance to make this list of people more vivid:

Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past

First, the alliteration of /f/ sounds in "Fair forms" mirrors what the speaker is talking about. "Fair forms" means "beautiful bodies," and the repeating /f/ sounds captures an almost overly-sweet sense of beauty. At the same time, it draws attention to the poem's own "form"—that is, the carefully constructed beauty of the poem itself.

Then, the sibilant /s/ and /z/ sounds in "seers of ages past" create a hiss that seems to convey old, wizened quality of the seers themselves, as if the seers are whispering through their scraggly gray beards.

## LINES 38-43

*The hills*
*Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,—the vales*
*Stretching in pensive quietness between;*
*The venerable woods—rivers that move*
*In majesty, and the complaining brooks*
*That make the meadows green;*

In the next section of the third stanza, the speaker reintroduces nature. Here, the speaker evokes majestic images of the landscape. Particularly, the speaker emphasizes how *old* nature is.

This section could easily have appeared in the first stanza, when the speaker described the powerful beauty of nature:

[...] The hills
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,—the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between

In the first stanza, the speaker described how nature always seems mirror peoples' moods. Now, nature again takes on human qualities, an instance of personification. Hills are "Rock-ribbed," just as humans have rib cages, and "vales" (or valleys) have a "pensive quietness," another description that would usually be applied to humans. Similarly, "rivers [...] move / In majesty" and the smaller brooks are "complaining."

Previously, the speaker asserted that people lose their humanity when they die and decompose. Now, however, the *natural* world itself seems to become more *human*. There's a sense of merging here, as if humans and nature are becoming one. Furthermore, the ancientness of nature mirrors the ancientness of the human race. For as long as humans have been living and dying, these features of the natural landscape have existed as well.

The meter here changes to capture the ruggedness of the landscape the speaker describes:

> Rock-ribbed | and an- | cient as | the sun,— | the vales
> Stretching | in pen- | sive qui- | etness | between;

Each of these lines leads with a stress. "Rock-ribbed," a spondee, has a rocky feel as if composed of two boulders, just like the ones that line the ancient hills. Meanwhile, "Stretching in pensive" seems to stretch out through its unstressed syllables, mirroring the river it describes.

## LINES 43-46

> *and, poured round all,*
> *Old Ocean's gray and melancholy waste,—*
> *Are but the solemn decorations all*
> *Of the great tomb of man.*

Lines 43-46 complete the sentence that began back in line 38. The first part of this sentence focused on the pretty parts of nature. Now, the sentence takes a bleaker turn: "and, poured round all, / Old Ocean's gray and melancholy waste." The imagery here metaphorically depicts the ocean as water that is "poured" over the entire globe. Yet, instead of seeing the ocean as a source of life, the speaker pictures the ocean as a "gray and melancholy waste."

A "waste" is an area that doesn't have much to offer living things—meaning the ocean here is a pretty inhospitable place. People in the 18th and 19th centuries had to travel by sea whenever they wanted to cross the Atlantic or Pacific, so many of them knew firsthand how rough and dangerous the sea could be. Again, the speaker personifies nature by referring to "Old Ocean," as though the ocean were a grandparent or elderly figure. Yet "Old Ocean" isn't so much kind as ornery.

The speaker goes on to assert that all these facets of nature, from hills to the ocean, "Are but the solemn decorations all / Of the great tomb of man." This metaphor compares the ground to a tomb, and all the things that can be seen above ground as decorations on the tomb. Although this is a pretty intense way to put it, the speaker is again just talking about the circle of life: everything that dies returns to the ground, so the earth is basically one huge tomb. Once someone gets in the mindset that the main purpose of the life is to die, then it becomes pretty easy to think of the vivid, living world as a mere decoration for the realm of the dead beneath one's feet.

## LINES 46-51

> *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*
> *That slumber in its bosom.*

Now the speaker has transitioned back to a bleak outlook on death. Here, the speaker elaborates on the assertion made in the previous section: that the earth is one big tomb, and that everything else is mere decoration.

The speaker imagines the world as seen from outer space:

> [...] The golden sun,
> The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,
> Are shining on the sad abodes of death

The "infinite host of heaven" refers to the stars. All the "shining" celestial objects look down on earth, and all they see are "the sad abodes of death." That is, if someone were to look at earth from the outside, they would see a planet of death.

Again, this is not necessarily how the speaker feels all the time, or even a perception that the speaker thinks people *should* have. Rather, the speaker is once again giving full voice to the kind of despair people can feel when thinking about death. Furthermore, even if this isn't necessarily the image the speaker wants people to end up with, the speaker doesn't want people to *avoid* thinking about it either. Rather, the poem implies that it's important to acknowledge the important role that death plays in the world.

Furthermore, thinking in this way allows one to grasp existence on a much larger scale. The speaker imagines the stars shining on the earth "Through the still lapse of ages." *Lapse* refers to an interval of time (just as *time-lapse* photography compresses a long period of time into a sped-up video). What then is "the still lapse of ages?" How can an interval of time be "still?" Well, imagine seeing earth from the point of view of a star. This star has been floating out there in the darkness of space for thousands, millions, even billions of years. A human lifetime is nothing to that star. Human civilizations rise and fall, but to that star nothing really changes. Human "ages," or historical periods, flash in front of it, barely perceptible as it floats in the unchanging stillness of space.

The phrase "still lapse of ages" captures this stillness, the sense that all the tragedies and exciting developments of human history are insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Beyond the scale of a human life, there is a vast stillness that will surround the world for all time.

Next, the speaker asserts that amount of dead people buried in the earth vastly exceeds the number of living people walking on its surface:

> [...] All that tread
> The globe are but a handful to the tribes
> That slumber in its bosom.

Again, the speaker forces the reader to reckon with the full scale of human death.

In this section, the speaker uses meter to help convey vast scales. For instance, take line 47:

> The plan- | ets, all | the in- | finite host | of heaven

The line has two extra syllables. Furthermore, one of these syllables creates a feminine ending, where the line ends on an unstressed syllable. The extra syllable tacked on the end noticeably elongates the line. "[T]he infinite host of heaven" thus has only three stresses, but five unstressed syllables, creating the impression of a kind of fullness—even infinity—within the line.

## LINES 51-55

> *—Take the wings*
> *Of morning, pierce the Barcan wilderness,*
> *Or lose thyself in the continuous woods*
> *Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound,*
> *Save his own dashings—yet the dead are there:*

In the previous sentences, the speaker asked the reader to imagine what the earth looks like to the stars. Now, the speaker imagines flying all over the globe, noticing how there is death everywhere on earth.

"Take the wings / Of morning," says the speaker. This is a very lyrical and impressionistic command. Bryant got it from Psalm 139:9, in the Bible:

> If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;

This biblical allusion not only provides an evocative image, but it also brings the themes of Psalm 139 into conversation with "Thanatopsis." The Psalms were religious poems written by David, one of the ancient kings of the Hebrews. This particular psalm discusses the omnipotence of God—that is, God's presence everywhere on earth.

This connection is covered more thoroughly in the Poetic Devices section of this guide. What's most important to note for now is that Bryant has replaced God with death. In the Psalm, no matter where the speaker goes, they encounter God. Now, the speaker encounters death everywhere. This change is very intelligent and powerful, but it's also heretical. God isn't in the picture at all in this poem.

The phrase "wings of morning" might also have reminded readers of Eos, the winged Greek goddess of dawn. Taken this way, the speaker asks the reader to imagine flying over the world with Eos as she brings dawn to each part of it. On a more intuitive level, this phrase conjures how the light of early morning seems to fan out over the landscape like wings, the sun rising higher and higher as if flying. Birds begin to take flight. As such, there are many associations in the imagination between morning, lightness, and flight.

The point is that now the speaker imagines soaring through the world, trying to find a place where there is no death. Of course, that is impossible. First, light begins to "pierce the Barcan wilderness"—that is, night ends in the desert and the sun shines on giant, crescent-shaped sand dunes called barchans. But there are dead people and animals in the dessert.

Then, the sun shines on the forests of the Pacific Northwest where the Oregon river flows (Bryant probably meant the Columbia river). As throughout the poem, the speaker personifies nature here:

> Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
> Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound,
> Save his own dashings

Although the river can hear, it can only hear the sound of itself crashing over rocks and splashing through rapids. The river thus has a very private existence.

This depiction continues a trend that runs throughout the poem. Although nature as a whole offers "a voice of gladness, and a smile" as well as "healing sympathy" and "teachings," individual parts of nature seem almost blind to each other. The "insensible rock," "Old Ocean's [...] waste" and now the Oregon—all these things are trapped in themselves. They can't perceive the world beyond them; they certainly don't notice all these dead humans.

Nature can offer humans a sense of peace through its unity. Yet as sections like these demonstrate, humans still have to reckon with what that unity is like. Joining nature in death means relinquishing one's thinking mind, and along with it the awareness both of oneself and the things outside oneself. The world of the dead offers a form of peace unlike any peace that humans can know while alive.

## LINES 56-61

> *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*
*Take note of thy departure?*

After describing a flight around the globe, the speaker again focuses on the world of the human dead. Although these dead have become part of the earth, they are now totally separate from the living. In fact, although death leads to a sense of unity with nature, and also produces a kind of isolation. As usual, the speaker continues to write this section in unrhymed iambic pentameter, or blank verse. Here, this unrelenting meter captures both the unstoppable march of time, as well as the monotony of isolation.

Just as the Oregon river "hears no sound, / Save his own dashings," the dead have their "solitudes." A *solitude* is a lonely, hard-to-reach place. So, when the speaker refers to "millions in those solitudes," this refers to realm of the human dead, which is effectively isolated from the rest of the world: "the dead reign there alone." That is, the human dead still have access to each other, just not to anything else. Again, the speaker considers death on a vast timescale. More specifically, the speaker says that people have been dying "since first / The flight of years began" (i.e., since the beginning of time).

Then, the speaker makes things much more personal, addressing a "thou." That is, the speaker turns to the reader, asking them to imagine dying "In silence," so that no one notices—not even friends. Once again, the speaker is voicing some people's deepest fears about death: imagine, the speaker suggests, what it would be like to die completely alone.

Furthermore, the speaker phrases this as a rhetorical question: "and what if thou withdraw / In silence from the living [...]?" The speaker might as well be saying, "So what if you die alone?" In this section, then, the speaker takes a pretty unsentimental, even cynical, attitude towards death.

## LINES 61-67

*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*
*Their mirth and their employments, and shall come*
*And make their bed with thee.*

The speaker continues down the previous section's cynical line of reasoning. In that section, the speaker basically said: "So what if nobody notices that you've died?" Now, the speaker goes on to answer that rhetorical question, saying, "All that breathe / Will share thy destiny." In other words, it doesn't matter if someone dies alone—soon enough, the rest of the living will join them in death as well.

The speaker acknowledges that life goes on when people die. Sometimes, life's persistence can be seen as a positive fact; here, it only adds another sour note to death. "The gay [i.e., the joyful] will laugh / When thou art gone," says the speaker. Happy people will keep having a good time, and "the solemn brood of care / Plod on." That is, serious and melancholy people will continue to have their trouble. Furthermore, although all these people will be absorbed in their emotions, ultimately their goals are only "phantom[s]," or illusions. Life may be intense and absorbing, says the speaker, but the things that give it meaning aren't real.

The meter, iambic pentameter (again, five da-DUM feet), lends a kind of monotony to this list, as though all the emotions of living people are ultimately boring and inconsequential:

> [...] All | that breathe
> Will share | thy dest- | iny. | The gay | will laugh
> When thou | art gone, | the sol- | emn brood | of care

The meter continues in this unbroken rhythm, just as the cycle of life and death continues unbroken, no matter what's going on in people's lives. The meter then varies a little, but only to emphasize the drudgery of being alive:

> [...] the sol- | emn brood | of care
> Plod on

"Plod on," which can be read as a spondee (DUM-DUM), captures heavy feelings of the "solemn brood of care." In other words, the meter seems to trudge through the line, just like the overly worried people it describes.

## LINES 67-73

*As the long train*
*Of ages glide away, the sons of men,*
*The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes*
*In the full strength of years, matron and maid,*
*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.*

The final sentence of the third stanza is a rhetorical flourish meant to evoke, once again, all the kinds of people that will die. The sentence functions as a catalog, listing young people, adults, unmarried women and mothers, babies, and old people.

It's important to note here that while "Thanatopsis" is indeed a powerful meditation on the nature of death, it's also a very powerful example of eloquence in the English language. One reason the poem's first publishers were so impressed, and that the poem has remained famous for so long, is that it *sounds* so good. It was one of the earliest examples of American poetry that achieved the same kind of sound that people had usually associated with British poetry.

In fact, the catalog is an old poetic technique often used in ancient epic poetry, such as that of the Greeks and Romans. Long catalogs in poems like *The Iliad* help summon that vastness and complexity of the world. They *also* allow poets to show off how eloquent they can be. A list of all the types of people in the world could easily become very dull—here, the speaker has injected a special dash of eloquence in order to make that list interesting.

Indeed, the speaker does keep it interesting. This is partly by varying the structure of the phrases, so they're not repetitive: "the son's of men, / The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes / In the full strength of years, matron and maid." These phrases have almost a jazzy feel to them, employing a great deal of variation. Additionally, the speaker doesn't list people in order of age, starting with "the speechless babe," and progressing up to the "gray-headed man," but rather jumbles everyone up, keeping the sentence unpredictable.

The hypotactic structure of this sentences adds a feeling of energy. As the speaker lists all these people, the grammatical meaning of the sentence still hasn't been completed. Only in line 72, "Shall one by one be gathered to thy side," does the speaker explain what this list is all about. Until then, this list seems to hover anxiously around the living—just as people live for some amount of time and then die.

## LINES 74-79

*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,*
*Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,*
*Scourged to his dungeon,*

In the final stanza, the speaker provides a moral for the poem, asserting how people should act in the face of death. After passing through all the bleak thoughts people can have about death, the speaker now moves towards a more positive vision. That said, the speaker doesn't discount any of the depictions of death from the previous stanzas. Rather, this stanza tries to show how people can find a sense of peace while also have a realistic understanding of death.

The stanza begins with the speaker discussing the right way to "live" in the face of death. Dying people should not "go [...] like the quarry-slave at night, / Scourged to his dungeon." A quarry slave is someone who is forced to mine rocks in an excavated pit. In this simile, then, the speaker is saying that people shouldn't see death as a kind of enslavement or undignified punishment. They shouldn't resist death, and they shouldn't die with a meek and defeated attitude.

In lines 75-77, the speaker outlines a vision of the process of dying that, if not optimistic, at least has a mystical quality to it. Dying people form an "innumerable caravan." A caravan is a long traveling group of people. Here, the speaker metaphorically imagines the dying in a long line that stretches from the world of the living to the realm of the dead. Death, then, becomes a kind of journey or migration, even an adventure. This journey leads to the "mysterious realm" of death, a phrase that suggests death is both a scary and a little exciting.

Employing another metaphor, the speaker says that each dead person gets a "chamber in the silent halls of death." In other words, the speaker suggest that death is like a hotel, or perhaps some austere castle. Each dead person gets a room in this building, which is totally silent. Of course, this is only a metaphor. The speaker isn't saying that there is a castle underground for the dead people. Rather, the speaker uses this image to help readers get as sense of death as a kind of sleep, a new phase of existence rather than a total end.

The metaphors in this section, then, capture the strangeness of death, while at the same time making that strangeness a little more accessible. Death is a journey, a rest, a stay in unfamiliar lodgings.

## LINES 79-82

*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.*

In this final section of "Thanatopsis," the speaker at last provides guidance for how people should approach death. This guidance is a little vague, but if it's put in context with previous assertions in the poem it does make sense.

The speaker says that dying people should be "sustained and soothed / By an unfaltering trust." In other words, people should be supported and calmed by their "trust," or faith. Yet this isn't faith in God or an afterlife, but a more abstract, undefined faith. Based on what the speaker has previously said in this poem, though, it's possible to infer what people are supposed to "trust." On one hand, they should trust in the unity of nature. On the other, they should trust in that fact that everyone dies and is joined together in death.

The speaker then moves on to a final simile that adds another layer to the "trust" people should feel at death. The speaker compares dying to wrapping a blanket around oneself and falling asleep "to pleasant dreams." This "trust," then, is like the trust that people feel when they fall asleep—that sleep is good, and that they will have good dreams. On its own, this simile isn't particularly original. People have been comparing death to sleep for a long time. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for instance, Hamlet wonders "in that sleep of death what dreams may come." *If death is like sleep, do people dream when they die?* People have been wondering this for a long time.

Although the simile itself is not particularly radical, its placement in the poem is quite striking, even jarring. Very little

in the poem has led the reader to imagine death as full of "pleasant dreams." It's only after passing through all the brutal, physical facts of death that the speaker can consider the more abstract, intangible side of death. The sentiment here echoes the first stanza, where nature is not just the physical landscape but "a still voice" and a "healing sympathy." Nature provides emotional comfort to humans when they are alive, and in death, it seems, it provides "dreams."

In this final line, the speaker wraps up the unrhymed iambic pentameter of the poem's blank verse with a final variation:

About | him, and | lies down | to plea- | sant dreams.

Here, the second foot is a pyrrhic (da-da) and the third is a spondee (DUM-DUM). The spondee emphasizes the phrase "lies down," creating a feeling up warmth around it. The act of going to sleep sounds pretty nice right about now. Instead of ending on a monotonous rhythm, the speaker bunches up these stresses to make this last line both memorable and soothing. After all the strange places the speaker has taken the reader, the poem finally ends on a note of comfort and safety.

## SYMBOLS

### ROCKS AND DIRT

In "Thanatopsis," rocks and dirt symbolize the humble beginnings and ends of all life, capturing how the earth is both the source of all life and the place that things return to when they die.

Nature plays a central role in the poem. It provides a sense of unity and peace to those who know how to look at it. The earth is the source of all living things. Soil—rocks and dirt, "the elements"—is the basic matter of that source. Plants grow from the dirt, and humans eat those plants, or use them to build shelter, to feed their animals, or to produce medicine. Then when people die, they are buried in the ground and eventually decompose into dirt. In turn, then, they help nourish the next generation of humans.

Humble dirt, then, is the core of life "Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim / Thy growth be resolved to earth again." At the same time, however, the speaker emphasizes that dirt is neither alive nor dead, by referring to the personified "insensible rock" and "the sluggish clod." These things are unconscious, immobile—one step above being totally dead, one step below being completely alive. Dirt, then, is a kind of limbo. It takes the dead and produces life. A dead person is "brother" to the rock and clod, suggesting that dirt, the ground, is a kind of family.

Taken all together, this symbolism suggests the unity of nature begins with the things under people's feet: rocks, clods, dirt.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 23:** "Earth"
- **Line 24:** "earth"
- **Line 27:** "the elements,"
- **Line 28:** "the insensible rock"
- **Line 29:** "the sluggish clod"
- **Line 39:** "Rock-ribbed"

### CELESTIAL OBJECTS

Celestial objects (objects in space, like the sun, moon, planets, and stars) symbolize the stillness of eternity, which contrasts with the fleeting nature of human life. These celestial objects look down on the world as a place of death.

In lines 46-49, the speaker says:

> [...] 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.

In these lines, the speaker imagines the world as seen from the perspective of "the infinite host of heaven," i.e., all the stars in the sky. These stars see earth as full of "the sad abodes of death." That is, earth as seen from outside looks like a giant graveyard.

Keep in mind that this poem was written before humans had ever photographed the world from outer space. Readers at the time didn't have a clear image of what the planet looked like. But that only makes the imaginative leap of these lines all the more striking. The speaker imagines that in outer space, time barely seems to pass. The stars have been up there for eons, and they will be there for eons more. What for humans are ages—one historical period after another—to these stars just look "still." Human life, so brief, can barely be perceived by the stars. Instead, only death, which is eternal appears to them.

This perspective plays an important role in the poem, because the speaker wants readers to think on a vast scale. Rather than just considering their own lives, readers should imagine "the still lapse of ages," and understand that death is a fundamental part of the cosmos.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 46-49:** "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."

## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

Throughout "Thanatopsis," alliteration contributes to the poem's eloquence and helps its elaborate sentences hang together.

For instance, in the poem's first sentence, which is eight lines long, /h/ and /v/ alliteration immediately signals to the reader that this is going to be a highly lyrical poem. That is, it's not a poem that tries to mimic everyday speech. Instead, it strives for the most beautiful, interesting, and intricate formulations. So, the first line goes:

> To him who in the love of Nature holds

The three /h/ sounds add a sense of cohesion to the phrase's unusual syntax, so that the end of the line calls back to the beginning.

Similarly, the /v/ sounds in the next three lines link three keys ideas, "visible forms," "various language" and "voice of gladness":

> Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
> various language; for his gayer hours
> She has a voice of gladness, and a smile

Though somewhat distant from each other, these repeated /v/ sounds clearly link these ideas, emphasizing how the sentence stretches out as it follows a train of thought. Taken all together, this repetition emphasizes nature's visibility, variety, and voice.

Sometimes, alliteration acts on a smaller level, making individual phrases more vivid. For instance, "Rock-ribbed" in line 39 has rocky, repeating /r/ sounds that suggest the repeating rib-like stones in the hills. Five lines later, "Old Ocean" conjures the elderly, personified ocean. It's repeating /o/ sounds might almost be cute, if the ocean weren't also a "gray and melancholy waste." Instead, the alliteration suggests the orneriness of "Ocean" as a figure.

In lines 49-53, alliteration acts almost like rhyme. End words begin with same sound: "tread," and "tribes" in lines 59-50; "wings," "wilderness," and "woods" in 51-53. This stretch of sounds helps add variety to the very long third stanza. Furthermore, like rhyme, it links words together. It is the "tribes" who "tread" over the earth, and morning's "wings" help one fly through the "wilderness" and "woods." The sentence that begins in line 51 doesn't end till line 58, so these rhyme-like alliterations helps add a sense of order to an otherwise tangled sentence.

In lines 56-57, a quick succession of /s/ and /f/ sounds captures the swift passing of time:

> [...] in those solitudes, since first
> the flight of years began

Coupled with the steep enjambment, this quickness helps summon the "flight of years," as if the words themselves are about to zoom off the page.

Throughout the poem, then, alliteration adds to the language's vividness and sense of order.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "him," "who," "holds"
- **Line 2:** "visible"
- **Line 3:** "various"
- **Line 4:** "voice"
- **Line 6:** "musings," "mild"
- **Line 7:** "sympathy," "steals"
- **Line 9:** "bitter"
- **Line 10:** "spirit," "sad"
- **Line 11:** "stern"
- **Line 12:** "house"
- **Line 13:** "heart"
- **Line 19:** "sun," "see"
- **Line 20:** "course," "cold"
- **Line 22:** "embrace," "exist"
- **Line 23:** "that," "thee"
- **Line 26:** "Thine," "thou"
- **Line 27:** "ever," "elements"
- **Line 28:** "be," "brother"
- **Line 29:** "sluggish," "swain"
- **Line 30:** "Turns," "treads"
- **Line 32:** "resting"
- **Line 33:** "retire"
- **Line 34:** "more," "magnificent"
- **Line 35:** "With," "world"
- **Line 37:** "Fair," "forms"
- **Line 39:** "Rock," "ribbed"
- **Line 41:** "move"
- **Line 42:** "majesty"
- **Line 43:** "make," "meadows"
- **Line 44:** "Old," "Ocean's"
- **Line 47:** "host," "heaven"
- **Line 49:** "tread"
- **Line 50:** "tribes"
- **Line 51:** "wings"
- **Line 52:** "wilderness"
- **Line 53:** "woods"
- **Line 54:** "sound"
- **Line 55:** "Save," "dashings," "dead"
- **Line 56:** "solitudes," "since," "first"
- **Line 57:** "flight," "them"
- **Line 58:** "their," "there"
- **Line 59:** "what," "withdraw"

- **Line 60:** "no"
- **Line 61:** "note," "departure"
- **Line 62:** "destiny"
- **Line 65:** "favorite," "phantom"
- **Line 67:** "their," "thee"
- **Line 69:** "green," "goes"
- **Line 70:** "matron," "maid"
- **Line 71:** "man"
- **Line 72:** "one," "by," "one," "be"
- **Line 78:** "not," "night"
- **Line 79:** "sustained," "soothed"
- **Line 82:** "down," "dreams"

## ASSONANCE

While not overbearing, assonance plays an important role in crafting the lyrical quality of the poem. Repeating vowel sounds help make the poem's elaborate sentences sound musical.

For instance, in lines 7-8, /ee/ and /e/ vowel sounds create a melodious effect:

> And healing sympathy, that steals away
> Their sharpness, ere he is aware.

Three long /ee/ sounds in the first line, followed by three short /e/ sounds in the second line, create a highly structured and soothing sound, mimicking the soothing quality of nature that the speaker is describing.

In lines 18 to 23, a series of assonant sounds help provide a sense of sequence, as if suggesting the step-by-step decomposition of a dead body:

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

The long /ee/ sounds give way to /oo/ sounds, then to long /ay/ sounds, and finally to short /i/. This interlocking series of sounds signals that although this is a long, complex sentence, it still follows a tightly-knit sense of progression. Similarly, when someone's body decomposes, it does so because that is the order of nature.

At the end of the third stanza, in lines 69-71, assonance creates a climactic feeling as the speaker lists all the types of people who are going to die:

> The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes
> In the full strength of years, matron and maid,
> The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man—

Starting on the long /ee/ sound, the speaker then switches to the long /ay/ sounds, repeating it a full five times. The repeated sound captures the repetitiveness of death—it comes for everyone.

Similarly, the speaker repeats /uh/ sounds in the final lines of the poem:

> Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
> Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
> By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,

Here the repeated sound captures the sustaining "trust" in nature that people should have. In other words, the /uh/ sound persists throughout these two lines just as people's faith in nature should persist.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "him," "in"
- **Line 2:** "with," "visible," "she," "speaks"
- **Line 3:** "language," "gayer"
- **Line 4:** "has," "gladness," "and," "smile"
- **Line 5:** "glides"
- **Line 6:** "Into," "his"
- **Line 7:** "healing," "sympathy," "steals"
- **Line 8:** "Their," "ere," "aware"
- **Line 9:** "like," "blight"
- **Line 10:** "and," "sad"
- **Line 11:** "agony," "and," "and"
- **Line 12:** "And," "and," "narrow"
- **Line 16:** "Earth," "her"
- **Line 18:** "thee"
- **Line 19:** "The," "see," "more"
- **Line 20:** "course," "nor"
- **Line 21:** "pale," "form," "laid"
- **Line 22:** "exist"
- **Line 23:** "image"
- **Line 27:** "ever," "elements"
- **Line 28:** "rock"
- **Line 29:** "clod"
- **Line 30:** "treads," "oak"
- **Line 31:** "send," "mould"
- **Line 33:** "thou," "wish"
- **Line 34:** "Couch," "magnificent," "down"
- **Line 37:** "forms," "hoary"
- **Line 38:** "hills"
- **Line 39:** "ribbed," "ancient," "vales"
- **Line 40:** "Stretching," "pensive"
- **Line 41:** "woods"
- **Line 42:** "brooks"
- **Line 44:** "Old," "Ocean's," "gray," "waste"
- **Line 45:** "solemn," "all"
- **Line 47:** "host," "heaven"

- **Line 48:** "abodes," "death"
- **Line 49:** "lapse," "that"
- **Line 50:** "handful"
- **Line 51:** "That," "wings"
- **Line 52:** "morning," "pierce"
- **Line 56:** "millions," "in," "since"
- **Line 57:** "began," "have"
- **Line 58:** "their," "dead," "there"
- **Line 59:** "rest"
- **Line 61:** "breathe"
- **Line 62:** "destiny"
- **Line 63:** "gone," "solemn"
- **Line 64:** "chase"
- **Line 65:** "favorite," "phantom," "these," "shall," "leave"
- **Line 67:** "make," "train"
- **Line 68:** "ages," "away"
- **Line 69:** "green," "spring," "he"
- **Line 70:** "strength," "matron," "maid"
- **Line 71:** "babe," "gray"
- **Line 72:** "by," "thy," "side"
- **Line 73:** "By," "those," "follow"
- **Line 74:** "summons," "comes"
- **Line 76:** "realm," "where," "take"
- **Line 77:** "chamber"
- **Line 78:** "like," "night"
- **Line 79:** "dungeon," "but," "sustained"
- **Line 80:** "unfaltering," "trust"
- **Line 81:** "couch"
- **Line 82:** "About"

## CONSONANCE

While assonance is used more economically, consonance pervades "Thanatopsis." Repeated consonants provide a robust, grounded, and sturdy feel to the poem. It helps convey the speaker's control over the poem's long sentences.

This is apparent from the very first lines. Besides alliteration, the following consonants repeat:

> To him who in the love of Nature holds
> Communion with her visible forms, she speaks

The /m/, /l/, and /s/ sounds, though not overpowering, lend a steady sense of structure to these lines. This structure is important to establish early on in a poem without rhyme and with lots of enjambment. Such repeating sounds create a kind of mouthfeel for the poem's lofty rhetoric. That is, the poem doesn't just have interesting syntax, but it also *sounds* good, and it *feels* good when read aloud.

In lines 8-9, /r/ consonance conveys a feeling of darkness and bleakness:

> Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts
> Of the last bitter hour come like a blight

All combined, these words with the /r/ sounds convey the pain humans feel when contemplating their limited time among the living.

This /r/ sound then reappears, among /th/, /sh/, /l/, and /g/ consonance, in lines 23-24:

> Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
> Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,

The intricacy of these sounds captures the cyclical nature of life that these lines describe. As syntax twists to form epanalepsis and chiasmus, the sounds seem to twist around themselves as well. Together, then, the two lines form a kind of cycle made out of sound.

At the end of the poem, the speaker employs a long stretch of consonance:

> So live, that when thy summons comes to join
> The innumerable caravan, which moves
> To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
> His chamber

Consonant /th/, /s/, /m/, /n/, /r/, and /v/ sounds repeat throughout. This provides a highly organized and melodic feel to the line. These ending lines crucially introduce the moral of the poem, which is that one should embrace death as part of the natural order of things—as something good. It's important, then, that the speaker convey that order, and its goodness, through the sound here. The repeating sounds, especially those deep /m/ and /n/ sounds, provide a reassuring timbre, suggesting that everything is going to be okay.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "him," "who," "love," "holds"
- **Line 2:** "Communion," "visible," "forms," "speaks"
- **Line 3:** "various," "for," "gayer," "hours"
- **Line 4:** "voice," "gladness," "and," "smile"
- **Line 5:** "eloquence," "glides"
- **Line 6:** "musings," "mild"
- **Line 7:** "healing," "sympathy," "steals"
- **Line 8:** "Their," "sharpness," "ere," "aware"
- **Line 9:** "bitter," "hour," "like," "blight"
- **Line 10:** "Over," "spirit," "sad"
- **Line 11:** "stern," "agony," "and," "and"
- **Line 12:** "breathless," "darkness," "narrow," "house"
- **Line 13:** "shudder," "grow," "heart"
- **Line 14:** "forth," "under," "open," "sky," "list"
- **Line 15:** "Nature's," "teachings," "while," "all," "around"

- **Line 16:** "Earth," "her," "waters"
- **Line 18:** "thee"
- **Line 19:** "The," "all," "beholding," "sun," "shall," "see," "no"
- **Line 20:** "In," "all," "course," "nor," "in," "cold," "ground"
- **Line 21:** "Where," "pale," "form," "laid," "tears"
- **Line 22:** "Nor," "embrace," "ocean," "shall," "exist"
- **Line 23:** "Earth," "that," "nourished," "thee," "shall," "claim"
- **Line 24:** "Thy," "growth," "resolved," "earth," "again"
- **Line 25:** "lost," "trace," "surrendering"
- **Line 26:** "Thine," "individual," "shalt," "thou"
- **Line 27:** "mix," "for," "ever," "elements"
- **Line 28:** "be," "brother," "insensible," "rock"
- **Line 29:** "sluggish," "clod," "swain"
- **Line 30:** "Turns," "share," "treads"
- **Line 31:** "send," "roots," "abroad," "pierce"
- **Line 32:** "not," "thine," "eternal," "resting," "place"
- **Line 33:** "Shalt," "retire," "alone," "nor," "couldst"
- **Line 34:** "Couch," "more," "magnificent," "shalt," "lie"
- **Line 35:** "patriarchs," "world"
- **Line 36:** "powerful," "earth"
- **Line 37:** "Fair," "forms," "hoary," "seers," "ages," "past"
- **Line 38:** "All," "in," "one," "sepulchre," "hills"
- **Line 39:** "Rock," "ribbed," "ancient," "sun"
- **Line 40:** "Stretching," "pensive," "quietness," "between"
- **Line 41:** "venerable," "woods," "rivers," "move"
- **Line 42:** "majesty," "complaining," "brooks"
- **Line 43:** "make," "meadows," "green," "poured," "round," "all"
- **Line 44:** "Old," "Ocean's," "melancholy"
- **Line 45:** "Are," "solemn," "decorations," "all"
- **Line 46:** "great," "tomb," "man," "golden," "sun"
- **Line 47:** "planets," "all," "infinite," "host," "of," "heaven"
- **Line 48:** "shining," "on," "sad," "abodes," "death"
- **Line 49:** "still," "lapse," "All," "tread"
- **Line 50:** "globe," "are," "handful," "tribes"
- **Line 51:** "slumber," "bosom"
- **Line 52:** "morning," "pierce," "Barcan," "wilderness"
- **Line 53:** "thyself," "continuous," "woods"
- **Line 54:** "Where," "rolls," "Oregon," "hears," "no," "sound"
- **Line 55:** "Save," "dashings," "dead," "are," "there"
- **Line 56:** "millions," "those," "solitudes," "since," "first"
- **Line 57:** "flight," "years," "laid," "them," "down"
- **Line 58:** "their," "last," "sleep," "reign," "there," "alone"
- **Line 59:** "So," "rest," "what," "withdraw"
- **Line 60:** "silence," "living," "no," "friend"
- **Line 61:** "note," "departure," "that," "breathe"
- **Line 62:** "share," "will," "laugh"
- **Line 63:** "When," "gone," "solemn," "brood," "care"
- **Line 64:** "Plod," "on," "and," "one"
- **Line 65:** "favorite," "phantom," "all," "shall," "leave"
- **Line 66:** "Their," "mirth," "their," "employments," "shall," "come"
- **Line 67:** "make," "their," "with," "thee," "the"
- **Line 68:** "sons," "men"
- **Line 69:** "green," "spring," "and," "he," "who"
- **Line 70:** "strength," "years," "matron," "maid"
- **Line 72:** "one," "by," "one," "be," "thy"
- **Line 73:** "those," "in," "turn," "shall," "follow"
- **Line 74:** "that," "when," "thy," "summons," "comes," "join"
- **Line 75:** "innumerable," "caravan," "moves"
- **Line 76:** "that," "mysterious," "realm," "where," "each"
- **Line 77:** "chamber," "death"
- **Line 78:** "Thou," "slave"
- **Line 79:** "Scourged," "dungeon," "sustained," "soothed"
- **Line 80:** "an," "unfaltering," "trust," "approach," "grave"
- **Line 81:** "wraps," "drapery"
- **Line 82:** "him," "and," "lies," "down," "pleasant," "dreams"

## ALLUSION

The phrase, "Take the wings / Of morning" is an allusion to Psalm 139:9 in the King James translation of the Bible:

> If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;

The Psalms were religious poems attributed to King David, one of the ancient kings of the Hebrews. The Psalms depict a speaker's personal relationship to God and religious life.

In the rest of Psalm 139, the speaker discusses how God is everywhere. God is always with the speaker, no matter where the speaker goes. God is even with the speaker in the speaker's thoughts. As a religious poem, this Psalm expresses the *omnipresence* of God—that is, the belief that God is present everywhere and in everything. Meanwhile, the speaker of "Thanatopsis" has clearly adapted this belief to discuss the omnipresence of *death*. Instead of an all-powerful God, death becomes all powerful. This is a potentially sacrilegious re-interpretation of this Psalm, because it replaces God with death.

In Psalm 139, the belief in God's omnipresence leads to a very intimate prayer from the speaker to God. The speaker admits God into the speaker's heart and mind, asking God for guidance on the virtuous path:

> Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:
> And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

For the speaker of "Thanatopsis," however, there is no such guidance. If God is present in "Thanatopsis," it's only through the natural landscape, as depicted in the first stanza. For the most part, though, the speaker has to find spiritual peace without God's help.

Instead of praying to God, the speaker contemplates death, eventually reaching a resolution of "unfaltering trust." This trust could be thought of as related to the kind of faith expressed in Psalm 139, but not necessarily. The speaker ultimately comes to believe that nature is good and so death must be good too—but that doesn't mean there's any sort of afterlife or God watching over people.

Additionally, the phrase "wings of morning" might summon images of the Greek goddess Eos, the winged goddess of the dawn. Although not connected to the Psalms at all, Eos definitely brings together the images of morning and flight. Readers attuned to both Christian and Classical mythology might hold both allusions in their heads simultaneity.

**Where Allusion appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 51-52:** "Take the wings / Of morning"

## PERSONIFICATION

Especially in the first half of the poem, the speaker personifies nature a great deal. This personification helps convey how nature and human beings are connected. When people are alive, nature seems to speak to them. And when humans die, they become a part of nature. Personification, then, acts as a kind of halfway meeting point between nature and humans.

In the first stanza, the speaker personifies nature as a "she" that "speaks / A various language." A "various language" is a language with a lot of variety; a language capable of expressing many ideas and emotions. This is a metaphor; nature doesn't *actually* speak, but it provides so many rich feelings to people that it's *as if* nature speaks to them. Here, the whole of nature—that is, the entire world—is depicted as a single "she." Right off the bat, then, this personification asserts that nature is a unified whole. Although it has different elements, like forests and human beings, all these elements are united under the single umbrella term "she."

Later on in the poem, the speaker goes on to personify grand facets of the landscape. For instance, the speaker describes:

> [...] the vales
> Stretching in pensive quietness between;
> The venerable woods—rivers that move
> In majesty, and the complaining brooks
> That make the meadows green [...]

Here, each of these beautiful nature occurrences—valleys, woods, rivers, and brooks—takes on a human characteristic.

When people die, it becomes clear that they aren't separate from nature, but part of it. A dead person becomes "brother to the insensible rock / And to the sluggish clod." In other words, nature is like a giant family. Rocks and clods (lumps of dirt) get personified as "brother[s]" of the dead. When people are alive, it's easy for them to think they are totally separate from the ground they walk on. However, when they die, it turns out that they're not so different from rocks and clods after all.

The words "insensible" (unconscious) and "sluggish" (lazy, immobile) in this phrase do some curious work. They seem to attribute just a sliver of awareness and life to these bits of matter that are traditionally viewed as totally devoid of life, totally inanimate. So, on one hand, death entails the loss of one's human mind and body. On the other hand, there seem to be other kinds of awareness and forms of existence that death leads to. A new kind of experience among rocks and dirt.

A similar moment occurs when the speaker describes the Oregon River (Bryant presumably means the Columbia River). The river "hears no sound, / Save his own dashings." Like the "insensible" and "sluggish" ground, the river seems incapable of interacting with the world in the same way that humans are. It is locked in on itself, isolated. It's a sad, even claustrophobic image, which suits the poem's pessimist assertion the death is everywhere on earth.

At the same time, the river is still part of the unity of nature. Additionally, the idea that it "hears" anything at all is a reassuring thought—there are many kinds of experience beyond being human. When people die, they enter into a kind of unity with all these strange beings.

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-8:** "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 / 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."
- **Lines 14-17:** "list / To Nature's teachings, while from all around— / Earth and her waters, and the depths of air— / Comes a still voice—"
- **Lines 19-20:** "The all-beholding sun shall see no more / In all his course;"
- **Line 22:** "in the embrace of ocean,"
- **Lines 23-24:** "Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim / Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,"
- **Lines 28-29:** "To be a brother to the insensible rock / And to the sluggish clod,"
- **Lines 30-31:** "The oak / Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould."
- **Lines 38-44:** "The hills / Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,—the vales / Stretching in pensive quietness between; / 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,"
- **Lines 54-55:** "Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no

sound, / Save his own dashings”

## METAPHOR

Metaphor is used throughout "Thanatopsis." There are two main comparisons that the speaker makes. The first compares nature's effect on people's emotions to "a still voice." That is, nature affects people's feelings so much that it's as if it speaks to them. This comparison is covered in the personification section of this guide. Here, we're focusing on the poem's other prominent metaphor: comparing death to sleep.

It's nothing new to compare death to a "last sleep," or to say a grave is an "eternal resting-place." However, it is important to note just how often this comparison occurs in "Thanatopsis." The speaker compares death to sleep or a place where one sleeps in the following phrases: "narrow house"; "nor couldst thou wish / Couch more magnificent"; "sad abodes of death"; "the tribes / That slumber in its [earth's] bosom"; "make their bed with thee"; and "chamber in the silent halls of death."

The tone of this comparison changes in each phrase. Sometimes, when compared to a "narrow house" or "sad abode," the sleep of death seems pretty bleak. It becomes claustrophobic, dull. Other times, as in "Couch [...] magnificent," it seems like a fabulous form of rest. And sometimes, it has a stately, austere quality, as in "chamber in the silent halls of death." All in all, this survey suggests that the poem isn't just repeating a tired metaphor; rather, it's exploring the full range of that metaphor. Since much of the poem is about giving voice to common worries about death—worries that the ending of the poem overcomes—then it makes sense to explore one of most common metaphors used to express those worries.

Additionally, there are a few metaphors that relate to death in a slightly different way. For instance, the speaker compares features of the natural landscape (like rivers and hills) to "solemn decorations all / Of the great tomb of man." In other words, since everyone ends up buried in the ground, the surface of the earth can be seen as mere decoration for that giant "tomb."

At the end of the poem, the speaker compares all the dying in the world to an "innumerable caravan, which moves / To that mysterious realm." A caravan is a long group of people traveling from one place to another. As the dying travel from the world to the "realm" of the dead, the speaker imagines them forming a kind of caravan. Similarly, in lines 67-68, the speaker looks "As the long train / Of ages glide away." Here, the speaker compares time to a train. From a vast historical perspective, each era seems to travel away and fade into the distance, one following the other like train cars. These two metaphors, of train and caravan, view time as an unending series of events transporting people from the living to the dead.

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 2-3:** “she speaks / A various language”
- **Line 4:** “a voice of gladness”
- **Lines 4-5:** “a smile / And eloquence of beauty”
- **Lines 5-6:** “she glides / Into his darker musings”
- **Line 12:** “the narrow house”
- **Line 17:** “a still voice”
- **Lines 32-33:** “not to thine eternal resting-place / Shalt thou retire alone”
- **Line 34:** “Couch more magnificent”
- **Lines 45-46:** “Are but the solemn decorations all / Of the great tomb of man”
- **Line 48:** “the sad abodes of death”
- **Lines 50-51:** “the tribes / That slumber in its bosom”
- **Lines 57-58:** “have laid them down / In their last sleep”
- **Line 59:** “So shalt thou rest”
- **Line 67:** “make their bed with thee”
- **Lines 67-68:** “As the long train / Of ages glide away”
- **Lines 74-76:** “when thy summons comes to join / The innumerable caravan, which moves / To that mysterious realm”
- **Lines 76-77:** “where each shall take / His chamber in the silent halls of death”

## SIMILE

In general, the speaker of "Thanatopsis" prefers to use metaphors rather than similes. However, the poem does place two of its similes in a very important place: the end of the poem.

Before getting to that moment, however, there is also a simile at the beginning of the poem that should be noted:

> [...] When thoughts
> Of the last bitter hour come **like** a blight
> Over thy spirit

Here, the speaker compares depressing thoughts about death to a blight—that is, a disease that affects plants. If they spread, blights can have a tremendously negative impact on crops, causing famines. By comparing a mood to sickened plants, the speaker reminds the reader that human beings are part of nature—people are more similar to plants than they are different. This will be important going forward, as the speaker will emphasize humanity's unity with nature.

Now to the dramatic similes at the end of the poem. First, the speaker urges the reader not to "go [...] **like** the quarry-slave at night, / Scourged to his dungeon." Here, the speaker is comparing people's attitudes towards death to the attitude of a slave who has worked all day and then is forced back into his dungeon at night. In other words, people view death as unjust, a terrible punishment. Meanwhile, the speaker is saying that people *shouldn't* feel like that.

Shortly after, the speaker urges the reader to:

> [...] approach thy grave,
> Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
> About him, and lies down to pleasant dream.

The speaker compares death to wrapping a blanket around oneself and drifting off to good dreams. People should embrace death just like they embrace a good night's sleep.

As mentioned in the metaphor section of this guide, the speaker often compares death to sleep. Even so, this metaphor has an unexpected quality to it. Death has been anything but a "pleasant dream" thus far in the poem. Even at its most optimistic, the poem hasn't suggested comfort so much as a "magnificent" quality to death. Death has seemed strange, interesting, non-human, and vast. However, by ending on this simile, the speaker seems to have been saving the best for last. Once people deal with all these other aspects of death—the speaker seems to say—they come to the final conclusion that death must be a pleasant rest.

**Where Simile appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 8-10:** "When thoughts / Of the last bitter hour come like a blight / Over thy spirit"
- **Lines 78-79:** "Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night, / Scourged to his dungeon"
- **Lines 80-82:** "approach thy grave, / Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch / About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams."

## CAESURA

Caesura plays a pretty constant role throughout "Thanatopsis." Because the poem is written in blank verse with a lot of enjambments (i.e., a da-DUM rhythm without any punctuation at the ends of lines), the punctuation has to appear in the middles of lines. Furthermore, the poem employs lots of long sentences with many clauses, which stretch on for many lines. The sentences, with their elaborate syntax, need caesurae to keep them in order and help the reader make sense of them.

Here is an example of how caesurae help the speaker control a sentence:

> Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
> Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
> And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
> Thine individual being, shalt thou go
> To mix for ever with the elements,
> To be a brother to the insensible rock
> And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
> Turns with his share, and treads upon.

This sentence describes how, when people die, they return to the earth. The caesurae break the sentence up into smaller parts, so that the reader can grasp each stage of the process that's being described.

Other times, caesura aids the poem's use of polysyndeton. Notice in the first stanza, for instance, how lines 4-5, 10-14, and 16 all insert a comma before "and." Although many of these commas aren't grammatically necessary, they have two important effects on the poem. First, as before, they break the poem's sentences into more manageable chunks. Second, they contribute to the poem's rhythm. Although the poem already has an iambic meter, such a meter can become monotonous in a blank verse poem of this length. So, caesura created small rhythms within lines that work in a kind of counterpoint or harmony with the poem's meter.

For instance, line 11 employs two caesurae: "Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall." The meter of this line is rather unusual:

> Of the | stern ag- | ony, | and shroud, | and pall

The line begins with trochee followed by a spondee. The sharp deviation from the poem's usual meter throws off the reader, making the beginning of the line feel rough, like the "agony" it describes. Then, two caesura accentuate the return of iambs in the last two feet, adding emphasis to the images of "shroud" and "pall." It's as if all the horrible things associated with death keep piling up: first "agony," *then* the burial shroud, *then* the pall goes over the coffin. Will the list never end?

Earlier in the first stanza, caesura also plays an important rhythmic role. Notice, in lines 4-7, how the caesura occurs in the roughly the same spot in each line. Rather than using punctuation at the ends of line, the poem uses it in the middle, so that each line seems to loop around to the next. This prevents the reader from treating each line as its own unit, and the stanza becomes a unified, tautly strung object

**Where Caesura appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "forms, she"
- **Line 3:** "language; for"
- **Line 4:** "gladness, and"
- **Line 5:** "beauty, and"
- **Line 6:** "musings, with"
- **Line 7:** "sympathy, that"
- **Line 8:** "sharpness, ere," "aware. When"
- **Line 10:** "spirit, and"
- **Line 11:** "agony, and," "shroud, and"
- **Line 12:** "darkness, and"
- **Line 13:** "shudder, and"
- **Line 14:** "forth, under," "sky, and"
- **Line 15:** "teachings, while"

- **Line 16:** “waters, and”
- **Line 18:** “days, and”
- **Line 20:** “course; nor”
- **Line 21:** “laid, with”
- **Line 22:** “ocean, shall”
- **Line 23:** “image. Earth, that,” “thee, shall”
- **Line 24:** “growth, to”
- **Line 25:** “And, lost,” “trace, surrendering”
- **Line 26:** “being, shalt”
- **Line 29:** “clod, which”
- **Line 30:** “share, and,” “upon. The”
- **Line 31:** “abroad, and”
- **Line 33:** “alone, nor”
- **Line 34:** “magnificent. Thou”
- **Line 35:** “world—with”
- **Line 36:** “earth—the,” “wise, the”
- **Line 37:** “forms, and”
- **Line 38:** “sepulchre.  The”
- **Line 39:** “sun,—the”
- **Line 41:** “woods—rivers”
- **Line 42:** “majesty, and”
- **Line 43:** “green; and, poured”
- **Line 46:** “man. The”
- **Line 47:** “planets, all”
- **Line 49:** “ ages. All”
- **Line 51:** “bosom.—Take”
- **Line 54:** “Oregon, and”
- **Line 55:** “dashings—yet”
- **Line 56:** “solitudes, since”
- **Line 57:** “began, have”
- **Line 58:** “sleep—the”
- **Line 60:** “living, and”
- **Line 61:** “departure? All”
- **Line 62:** “destiny. The”
- **Line 63:** “gone, the”
- **Line 64:** “on, and”
- **Line 65:** “phantom; yet”
- **Line 66:** “employments, and”
- **Line 67:** “thee. As”
- **Line 68:** “away, the”
- **Line 69:** “spring, and”
- **Line 70:** “years, matron”
- **Line 71:** “babe, and”
- **Line 73:** “those, who”
- **Line 74:** “live, that”
- **Line 75:** “caravan, which”
- **Line 76:** “realm, where”
- **Line 78:** “not, like”
- **Line 79:** “dungeon, but, sustained”
- **Line 80:** “trust, approach”
- **Line 82:** “him, and”

## POLYSYNDETON

Polysyndeton, the use of conjunctions like "and" where not strictly necessary, plays a significant role in the rhetoric of "Thanatopsis." It helps emphasize how extensive the poem's lists are, as if they could go on forever.

The most dramatic use of polysyndeton comes in the first stanza. From lines 4-16, the word "and" appears 13 times. In this stanza, the speaker lists both the effects of nature on human emotions, and the things people imagine when they start to despair about death. The use of "and" here captures how both of these lists are practically endless. For instance, the speaker describes how nature always seems to have the right response to people's moods:

> She has a voice of gladness, **and** a smile
> **And** eloquence of beauty, **and** she glides

Each additional "and" conveys how nature continually responds to people's needs. Clearly, nature can help people no matter their mood. Then, in lines 10-13, the speaker uses "and" to show how depressing thoughts start to pile up, one on top of the other:

> Over thy spirit, **and** sad images
> Of the stern agony, **and** shroud, **and** pall,
> **And** breathless darkness, **and** the narrow house,
> Make thee to shudder, **and** grow sick at heart;—

Here, with "and" often appearing twice per line, the speaker suggests how once people start thinking about death, they fall down a rabbit hole and can't stop thinking about it. Notice also that the speaker almost always pairs polysyndeton with caesura. There's usually a comma before "and." This allows "and" to play a rhythmic role in the poem as well, creating additional emphasis.

At the end of the third stanza, in lines 64-71, the speaker also employs a long stretch of polysyndeton. As with the earlier examples, this again suggests a list that could go on forever. Here, the speaker describes how people continue on with their lives after someone dies—although these people will eventually die as well. This list captures how full of variety the world is, and at the same how all that variety ends in death.

**Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:**

- **Line 4:** “and”
- **Line 5:** “And,” “and”
- **Line 7:** “And”
- **Line 10:** “and”
- **Line 11:** “and,” “and”
- **Line 12:** “and”
- **Line 13:** “and”

- **Line 14:** “and”
- **Line 16:** “and,” “and”
- **Line 29:** “And”
- **Line 30:** “and”
- **Line 31:** “and”
- **Line 42:** “and”
- **Line 43:** “and”
- **Line 44:** “and”
- **Line 64:** “and”
- **Line 66:** “and,” “and”
- **Line 67:** “And”
- **Line 69:** “and”
- **Line 70:** “and”
- **Line 71:** “and”

## ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is a prominent device often used in blank verse poems (unrhymed iambic pentameter). Without rhyme, leaving the lines end-stopped would make the poem rather monotonous—every phrase would be 10 syllables long, and the poem would seem like a list of such phrases, rather than a dynamic and exciting progression of thoughts. In contrast, enjambment allows sentences to wrap around line breaks like a tautly strung rope. The iambic meter provides a sense of order and regularity as sentences barrel forward. Thus, in combination with the poem's plentiful use of caesurae, enjambment plays a crucial role in the poem's sense of energy and intricacy of thought.

In fact, enjambment is so prominent in "Thanatopsis" that the first end-stop doesn't appear until line 11. That means that the poem immediately throws the reader into a string of thoughts that doesn't slow down for ten lines. Right off the bat, then, the poem is about being absorbed in thought. Furthermore, the speed that these enjambments create helps this fairly long poem pass at a quick pace.

When end-stops *do* come, then, they provide a powerful change in rhythm. In the first stanza, three end-stops in a row help capture the power of images of death. As people imagine the "breathless darkness, and the narrow house"—that is, the suffocating claustrophobia of the grave—the poem slows to a halt, as if it is also suffocating. Throughout the poem, end-stops appear here and there amid enjambments. They help signal that, although the poem is progressing at a quick pace through its twists and turns of thoughts, the speaker remains in control. Additionally, end-stops prevent enjambment from becoming boring by adding variety to the poem's rhythm.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-2:** “holds / Communion”
- **Lines 2-3:** “speaks / A”
- **Lines 3-4:** “hours / She”
- **Lines 4-5:** “smile / And”
- **Lines 5-6:** “glides / Into”
- **Lines 6-7:** “mild / And”
- **Lines 7-8:** “away / Their”
- **Lines 8-9:** “thoughts / Of”
- **Lines 9-10:** “blight / Over”
- **Lines 10-11:** “images / Of”
- **Lines 14-15:** “list / To”
- **Lines 18-19:** “thee / The”
- **Lines 19-20:** “more / In”
- **Lines 22-23:** “exist / Thy”
- **Lines 23-24:** “claim / Thy”
- **Lines 25-26:** “up / Thine”
- **Lines 26-27:** “go / To”
- **Lines 28-29:** “rock / And”
- **Lines 29-30:** “swain / Turns”
- **Lines 30-31:** “oak / Shall”
- **Lines 32-33:** “resting-place / Shalt”
- **Lines 33-34:** “wish / Couch”
- **Lines 34-35:** “down / With”
- **Lines 38-39:** “hills / Rock-ribbed”
- **Lines 39-40:** “vales / Stretching”
- **Lines 41-42:** “move / In”
- **Lines 42-43:** “brooks / That”
- **Lines 45-46:** “all / Of”
- **Lines 49-50:** “tread / The”
- **Lines 50-51:** “tribes / That”
- **Lines 51-52:** “wings / Of”
- **Lines 53-54:** “woods / Where”
- **Lines 56-57:** “first / The”
- **Lines 57-58:** “down / In”
- **Lines 59-60:** “withdraw / In”
- **Lines 60-61:** “friend / Take”
- **Lines 61-62:** “breathe / Will”
- **Lines 62-63:** “laugh / When”
- **Lines 63-64:** “care / Plod”
- **Lines 64-65:** “chase / His”
- **Lines 65-66:** “leave / Their”
- **Lines 66-67:** “come / And”
- **Lines 67-68:** “train / Of”
- **Lines 69-70:** “goes / In”
- **Lines 74-75:** “join / The”
- **Lines 75-76:** “moves / To”
- **Lines 76-77:** “take / His”
- **Lines 79-80:** “soothed / By”
- **Lines 81-82:** “couch / About”

## IMAGERY

Imagery plays an important role in "Thanatopsis." Because the poem weds two vastly different scales—that of a single human life, and that of the entire history of the world—images help summon these scales and place them in context of one another.

The poem begins by imagining the death of a single person. It conjures the claustrophobia of the grave: "shroud, and pall, / And breathless darkness, and the narrow house." This initial imagery summons how people think about death when they can't see beyond themselves. Death seems sad, scary, isolating. It has also an alien feel to it, as when "The oak / Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould." In this striking image, the roots of an oak tree travel through the dirt and split someone's body, its tendrils contributing to the body's decay.

Then, the speaker asks the reader to see things on a larger scale: "Go forth, under the open sky." This phrase imagistically *opens up* the rest of poem. Instead of focusing on the claustrophobia of an individual's body, the poem will try to take in the whole world. As the poem moves forward, then, its images get a lot bigger. The speaker summons "hills / Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun," and "Old Ocean's gray and melancholy waste," as well as "the Barcan wilderness." Barchans are giant crescent-shaped sand dunes—the speaker is imagining the desert here. These images, then, take in all kinds of nature all over the world.

Furthermore, the speaker doesn't stop at describing nature on earth, but also looks up into the sky. The speaker describes how:

> The golden sun,
> The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,
> Are shining on the sad abodes of death

Here, the speaker imagines what earth looks like to the stars that are shining down on it. To those stars, the earth looks like a land of death.

At the same time, the speaker also uses imagery to capture the human toll that death takes. For instance, at the end of the third stanza, the speaker says:

> [...] the sons of men,
> The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes
> In the full strength of years, matron and maid,
> The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man—
> Shall one by one be gathered to thy side,

These people, especially the last two—"The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man"—vividly represent just how diverse humans are. As people pass through the different stages of life, they change immensely. Yet no matter how old someone is, they could die at any minute. This list, then, conveys both the sadness of death and its ordinariness.

**Where Imagery appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 11-12:** "and shroud, and pall, / And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,"
- **Line 14:** "Go forth, under the open sky,"
- **Line 16:** "Earth and her waters, and the depths of air—"
- **Lines 19-22:** "The all-beholding sun shall see no more / In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground, / Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears, / Nor in the embrace of ocean,"
- **Lines 26-31:** "shalt thou go / To mix for ever with the elements, / To be a brother to the insensible rock / And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain / Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak / Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould."
- **Lines 37-38:** "Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past, / All in one mighty sepulchre."
- **Lines 38-44:** "The hills / Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,—the vales / Stretching in pensive quietness between; / 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,—"
- **Lines 46-48:** "The golden sun, / The planets, all the infinite host of heaven, / Are shining on the sad abodes of death,"
- **Lines 51-55:** "Take the wings / Of morning, pierce the Barcan wilderness, / Or lose thyself in the continuous woods / Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound, / Save his own dashings—yet the dead are there:"
- **Lines 68-72:** "the sons of men, / The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes / In the full strength of years, matron and maid, / The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man— / Shall one by one be gathered to thy side,"
- **Lines 74-79:** "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, / Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night, / Scourged to his dungeon,"
- **Lines 80-82:** "approach thy grave, / Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch / About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams."

## EPANALEPSIS

While many devices reappear throughout a poem, forming the very fabric of the poem, sometimes a device appears just once, adding a touch of variety. The single appearance of epanalepsis in "Thanatopsis" contributes to the poem's sense of lofty rhetoric.

Epanalepsis is when a word that appears at the beginning of a phrase reappears at the end:

> Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
> Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,

Here, the speaker is talking about how the earth provides food and shelter to people throughout their lives, and then when

people die they decompose back into the earth. The repetition of the word "earth," then, captures the cyclical nature of life and death. The syntax of the phrase itself becomes a cycle. As a whole, this line represents the speaker's intense control of syntax, stretching and contorting language to convey each idea most vividly.

**Where Epanalepsis appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 23-24:** "Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim / Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,"

## VOCABULARY

**Thanatopsis** () - *Thanatopsis* comes from the Greek words *thanatos*, meaning "death," and *opsis*, meaning "sight." In other words, thanatopsis is the act of looking at death, of meditating on it. As it turns out, it wasn't Bryant who came up with the title, but rather one of the editors who first published Bryant's originally untitled poem.

**Communion** (Line 2) - *Communion* is an intimate exchange of thoughts and feelings between people—or, in this case, between people and nature. It also has a related and prominent use in Christianity. Communion is the act of receiving the "body and blood of Christ" in the form of sacred bread and wine.

**Forms** (Line 2) - Here, "forms" refers to any part of nature that can be seen above ground, from plants and animals to forests and rivers.

**Various Language** (Line 3) - *Various* here means having great variety. So, a "various language" is one with a lot of variety; it can express many ideas and emotions.

**Gayer** (Line 3) - Happier. "Gayer hours" are thus times when someone is relatively happy or joyful.

**Musings** (Line 6) - *Quiet* reflections someone makes to themselves. So, "darker musings" would be someone's bleak thoughts.

**Sympathy** (Line 7) - *Sympathy* is a feeling of understanding one person has for another, often when that person is going through a difficult time. Nature's "healing sympathy" would then be the sense that nature understands people's pain, and that such understanding helps ease that pain.

**Ere** (Line 8) - *Ere* means before. Nature makes people feel better before they even realize it's happening.

**Blight** (Line 9) - *Blight* is a disease that spreads among plants, often ruining people's crops and potentially causing famine. Here, it's metaphorically compared to bleak thoughts that won't go away.

**Thy** (Line 10, Line 21, Line 23, Line 24, Line 31, Line 61, Line 62, Line 72, Line 74, Line 80) - An archaic form of the word "your." The speaker seems to use it to address the reader.

**Shroud** (Line 11) - A burial *shroud* is a large cloth that is wrapped around someone when they die.

**Pall** (Line 11) - A cloth draped over a coffin.

**Narrow House** (Line 12) - This phrase metaphorically compares a coffin to a tiny house. Of course, a house the size of a coffin would be incredibly claustrophobic!

**Thee** (Line 13, Line 18, Line 23, Line 67) - *Thee* is an archaic form of the word "you," historically used as a less formal way to address people. The speaker seems to be using it to address the reader.

**All-Beholding** (Line 19) - All-seeing. In other words, the speaker imagines the personified sun as able to see everything it shines upon.

**Course** (Line 20) - The sun's path through the sky as the day goes by.

**Image** (Line 23) - Here, "image" refers to the likeness of the person the speaker is addressing. The speaker is saying that when people die, they visually disappear from the earth.

**Thou** (Line 26, Line 33, Line 34, Line 59, Line 63, Line 78) - An archaic form of "you." It was often used in poems even after it went out of use in spoken language, since it was perceived as having a more lyrical quality.

**Elements** (Line 27) - The materials that make up the world, such as dirt, rocks, and water. Historically, European society believed there were four elements: earth, water, air, and fire.

**Insensible** (Line 28) - Lacking senses, not being conscious. Rocks aren't conscious, says the speaker.

**Sluggish clod** (Line 29) - *Sluggish* means lazy, slow, or immobile. A *clod* is a lump of dirt. So, a "sluggish clod" is some dirt that doesn't like to move.

**Rude swain** (Line 29) - *Swain* is a poetic term for a young person from a rural place, often referring to shepherds—here it seems to suggest a farmer. *Rude* means unsophisticated or uneducated. In this poem, then, a "rude swain" is a simple farmer tending to his land.

**Share** (Line 30) - A plowshare, the blade on a plow that turns up ground for farmers as they plant seeds.

**Abroad** (Line 31) - *Abroad* means spread out over a distance; elsewhere. In other words, the oak's roots spread out through the soil.

**Couldst** (Line 33) - An archaic form of "could."

**Patriarch** (Line 35) - Male rulers, father figures, or any men perceived to be the original ancestors of a group of people. Here, the speaker refers to the famous rulers of the ancient world.

**Infant world** (Line 35) - The earliest history of the human race. The speaker is thinking of ancient peoples such as the

Hebrews, Egyptians, or Greeks.

**Hoary seers** (Line 37) - *Seers* (that is, *see* + *ers*) are people who can supposedly *see* into the future. *Hoary* refers to the seers' hair, which is gray and/or white. Thus, the speaker is talking about old, gray-haired prophets.

**Sepulchre** (Line 38) - A *sepulchre*, or *sepulcher*, is a room where a dead person has been buried. The speaker is suggesting that the entire earth is like one big tomb.

**Rock-ribbed** (Line 39) - Lined with rocks, as if the rocks form a ribcage.

**Vales** (Line 39) - A poetic term for a valley.

**Venerable** (Line 41) - Highly respected. In other words, the woods have the same quality to them as someone who possesses a great deal of dignity.

**Complaining Brooks** (Line 42) - This phrase personifies the brooks (small streams of water) as noisily complaining.

**Waste** (Line 44) - As in a *wasteland*. That is, the open ocean has a forbidding appearance, as if nothing can live there.

**Host of Heaven** (Line 47) - A host is a large group, often used to refer to an army. The "host of heaven" refers to the celestial objects; e.g., suns, stars, moons, and planets.

**Abodes** (Line 48) - Homes or dwellings. The abodes of death are where all the dead people are; i.e., the ground.

**Lapse** (Line 49) - A *lapse* is an interval of time. The phrase "still lapse of ages" suggests the passage of all of human history. It is "still" because, from such a vast perspective, human lives are just blips; time almost seems to stand still.

**Barcan** (Line 52) - *Barcan* is an alternate spelling of barchan, a type of crescent-shaped sand dune. The "Barcan wilderness" is thus the desert.

**Rolls** (Line 54) - Flows; i.e., where the Oregon river flows.

**Oregon** (Line 54) - Bryant clearly is referring to a river here; probably the Columbia River, the largest in Oregon.

**Dashings** (Line 55) - The splashing and crashing of the river.

**Solitudes** (Line 56) - Lonely places. The ground, where the dead are buried, is a place only the dead can go.

**Laid them down** (Line 57) - This is a poetic way of saying "laid down." The speaker is comparing dying to going to sleep.

**Brood of Care** (Line 63) - A *brood* is a group of young animals that are all siblings. And *care* means worry. So, the "brood of care" metaphorically refers to people whose lives are full of worry.

**Phantom** (Line 65) - An illusion. The speaker is suggesting that the things that give people's lives meaning are illusions.

**Mirth** (Line 66) - Joy, happiness, laughter, amusement.

**Employments** (Line 66) - Jobs, vocations, tasks.

**Train** (Line 67) - A locomotive or any line of traveling people or vehicles. The "train / Of Ages" summons the image of each historical period passing by like parts of a train.

**Matron** (Line 70) - A married woman.

**Maid** (Line 70) - A virgin or an unmarried woman.

**Summons** (Line 74) - An order to go somewhere. Here, it metaphorically means an order to die.

**Caravan** (Line 75) - A long group of people traveling. Here, it metaphorically suggests all the people who are dying in the present moment.

**Chamber** (Line 77) - Bedroom. Where the dead metaphorically sleep.

**Quarry-slave** (Line 78) - A slave forced to mine rocks in a quarry, an excavated pit of land.

**Scourge** (Line 79) - A whip. The quarry-slave has been brutally forced into his dungeon.

**Unfaltering** (Line 80) - Unwavering, constant, steadfast.

**Drapery** (Line 81) - A blanket.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Thanatopsis" is written in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter (meaning it follows a da-DUM rhythm). Additionally, the poem employs a lot of enjambment and caesurae. These devices, paired with the poem's long sentences, create a winding, elaborate form of language. The lines seem to spool down the page, mimicking the speaker's train of thought.

As with many blank verse poems, "Thanatopsis" is divided into stanzas called verse paragraphs. Rather than all being the same length, these stanzas act much like paragraphs in prose, dividing up the speaker's text into manageable chunks. There are four verse paragraphs, each introducing a particular idea and line of thinking.

The first stanza discusses people's relationship with nature, particularly thinking about how nature affects people's emotions. The second stanza imagines what happens when people die and become part of nature. The third stanza, the longest, takes in the whole history of human death, emphasizing how the earth will be full of the human dead for all of time. And the fourth stanza, the shortest, provides a moral—it offers a way for facing death with dignity and faith.

### METER

"Thanatopsis" is written in iambic pentameter, which means there are five poetic feet per line, each with a da-DUM rhythm. The poem is also unrhymed, making this blank verse as well. This meter, coupled with the poem's extensive use of

enjambment, provides the main sense of order and cohesion in the poem.

The poem begins with a straightforward example of iambic pentameter:

> To him | who in | the love | of Na- | ture holds

Beginning in this clear manner, the poem immediately signals that it should be read in iambic pentameter. It also signals that the speaker has strong control over the meter. Now, the reader knows, if the speaker does deviate from the meter in the future, it will be *purposeful* rather than *accidental*.

The iambic pentameter remains pretty steady throughout the poem. Sometimes, the speaker replaces the first iamb with a trochee (DUM-da), as in line 30:

> Turns with | his share, | and treads | upon. | The oak

Here, the reversed stresses of the first foot capture the "Turn[ing]" that line describes. Just as a farmer plowing a field has to reverse direction to plow a new row, the meter also reverses itself.

Other times, the speaker replaces the first iamb with a spondee (DUM-DUM). This happens in both lines 37 and 39:

> Fair forms, | and hoar- | y seers | of a- | ges past

And:

> Rock-ribbed | and an- | cient as | the sun,— | the vales

The meters of both of these lines mirror each other. Not only do both begin with a spondee, but both spondees also alliterate ("Fair forms" and "Rock-ribbed"). The stresses accentuate these phrases.

Often, regular iambs work together with syntax and caesurae to heighten the emphasis on certain words. For instance, the word "but" in line 79 falls on a normal iambic stress:

> Scourged to | his dun- | geon, but, | sustained | and soothed

The two caesurae that surround "but" draw further attention to the natural stress it receives. This "but" comes at a crucial moment in the poem, marking the point at which the speaker transitions into the moral of the poem—how people *should* act in the face of death. It's a climactic moment, and the stress, combined with syntax and caesura, helps deliver that climax.

Throughout the poem, then, meter works in tandem with other devices to provide a crucial sense of order and rhetorical height.

## RHYME SCHEME

"Thanatopsis" doesn't rhyme. As an instance of heavily enjambed blank verse, it instead relies on the twists and turns of long, iambic sentences. Normally, rhyme emphasizes the ending words of lines. It creates a pause, encouraging to the reader to view each line as a kind of unit. The verse of "Thanatopsis," however, works in the opposite manner. Sentences spiral across line breaks, picking up speed and encouraging the reader to view lines as interconnected parts. The speaker uses these long, strung-together lines to capture the rhythms of thought and to show off some lofty rhetoric.

## SPEAKER

The speaker of "Thanatopsis" is unidentified. Curiously, the speaker never uses the first-person "I." Rather, the speaker uses the second-person "thou" (a poetic form of the word "you") as the center of attention. This seemingly addresses the reader, so that everything that happens in the poem happens to the reader.

The boldest use of the second person comes at the beginning of the second stanza:

> Yet a few days, and thee
> The all-beholding sun shall see no more
> In all his course

In other words, "In a few days you are going to die," the speaker seems to say to the reader. The speaker goes on to talk about how the reader will be buried in the earth and decompose, so that no trace of them remains.

By placing the reader at the center of the poem, the speaker conveys one of the poem's central themes: death comes for everyone. It makes this theme that much more urgent for the reader—knowing that the speaker isn't just talking about anyone dying, the speaker is talking about the *reader* dying.

On one hand, then, the speaker seems to a kind of disembodied voice of wisdom, as if this were a kind of moral or philosophical text. Thought of this way, the *speaker* seems to take a back seat, while the *addressee* remains front and center. On the other hand, the poem can be interpreted as a very intimate record of the speaker's thoughts, as if the speaker is talking to themself. In this interpretation, all the twists and turns of the poem's elaborate syntax capture the texture of the speaker's thought process.

## SETTING

While "Thanatopsis" doesn't have a single clear setting, it makes extensive use of natural imagery. In some sense, the

entire earth itself could be thought of as the poem's setting. From rocks and dirt, to magnificent forests and oceans, everything on the planet is related to death in some way. The speaker uses these facets of the natural landscape to think about humanity's relationship with death.

Early in the poem, the speaker urges the reader to "Go forth, under the open sky." This suggests that the great outdoors is the best place for doing the kind of thinking that poem will demand. People can't adequately contemplate death just lying around in their bedrooms, the speaker seems to say. They have to go out and face it in the natural world.

As the poem progresses, its scope increases more and more. The speaker isn't bound to one location, but rather wants to take in the whole world. "Take the wings / Of morning," urges the speaker. In other words, the speaker tells the reader to imagine soaring over the earth to "pierce the Barcan wilderness, / Or lose thyself in the continuous woods." The speaker also summons images of "hills / Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun," as well as valleys and "rivers that move / In majesty." Death is present in all of these places, asserts the speaker.

The speaker doesn't limit the setting to the surface of the earth, either. Imagining what happens to someone when they die, the speaker pictures a body decomposing underground: "The oak / Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould." A person's body gets split apart as roots pass through it. Sometimes, the speaker takes a more metaphorical approach to the world underground, describing how each dead person receives "His chamber in the silent halls of death." Since human beings don't know what it's like to decompose and become a part of the earth, the speaker employs this figurative image, picturing the realm of the dead as a vast mansion, fulls of hallways and bedrooms.

Furthermore, the speaker also imagines earth as seen by the objects in the sky. For instance, when someone dies, the "all-beholding sun" can no longer see them. And to the stars in the sky—"the infinite host of heaven"—earth is full of "the sad abodes of death." Earth, as seen from outer space, is clearly a tomb, says the speaker.

Thus, the speaker's sense of setting gives a 360 degree view of the earth, all through the lens of death.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

William Cullen Bryant wrote "Thanatopsis" sometime between 1811 and 1813, when he was 17-19 years old. His father found it among Bryant's papers and submitted it, along with other poems, to a publisher in Boston. The publishers couldn't believe that an American had written such a poem. They agreed to publish Bryant's work, giving it the title "Thanatopsis," meaning "meditation on death."

As the publisher's reaction suggests, "Thanatopsis" was an unprecedented literary event. Many regard "Thanatopsis" as the beginning of American poetry. That said, it's interesting that the poem draws heavily on older, European poetry, particularly from England. That's one of the reasons it was hard for the publishers to believe this was an *American* poem.

What were Bryant's English models for this poem? Well, one set of influences was the Graveyard Poets, a group of English and Scottish writers who meditated extensively on death. One famous example is Robert Blair's "The Grave." Like Bryant, Blair writes in blank verse full of vivid imagery.

Another influence was William Wordsworth. Wordsworth was part of the first generation of English Romantic poets. He pioneered a meditative form of blank verse (influenced in turn by the Renaissance poet John Milton). Wordsworth was especially concerned with depicting how people relate to nature, capturing the intimate twists and turns of thought as a speaker comes to terms with their place in the world.

Combining Blair's depiction of death with Wordsworth's gift for introspection, and learning from each poet's command of blank verse, Bryant crafted a distinct voice in "Thanatopsis." Although the poem predates the American Romantic movement known as Transcendentalism, it contains many of the themes that movement would address. Writers like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson were especially concerned with how Americans related to nature. Just as in "Thanatopsis" Bryant addresses nature rather than God, these later writers depicted nature as a divine entity.

Thus, Bryant's poem can be seen as bridging English and American writing, inaugurating a new kind of American poetry and paving the way for Romanticism in America.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Bryant grew up in Puritan Massachusetts at the end of the 18th century. As such, it's helpful to compare the poetic ideas in "Thanatopsis" to Puritan ideas about God and nature. For the puritans, it would have been heretical to replace God with nature in the manner that Bryant does in this poem. The same goes for Bryant's treatment of the afterlife. That is, "Thanatopsis" doesn't seem to believe in the afterlife in any Christian sense of the term. Perhaps predictably, then, Bryant struggled to find a place in the Puritan communities of Massachusetts. His law practice eked along, and finally in 1825 he moved to New York City to pursue a career in journalism.

When Bryant wrote "Thanatopsis," America had been an independent nation for just over 30 years. The Lewis and Clark Expedition ended only five years before Bryant wrote "Thanatopsis." Although the poem is predominantly focused on death, the physical reality of America pervades the poem's

imagery. The country seemed to be getting bigger every year. The Pacific Northwest, which Lewis and Clark explored, even makes an appearance: "in the continuous woods / Where rolls the Oregon." The poem's interest in nature can be seen as part of the growing national consciousness of *American nature*, of what it means to live in such a large and naturally bountiful country.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "The Grave" by Robert Blair — The full text of "The Grave," a poem by Graveyard Poet Robert Blair. Published in 1743, this is one of the poems that inspired "Thanatopsis." (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Grave_(Blair))
- A Biography of Bryant — A detailed biography of William Cullen Bryant, as well as more poems, from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-cullen-bryant)
- A Film Inspired by "Thanatopsis" — A short piece of experimental film inspired by "Thanatopsis." Directed by the sci-fi illustrator and film artist Ed Emshwiller. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDoH_KGTR7A)
- A Reading of "Thanatopsis." — "Thanatopsis" read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGvX15W5dE4)
- Bryant's Life in Brief — This 1850 painting by Asher Brown Durand was inspired by Bryant's poem and currently hang's in New York's City's Metropolitan Museum of Art. (https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10793)

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Griffin, Brandan. "*Thanatopsis.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Jan 2020. Web. 30 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Griffin, Brandan. "*Thanatopsis.*" LitCharts LLC, January 7, 2020. Retrieved April 30, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/william-cullen-bryant/thanatopsis.