

Thanatopsis and Vocabulary

Section Objective:

- Literary skills: Understand, analyze and compare universal themes; and compare themes across genres
- Vocabulary: Understand word origins; understand word analogies; create semantic charts; and understand multiple-meaning words
- Reading skills: Make predictions; make inferences about character motivations; and distinguish fact from opinion

Themes

“Thanatopsis” William Cullen Bryant



William Cullen Bryant (1794 – 1878)

William Cullen Bryant is America’s first well-known recognized poet. He produced a body of work that paralleled the kind and the amount of writing of many significant English writers. In fact, he was called by many as the “Father of American Literature.”

Bryant had moved from rural Massachusetts to New York City. There, he became editor of the New York Evening Post. During this time, America changed from a rather extensive farming society to an industrial one. With this change, society had to cope with many unique problems, and Bryant became the national spokesman for many of these issues. For fifty years, Bryant was involved with various political issues of his time such as slavery, women’s rights, prison reform, freedom of speech and religion, the right of workers to organize in unions, etc. – all very liberal causes for his day. He supported Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln for president. Bryant was so passionate about these causes – very much a romantic in his concern for the common man and the democratic ideals of American life.

Did You Know...?

William Cullen Bryant wrote most of “Thanatopsis” when he was seventeen. The poem was the lead poem in the book it appeared, and many considered the book to be the first major book of American poetry. However, Bryant earned less than fifteen dollars in the course of five years from the book.

Most of Bryant's poetry was written before he was thirty years old, influenced by his childhood. He was raised in Cummington, Massachusetts. His father was a country doctor and an enthusiastic naturalist. During his childhood, Bryant would roam the countryside, constantly observing nature and commenting about it. At sixteen, he read many English romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He especially identified with Wordsworth in that he too felt that nature could contain spiritual and moral meanings for man.

With this keen interest in nature and the spiritual world, Bryant was inspired to write his first major work at seventeen, a poem entitled "Thanatopsis." Bryant's poetry, along with James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking novels and Washington Irving's sketches and stories, actually helped establish a new Romantic movement in American literature.

In his poetry, Bryant turned constantly to nature as a reflection of the human spirit. He felt that through nature, one could, in some ways, see the face of God, a source of moral lessons and a means of exploring the human imagination. He felt that nature speaks through the human imagination, even in sleep. He thinks that the connection made by the imagination between the natural world and human emotion is the energy force that produces poetry.



"Thanatopsis" William Cullen Bryant

Predictions

"Thanatopsis" means a view of death or a meditation on death. One would assume that the poem will describe enlighten the reader about death. With beginning of the poem, nature talks to the reader. We can predict that nature will offer the reader some deep wisdom.

Inferences About Character Motivation

The narrator of the poem is addressing anyone who listens to nature's advice. He infers the reader loves nature and understands nature as much as he does. He also infers that the reader will listen to nature's advice and follow it.

Synthesizes Ideas from Different Sources

Bryant refers to many areas of discipline from word choices to various allusions. For instance, the title, "Thanatopsis," is a reference to Greek, meaning "a view of death." Many words in the poem create a Christian tone to his poem, to the tie between nature and his message. For examples, words like "communion," "healing," "shroud," "pall," and "narrow house," seem to suggest a religious tone – Christ and burial.

Then, some phrases, such as “Earth that nourished thee shall claim / Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,” suggests a Biblical allusion to the idea that a person was created from dirt and would return to dirt. The line, “Take the wings of morning” comes from Psalm 139:9.

Of course, then we have the references to geography such as the “Barcan Wilderness,” the Oregon River, “caravans,” “quarry slave” suggestions other part of the country and world.

Connection to the News

In today’s world, people want to live for ever. Many do not want to think about death. However, in “Thanatopsis,” Bryant is making reader stop and realize that death is a natural part of life. One only needs to approach it “Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch / About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.” In other words, death is the natural and logical conclusion of one’s life. One needs to approach death in an accepting way, in a way not to be feared. The idea of sleep seems to suggest that one will wake again – another allusion to Christianity – the immortality of the soul.



Distinguish Between Facts and Opinions

Bryant’s Christian – toned acceptance of death is his **opinion**. The ideas in the poem that everyone one eventually dies, that there are more people dead than alive, that death comes to the rich, famous, and powerful as well as the common man are the true **facts** of life.

Comparison of Themes

Although some writers like to suggest the terrors of hell that might await some people, especially if they do not mend their ways, such as Jonathan Edwards did in his sermon, *Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God*, Bryant does not choose to emphasize the final judgment, but rather the naturalist part of death.

Vocabulary Practice

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Basically, an **analogy** is a comparison. It shows relationships between and among words, involving meaning, both denotative and connotative, structure, grammar, form, etc.

The form of an analogy looks like the following:

_____ : _____ :: _____ : _____

A B C D

You are to read an analogy like this:

A has a relationship to B that is the same as the relationship of C to D.

For instance: cat : kitten :: dog : puppy

(The relationship of each of these two words is that the kitten is the baby of an adult cat. The same as the puppy is the baby of an adult dog.)

These relationships can take a number of forms such as the following:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Tool and its action | hammer: pound |
| 2. Part to whole | card : deck |
| 3. Defining Characteristic | calf : cow |
| 4. Worker and tool | painter : brush |
| 5. Class and member | reptile : snake |
| 6. Antonyms | hate : love |
| 7. Synonyms | discover : find |
| 8. Worker and article created | musician : song |
| 9. Degree of Intensity | slow : slower |
| 10. Function | golfer : putt |

Practice

For these words, try to write an analogy for each one. Look up each word for its definition, part of speech, synonyms, and antonyms.

Example: musing Think deeply at length

Noun

Synonyms: meditating / pondering / considering / reflecting

Antonyms: None

musings: _____ : believable : credibility

- a. hope
- b. faithfulness
- c. contemplating
- d. discovery

1. shroud
2. communion
3. sluggish
4. clod
5. patriarch
6. sepulcher
7. hoary
8. seers
9. pensive
10. venerable
11. melancholy
12. solemn
13. infinite
14. abodes
15. phantom
16. innumerable
17. quarry
18. scourged
19. sustained
20. reign

Growth Activities

1. Research William Cullen Bryant on the Internet. Read more of his poetry. Reflect on the spirituality of nature – his main theme in his poetry.

