

Portrayal and development of the theme of fear of death in the poem thanatopsis



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The fear of death and dying is felt by everybody at some point in their lives. It is a perfectly natural fear and is hardwired into us. It is one that even assists in the survival of the human species. In “Thanatopsis” by William Cullen Bryant, this fear is recognized and seemingly implied as being unnecessary.

In this poem, Bryant uses his understanding of death to first acknowledge the fears about it and then try to comfort the reader. This acknowledgement is apparent in the first three sections, from lines 1-30, and then Bryant slowly introduces the reader to the idea that death isn't something that has to be feared. It is at this point in which “Thanatopsis” becomes more of a hopeful speculation that death isn't what people generally expect and fear. He becomes romantic in his ideas that “thou shalt lie down with patriarchs of the infant world...all in one mighty sepulcher”. He presents ideas of afterlife and even has religious undertones, though there are obvious attempts to stay away from religion. Bryant's use of words and thoughts give the impression that death is magnificent and not merely an end to life.

Bryant assumes in “Thanatopsis” death is not an end to life but a “last sleep” where “the dead reign”. While, yes, it is comforting to take this and believe in it, it is also a speculation and nothing more. Meanwhile, the poem progresses into almost a fairy tale of sorts. This in Bryant's purpose of comforting the reader is almost expected but still it deters the reader from actuality. It seems that Bryant never considers that death might indeed be the end to life and nothing more, unlike the glamorous “departure” he describes. While this truth may be found to be unpleasant by some, it doesn't lead the reader to happiness on false terms.

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Even this seemingly unpleasant end to everything doesn't have to be feared; though it is perfectly natural to feel it. Nature gave us this fear for reasons and though, yes, it is possible for one to deny the fears and feel void of them, most still feel themselves attached to them later on, comforted or not. One can live with this fear and still lead a happy life, in fact most do.

For a purpose of merely comforting the reader about their fear of death and dying, Bryant accomplishes this and does well at it. Through his words, Bryant paints a picture of afterlife and companionship. That comfort, however, is very limited. He sells the idea of death well and his poem, which is a collection of nice thoughts, is enjoyable to read but only that.