

Depiction and symbolic layer of the concept of afterlife in the poem thanatopsis



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The afterlife is an abstract concept which delves into the realm of faith. The concept allows people to trust death, it allows people to accept death. In “Thanatopsis,” a poem by William Cullen Bryant, he attempts to ease the pain of death by explaining that death is a natural process. He explores the events prior and following death, advocating that the dead become one with nature. Bryant believes death is peaceful and beautiful, and it is simply a transitional period from earthly existence to the afterlife. He utilizes several stylistic choices to suggest that death is a tranquil transition from one world to another.

Throughout the poem, Bryant discusses the sources of comfort for the dying. In the first stanza, Bryant describes a man who holds a strong connection with nature. When the man feels joyful, nature “has a voice of gladness, and a smile / And eloquence of beauty” (4). The sounds of nature are peaceful and calm. When he begins to fall into darker thoughts, nature deftly “steals away / Their sharpness, ere he is aware” (8-9). Already, nature’s comforting aspects are highlighted. Nature can remedy the dark thoughts of the man, accentuating its healing properties. Interestingly, Bryant then transitions his focus from the man to the readers themselves. According to him, the moment when the readers ponder about their dying moments, they should “list / To Nature’s teachings” (14-15) for it has the remedy to those thoughts. Suddenly, Bryant hypothesizes that the readers face a grim fate: they are going to die soon. He believes the Earth “that nourished thee [the readers]” (22) will decompose the readers’ bodies so they can become one with nature; Bryant hints that nature is the afterlife of the dead. In the second stanza, Bryant reassures the readers they are not alone in this endeavor.

They instead retreat to their “ eternal resting place” where they “ shalt lie down / With patriarchs of the infant world” (31; 33-34). Their bodies will decompose into the same earth consisting of the decomposed bodies of the past lives. Bryant explains that the various forms of nature are merely decorations “ of the great tomb of man” (45). The oceans, forests, plains, and rivers decorate the Earth where bodies of the dead decompose. Bryant tells the readers that they can “ lose thyself in the continuous woods / Where rolls the Oregon” (52-53), but death will be there. The readers can attempt to evade death, but all attempts are futile because death eventually happens to everyone. However, the ubiquitous nature of death comforts the readers. If no one notices their death, Bryant assures that “ All that breathe / Will share thy destiny” (60-61). He comforts the readers by ensuring that even if no one notices their departure, they eventually share the same fate. In the third stanza, Bryant finalizes his efforts of comforting the readers. When the readers approach the cusp of death “ where each shall take / His chamber in the silent halls of death” (75-76). In the end, the readers are sleeping in their own peaceful, silent rooms in death, which helps develop the theme of death being the interim between earthly life and the afterlife.

Structure and tone play a significant role in exploring life after death. The structure of the poem reinforces the sense of calmness and joining with others after death. For example, the entire poem is written in free verse. Free verse feels like regular speech, and regular is what Bryant was aiming for. He structures the poem to be free verse in order to offer a sense of natural speech; he convinces the readers to trust in him. The natural speech reinforces the idea that death happens, and that idea alone should be

comforting. Thus, the free verse nature of the poem provides a sense of peacefulness. The poem lacks a rhyme scheme, but the iambic meter unifies the poem. The unity comforts the readers and provides them a sense of regular rhythm. One example of iambic meter relating to life after death is the iambic meter itself. "To him who in the love of Nature holds" (1). The stresses are every other syllable; in life, ups and downs are prevalent. At the moment of death, one is weak and frail, unstressed. After death, a bright new life is suggested because of the stress immediately after. Tone also plays a role in exploring the topic of death being only a resting period before the afterlife. For example, Bryant uses diction to describe the grave of the dead as "one might sepulcher" (37). Despite grave or tombstone being perfect substitutes, Bryant opted for sepulcher. The reason is that the word carries religious weight, which brings in the element of a possible afterlife. Specifically, sepulcher is seen in Christian history as Jesus rises from the dead from an Easter sepulcher. This suggests the sepulcher a hiatus from life and the dead will rise in a holier plane like Jesus. Another example of strange diction is since near the beginning of the poem. As Bryant describes the man with a strong love for nature, he mentions that the man "holds Communion with her visible forms" (2). Communion is another Christian ritual in which a person eats the body of Christ. Despite Jesus being dead, people are still able to connect with the living and essentially have an afterlife. The man in the first stanza connects to nature on that level in the sense that the dead fuse with nature and are also connected to the man. Thus, once the man becomes one with nature, he holds Communion with other people, which reinforces the theme of an afterlife. Through Bryant's usage of structure and tone, he helps reinforce the theme of afterlife.

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Bryant utilizes poetic devices to reinforce the theme of a peaceful death into the afterlife. The use of symbolism emphasizes the underlying serenity of death as death is merely a resting period for the afterlife. After Bryant describes the grave of men, he says “ The golden sun, / The planets, all the infinite host of heaven, / Are shining on the sad abodes of death” (45-47). The sun’s light reaches the gloomy homes of death which is a contrasting effect. Beams of light from the sun contrasts the perception of a gloomy death; now, death seems like a calm summer day. The sun shining on death also means the start of a new day, which suggests that a new life starts after death. Thus, the sun symbolizes the peacefulness of death prior to the afterlife. Bryant also connects sleep with death through the use of symbolism by telling the readers to lie “ down to pleasant dreams” (81). Sleeping is the time of rest and recovery; after sleep, a new day starts. Bryant also tells the readers to have pleasing dreams, for he believes the dying should embrace the peaceful aspects of death. So, when the dead wake from their sleep, they experience a bright, new life. Bryant also uses imagery extensively throughout the poem to explain the comfort of the grave. He details the various aspects of nature through the use of imagery to depict the serenity of dying. When he describes the grave of men, he says, “ the venerable woods—rivers that move / In majesty, and the complaining brooks / That make the meadows green” (40-43) are all calming decorations provided by nature. Death is not a tortuous fate, but rather a soothing and peaceful one. By appealing to the readers’ sense of vision and sound, Bryant convinces the readers to trust death. The peaceful mood of the grave allows the dead to experience the soothing forms of nature after death. Bryant implies that in the afterlife, the dead can sense nature. Bryant also comforts the readers

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with imagery by depicting millions of dead. Another example of imagery occurs when Bryant talks about the tribes. "The innumerable caravan, which moves / To that mysterious realm" (74-75). He paints a vivid picture of millions walking in a line towards death. The sense of unity calms the readers, as they are a part of a regular cycle. Thus, the people who die should not be afraid as they are dying with millions of others. However, the journey to death is not the end, they are merely venturing into a different realm of living. They are leaving their physical bodies to journey into another world. Bryant masterfully utilizes symbolism and imagery to enhance the theme of afterlife.

While Bryant's belief in the afterlife is apparent, he leaves the specific afterlife ambiguous at the end. For example, he discusses that people who die fuse with nature, then he uses a bed as a symbol for death which implies the dead will awake into a new life. He intentionally leaves the afterlife ambiguous because he wants the poem to be relatable to everyone. If the dying believe in a heaven, they are simply reborn into the heaven, or they awake into the new world. If the dying believe in reincarnation, they die and reborn into a new, earthly life. If the dying believe in becoming one with nature, they decompose into the soil and become nutrients, fostering new life. In all of these examples, the unifying theme of new life is clear. Bryant suggests an afterlife exists to comfort the dying, but leaves the afterlife vague in order to reach a wider audience.