

# William cullen bryant

[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



The most accomplished and popular American poet of the first half of the nineteenth century, Bryant also was the first American poet to receive substantial international acclaim. Bryant is considered an early proponent of Romanticism in American literature, and his work is often compared thematically and stylistically to that of English Romantic poet William Wordsworth. Opposing eighteenth-century poetic conventions and using experimental iambic rhythms, Bryant's poetry usually meditates on nature and the transience of earthly things.

Although its themes were few and its thought not profound, Bryant's verse possessed a simple dignity and an impeccable restrained style, most notably in "Thanatopsis" (1817) and "To a Waterfowl" (1821), the poems for which he is best remembered. Since Bryant also spent more than fifty years of his life as editor of the New York Evening Post, a career which ranks among the longest in American journalism, he never fully developed his poetic talents. However, Bryant's literary efforts make him an important, if somewhat overlooked, figure in American poetry.

Biographical Information Born November 3, 1794, at Cummington, Massachusetts, Bryant began to compose verses at age nine. His first poem to gain critical attention, *The Embargo; or, Sketches of the Times*, which satirized Thomas Jefferson's laws limiting free trade, appeared in 1808. Bryant entered Williams College at age sixteen, but left without graduating and returned home, where he studied law until he was admitted to the bar in 1815. For the next ten years Bryant practiced as an attorney, a profession he came to detest.

Meanwhile, he continued to write poetry and published several essays of poetry criticism. Encouraged by the highly favorable critical response to the anonymous publication of an early version of his "Thanatopsis" in the North American Review in 1817, Bryant established his name as a poet with his first collection, *Poems* (1821). In 1825 he moved to New York City, where he co-founded the *New York Review and Atheneum Magazine*, which eventually proved to be unsuccessful, and associated with artists Asher Durant and Thomas Cole and members of the renowned Knickerbocker school, which included writers Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Fitz-Greene Halleck, and Gulian Verplanck, each of whom later became the subjects of Bryant's biographical discourses. In 1827 Bryant was offered an editorial position at the *New York Evening Post*, and by 1829 he became the newspaper's editor-in-chief and part owner.

For nearly fifty years under his leadership the *Evening Post* espoused such liberal political causes as free trade, free speech, workers' rights, and the abolition of slavery, serving initially as an organ of the Democratic party and later the Free-Soil movement and finally the Republican party. Upon publication of his second volume of verse, *Poems* (1832), Bryant had attained national prominence as a public figure, both as poet and editor. Although Bryant published other poetry collections over the course of his life, his editorial responsibilities consumed his time and turned his attention to prose writing.

Bryant also toured Europe and the United States: one visit to Illinois inspired "The Prairies," and the letters he wrote to the Evening Post during his trips abroad comprise three collections of travel sketches. Despite a lifetime of political, literary, and physical activity, Bryant suffered a debilitating stroke and died two weeks later on June 12, 1878. Major Works Distinguished by its simple dignity, didactic purpose, plain style, and a conscious concern for craftsmanship, Bryant's poetry expresses ideas derived from the Enlightenment and English Romanticism.

The majority features recurrent themes of mutability, loneliness and isolation, the passing of innocence, and the somber certainty of the grave. Yet his poems are tinged by his personal interest in American politics, folklore, and history, and, above all, by his observations of the beauty and power of his native landscape, which pervades his poetic sensibilities. Bryant's poetic treatment of nature incorporates his belief that Nature is simply the visible manifestation of an omnipresent, transcendent God, who remains distinct from the natural world.

For example, "To a Waterfowl" depicts the poet's vision of a lone bird on the horizon at the close of a wearisome day, which sparks his realization that all nature is directed and protected by divine providence. In "A Forest Hymn" the poet exclaims that "The groves were God's first temples," observing that even a flower possesses "an emanation of the in-dwelling Life." Many of Bryant's lyrics reveal that Nature exists to console and instruct humanity about divine purpose, which is represented by providential cycles of changes in nature and life.

For instance, "Thanatopsis," whose Greek title means "view of death," gives voice to Nature, who teaches that humanity partakes of all natural processes and admonishes humanity to live well so it may not fear death. "The Death of the Flowers," written on the death of Bryant's sister, identifies the dead woman with the decay of beautiful summertime, while "To the Fringed Gentian," whose title refers to a late-blooming autumnal flower, states the poet's wish that "Hope, blossoming within my heart, / May look to heaven as I depart." Critical Reception

Bryant's colloquial voice and celebration of nature were hailed as poetic innovations upon publication of his debut collection *Poems*, and confirmed his reputation as the most eminent American poet of the day. His status generally went unquestioned by his contemporaries until the middle of the nineteenth century, when some critics began to observe that his lyrics lacked flexibility and depth of subject and theme; that his versification failed to display poetic virtuosity and breadth of conception; and that his poetry relied too much on didactic endings and generally lacked passion.

Thus, by the time the poet had achieved the heights of critical adulation, he already was being reduced to a poet of historical significance, or at least a competent wordsmith of second rank. Although most critics have agreed that Bryant's early poems represent his best work, critical assessment of his work has declined considerably in the twentieth century and is largely limited to debates about whether Bryant's poetic sensibilities are more Puritan or Romantic.

A small revival of interest in Bryant's poetry has occurred since 1978, which marked the hundredth anniversary of the poet's death, but most criticism has centered on a half-dozen of individual poems, comparisons to other writers and artists, or the relation between geography and poetry. Norbert Krapf has remarked, " if we ultimately find [Bryant] to be a 'minor' poet, we must realize that it is indeed no mean accomplishment to be a minor poet. "