



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
Volume-III, Issue-II, September 2016, Page No. 152-158
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

Thanatopsis and Prospice: A consolation in the face of the inevitable mortality of all humans

Dr. Thamarai Selvi

Lecturer, Language and Literature, University of Goroka, Papua New Guinea

Abstract

*W. C. Bryant's poem *Thanatopsis* was a poem meant to be comforting and to think of death as a happy dream-filled sleep. Robert Browning's *Prospice* gave us two indications that there was honour in life, both of which came from relationship to others and to persist in the face of death so one could "fare like his peers" which carried a positive tone of friendship. In the poem "*Thanatopsis*" the narrator started by talking about nature's ability to make us feel better. The speaker tells us that nature could make pain less painful. It could even lighten our dark thoughts about death. He tells us that, when we begin to worry about death, we should go outside and listen to the voice of nature. That voice reminds us that we would indeed vanish when we die and mix back into the earth. The voice of nature also tells us that when we die, we won't be alone. Every person who had ever lived on this ground and everyone who is alive will be soon dead and in the ground too. In *Prospice* the speaker is the poet himself and says that he would not falter before death even though its imminence perverted the journey of life, but instead would march forward heroically and face it head-on. The speaker considers himself a "fighter" and refuses to consider taking a coward's route to death and approaching it with anything less than full confidence. Both the poems are a kind of consolation portraying that death was inevitable for mortals and one had to prepare for death.*

Key Words: pretense, nature, painful, journey, inevitable, Thanatopsis, Prospice.

Introduction: The poem, "*Thanatopsis*," by William Cullen Bryant, was a wonderful literary work which explored the controversial questions of death. The narrator tried to create images which connect sleep and death throughout the poem. In fact the connection between death and sleep created a metaphor which added depth and meaning to the poem. While examining the differences and similarities of death and sleep the reader was left with thought provoking questions and the answers to these questions reassured some readers while confused others. Sleep was a time of rest. It allowed preparation for the next day or event, and by relating this definition to death the narrator gave a new insight on one's fate after earthly existence. People generally wake from sleep, and Bryant expanded this occurrence to death. Death could simply been a time of rest that retired the bodies' of

earthly beings, and allowed the soul to wake. Upon waking the soul was freed, and entered a new plane of existence. I somehow felt that the narrator actually indicated his belief in afterlife. Bryant did not earn a living exclusively from writing poetry. Influential in civic and political affairs, he was a lawyer and, for more than fifty years, editor of the *New York Evening Post*. A busy manlike him could produce a poem judged to be of such high quality was in itself an outstanding achievement. The doctrine that the poem taught was that death meant a total loss of human evidence. Surrendering up, the individual being, would now mix forever with the elements in the ground. Some critics had criticized this part of the poem and speculated that Bryant had not written a Christian poem in which a faith in immortality and a hope of being eternally with God in heaven provided ultimate consolation. Robert Browning's poem 'Prospice' was a dramatic monologue written about a man's thoughts on his impending death. He expressed his optimistic outlook on death and afterlife. A dramatic monologue is a poem with a speaker who is clearly separate from the poet, who speaks to an audience that is clearly present in the scene. This implied audience was what distinguished the dramatic monologue. Robert Browning's wife passed away and with her death, Browning's life was once again forever altered. Even though his career escalated during the period after her death, it also led to intense emotional poems that questioned and sometimes exemplified death. The same year that Elizabeth died, Browning wrote "Prospice," a poem that discussed his fearlessness towards death. Beginning with the simple question, Fear death? Browning goes on to discuss the inevitable end to life. He stated that all men must face it and that a reward stands on the other side. He felt as though death came once everything one had wanted from life had been realized. With this understanding everyone must face death, he anticipated it, wanted to face it like a "fighter." He wrote with eagerness about his desire to fight, he wanted to be like the old heroes and face death like the final adventure that it was. However, he wishes to be reunited with his wife. Calling her the "soul of my soul" Browning envisioned the moment when he could once again hold her.

Literature review: The concept of death is one that is both intriguing and terrifying. Sure, everyone had their own theories about what would occur when one's life came to a screeching halt. Due to lack of evidence for an afterlife or anything for that matter, Death was still one of the scariest problems human beings had to encounter. This horror was destroyed in the poem *Thanatopsis* by William Cullen Bryant, who described death in a realistic but optimistic point of view. His usage of imagery and a thematic progression gave the poem depth and realism, attributed that described his thoughts accurately to his audience. The poem was an analysis of the process of aging and the impact of thoughts of death on humans. Death was a very difficult concept to grasp. Indeed, the author had gone as far as to describe it as "sad images of the stern agony". However, the author made use of a thematic progression throughout the poem, and this melancholy tone quickly shifted to joy. The overall theme explained that death was an unavoidable fact of life, and one should not waste time contemplating the sadness of non-existence. Browning in new way tried to glorify or epitomize death rather, he described a somewhat rigorous and painful death for all

that it was, and claimed that he wished that the death that took the heroes of old might take him a way as well, no more no less, the poem suggested that our protagonist had achieved all he could in his earthly life, and not necessarily inviting death, but rather assuring the reader that when it came, he wished to meet it head on, this courageous idealism perhaps reflected Browning's state of mind at the time, rather it was very different from other poems of his such as porphyrias lover and my last duchess, there is a certain positive and eager tone to the ordeal, unseen in his other texts, again however this may stem from the events that had influenced him. Browning's philosophy of life was always one of courage, of making the adventurous attempt in face of difficulty. The Arch Fear (Death) did not terrify him. The poem expressed his undaunted spirit in the face of death and his firm belief in the eventual reunion with his beloved wife. As he had faced the joyous contest of living, now he would meet the final struggle – confidently, with the assurance of personal struggle. Prospice' means to 'look ahead' in Latin – a positive take on death and its rewards. The poem was written following Elizabeth's death. The poem was a powerful portrait of a wife's death and a husband who was 'looking forward' to death when he would see her again.

Theory: Transcendentalism- This title is put together from two Greek words: "thanatos" (which meant "death") and "opsis" (meant "view," or "sight" – that's where we got the English word "optic"). When we put it together, Thanatopsis meant literally "a view of death". In any case, this title definitely tells us what this poem was all about: death. William Cullen Bryant was best known for writing calm, thoughtful poems about the natural world. He experimented with a bunch of different kinds of forms and meters, but he showed a pretty consistent interest in streams, flowers, birds, and all that stuff. Bryant also often used these poems about nature to explore philosophical and spiritual themes. Some of his most famous poems, like "To a Waterfowl" and "To the Fringed Gentian," talked about the same kind of positive spiritual feelings that we see at the end of "Thanatopsis." He stayed away from talking about religion directly, but he did hint that there was something in the universe that was looking out for us. Bryant ultimately concluded in "Thanatopsis" that regardless of whether one was religious or not, death was inevitable and should be embraced as such. The narrator of the poem concluded that it ultimately did not matter what beliefs or morals man chose to embody while he was living because, ultimately, the only thing of which anyone could be sure was death. So everyone should live the life that best helped prepare them for death. While examining the differences and similarities of death and sleep the reader was left with some very thought provoking questions. The answers to these questions reassured some readers while confused others. Sleep was a time of rest. It allowed preparation for the next day or event, and by relating this definition to death Bryant gave new insight on one's fate after earthly existence. When identifying sleep with death Bryant gave death many characteristics of slumber. People generally woke from sleep, and Bryant expanded this occurrence to death. Death could simply be a time of rest that retired the bodies' of earthly beings, and allowed the soul to wake. Bryant wrote, "Take the wings of morning, and pierce the Barcan wilderness." To me, the wings in this statement symbolized a spiritual, angelic

being, and the morning suggested a time of waking. After waking, the angelic being broke through the confinement of the human grave, and continued its existence elsewhere. In my opinion these lines indicate Bryant's belief in an afterlife. Bryant was sometimes called the "American Wordsworth" because, like the British Romantic poet William Wordsworth, he excelled in creating effective descriptions of nature. William Cullen Bryant's *Thanatopsis* was a poem meaning "a vision of death". Bryant referred not only to death but the trappings of a funeral in the poem. Unlike other death poems, Bryant did not refer to death as a person but personified Nature in a feminine form. She "has a voice of gladness" and "eloquence of beauty", but she glided into his "darker musings". The first death vision was here. The musings were tied with the "last bitter hour," to form the vision of death. Additional references pointed to the physical appointment of death. The "narrow house" was a reference to a coffin and the grave was shown by the "sun shall see no more." Bryant continued to state the world would continue without the departed. The "gay will laugh", and the "brood...plod on." However, he also noted they would join the departed in death as well. This is a reminder no one escaped death. As the poem concluded, Bryant was assuring the reader that the vision of death should not be feared but it should be "sustained and soothed" because the world would continue and would also go to death. As an American poet, "Thanatopsis" is reminiscent of the British Romantic poems in both form and theme. The opening of the poem is like Wordsworth, with an elaborate and profound appeal to nature and a sense of the natural world being the seat of all understanding. The themes of death, the democracy element of mortality, and the idea of embracing the notion of dying as part of a larger cycle of life that envelops all living things are very Romantic in nature. For a poem written in the early nineteenth century, in which Christian belief was the norm in the United States, this was an unusual elegy in the sense that it offered none of the traditional consolations to humans faced with their own certain mortality. *Thanatopsis* was a truly remarkable work. The lush imagery and deep personal commentary allowed the poem to speak to the reader. By exploiting death and the fear of it, Bryant was able to construct something that was both refreshing and realistic. The darkness of death, when contrasted with the bright joys of life, seemed insignificant and nonexistent. A lifetime of happiness would create a satisfying end.

The poem *Prospice* by Robert Browning had an exciting tone throughout; the title even meant "Look forward." Browning jumped wholeheartedly into his desire to meet death head-on and each line brought him closer to a resolution, a climactic end to an analysis of the inevitable finale. Browning integrated much of his faith and values into his poetry. He believed that death should be considered as a final battle, fought until the finish. The poem was characteristic of Browning's optimism and his skilful and subtle use of language. It also demonstrated his ability to present subjective experience through constructed narrators, a trait that helped move his poetry out of Romanticism and into early modernism. The poet painted death as a glorious battle that transpired after we had conquered life: "For the journey was done and the summit attained... Though a battle's to fight ere the guerdon be gained" and "Guerdon" means "reward". Thus we must triumph over death in order to

achieve our final peace. The author didn't want death to merely let him past; he was eager to fight, wanted to "taste the whole of it," because it meant he would enjoy his victory that much more. He wanted to be like "the heroes of old." Browning explained that, in an instant, the terrified prospect that was death was over, and led to "the best," the afterlife, for those that were willing to face death. As Browning said, the end result was something worth fighting for. He imagined it as reuniting with his wife, who had passed away. All the tumult that surrounded the battle with death soon "changed," evolved into a "peace," then into "a light" that guided us, finally, to our loved ones. To Browning, death might have been a battle, but it was one that was over quickly, and which ended with such an amazing reward that it was worth enduring. The content of *Prospice* compared the speaker's impending death to a climbing mountain, and being a soldier in war. It conveyed an image of a courageous man embracing death, and what God had planned for him without fear. Browning began by asking the audience if they thought he had feared death; compared it to the elements. The fog in his throat was making it hard to breathe as he ascended the mountain. The cold rush of wind signified that he was nearing the top of the mountain- the final hour of death. As he approached he saw death waiting at his lookout point but he did not hesitate to go forward. He was strong enough to submit without a fight, because he had reached the top of the mountain, and allowed his guard to be let down. Even though it was necessary to fight the battle before the final award was received. The speaker was always a fighter. The speaker would hate to have lived his life being blind to and avoiding death, pretending that it would never happen. He wanted to see and know all of it, even the grotesque aspects, and face it like his fellow soldiers in their heroic manner. He would bear the pain in his death in order to balance the pain he escaped through out.

Conclusion: No one had ever been dead and returned to give a clear account about what death was really like making death remain unknown. Man's nature made him fear what he did not understand and could not control. It was difficult to state that near-death experience came close to what a death experience was because it remained a blank for people. We could never know what death was exactly unless we were dead, thus, the living could never fully understand it. Having only a semblance of control over it, it was difficult to not fear it. People's primary response to death was avoidance. It was not a pleasant topic of conversation and it was rarely discussed. It was usually discussed in academic terms. Death created discomfort in every personal discussion. It was much easier to talk about death in terms of other people rather than one's own. Death and dying had received much attention particularly in its scientific and religious aspects. Many people who had suffered a loss had shared many of their perspectives about it which helped developed the core concepts of death. Death was unique. Therefore each individual's experience was unique. Death Anxiety-Most ideas of death were negative and disturbing. Images of death produced feelings of fear and anxiety. Many people were afraid of dying more than death itself. Relatively speaking, there were just as many ways of dying as there were many ways of living. This was because dying was influenced by the living. Death Denial-Many people were greatly habituated to denying death that when it appeared they were caught entirely by

surprise. They tend to miss out on the extraordinary opportunity for peace and resolution that came with the dying trajectory as they were overwhelmed and confused when faced by it. Death denial permeated people in many various ways. It strongly influenced the choices they made (Coberly). Death Acceptance-Acceptance of death involved willingness to let go and detach one's self from events and things which one used to value. Acceptance having a positive acceptance included the recognition of the spiritual connection. People who had truly accepted death had a transcendental reality and the vision of sharing spiritual life with people they loved for all eternity (Wong). Acceptance of death began with confrontation. Social Perception of Death-Society appeared to have eliminated death from vocabulary. The present society promoted happiness and material possession. Any divergence from these priorities was deemed to be problematic or unnatural. However, this society was also predominated with violence. According to Pope John Paul II, modernity had given birth to a culture of death.

References:

- 1) Brodwin, Stanley, and Michael D'Innocenzo. *William Cullen Bryant and His America: Centennial Conference Proceedings, 1878-1978*. New York: AMS Press, 1983.
- 2) Brown, Charles Henry. *William Cullen Bryant*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971.
- 3) Godwin, Parke. *A Biography of William Cullen Bryant*. Vol. 1. New York: Russell and Russell, 1967.
- 4) McLean, Albert F., Jr. *William Cullen Bryant*. New York: Twayne, 1964.
- 5) Peckham, H. H. *Gotham Yankee: A Biography of William Cullen Bryant*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1971.
- 6) "Thanatopsis by William Cullen Bryant." [123HelpMe.com](http://www.123HelpMe.com/view.asp?id=66384). 17 Sep 2016 <<http://www.123HelpMe.com/view.asp?id=66384>>.
- 7) Gioia, Dana. "Longfellow in the Aftermath of Modernism". *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, edited by Jay Parini. Columbia University Press, 1993: 74-75. ISBN 0-231-07836-6
- 8) Parks, Edd Winfield. *Ante-Bellum Southern Literary Critics*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1
- 9) Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007). Includes a chapter on the poem. ISBN 0-8166-4893-X 962: 175.
- 10) *Phelps, William Lyon (1924). Howells, James, Bryant, and Other Essays*. New York: Macmillan Publishers
- 11) *Trent, William Peterfield Trent (1920). A History of American Literature, 1607-1865*. New York: D. Appleton & Company.

- 12) Trent, William Peterfield Trent (1917). *The Cambridge History of American Literature*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- 13) Bigelow, John (1890). *William Cullen Bryant*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- 14) Haralson, Eric L. (2014). *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*. London: Routledge.
- 15) Online text copyright © 2003, Ian Lancashire for the Department of English, University of Toronto. Published by the Web Development Group, Information Technology Services, University of Toronto Libraries.
- 16) Original text: Robert Browning, *Dramatis Personae* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1864). PR 4209 A1 1864 ROBA.
- 17) Browning, Robert. "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church." The Norton
- 18) Anthology of English Literature. Ed. M.H. Abrams. New York: W.W. Norton and
- 19) Company, 2000.
- 20) "Prospice." The Norton Anthology of English Literature. Ed. M.H. Abrams. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000.
- 21) Everett, Glenn. "Browning's Religious Views." Victorian Web. 2003. 14 April 2004.<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/rbrelge.html>
- 22) Everett, Glenn. "Robert Browning – Biography." Victorian Web 2003. 14 April 2004.
- 23) <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/rbbio/html>
- 24) "Robert Browning: Selected Poems by Robert Browning." Blackstone Audiobooks.
- 25) 2000. 14 April 2004.
- 26) <http://www.blackstoneaudio.com/audiobook.cfm?AFF=1048&ID=1358>