



# Thanatopsis

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William Cullen Bryant wrote “Thanatopsis” when he was about seventeen. He was influenced by the British “Graveyard Poets” (ex. Thomas Gray and Robert Blair), William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He added to the poem in 1821. His additions frame the poem and give it an added religious point.

After reading the poem, consider the following questions.

1. What Greek words were combined to make the title? How do the meanings of these words contribute to the meaning of the poem?
2. Define the following words; consider the context of the poem: shroud, pall, narrow house, and sepulcher. How do these words and their meanings impact the meaning of the poem?
3. Is this a poem about life or is this a poem about death? Explain your answer.
4. The tone of this poem shifts. What is the tone in the first part of the poem? When does the tone shift? What is the tone after the shift?
5. *Thanatopsis* is an ELEGY. What is an elegy? What are the conventions of an elegy? What elements of *Thanatopsis* meet those conventions?
6. This poem was written early in the nineteenth century. The type of landscape art during this time period favored sweeping panoramas, wild vistas, untamed landscapes, and views of the sky. Look at *Thanatopsis* as a visual description of a painting. What elements of the poem are like a painting? What images are created in the poem? What landscape is created?
7. *Thanatopsis* is a poem that can be interpreted in several ways. How is this poem an example of a historical piece? How is this a Romantic poem? How is this a Calvinist poem?