THANATOPSIS

***by: William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878)***

http://www.poetry-archive.com/t_pic.gifO him who in the love of Nature holds

Communion with her visible forms, she speaks

A various language; for his gayer hours

She has a voice of gladness, and a smile

And eloquence of beauty, and she glides

Into his darker musings, with a mild

And healing sympathy, that steals away

Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts

Of the last bitter hour come like a blight

Over thy spirit, and sad images

Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,

And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,

Make thee to shudder and grow sick at heart;--

Go forth, under the open sky, and list

To Nature's teachings, while from all around--

Earth and her waters, and the depths of air--

Comes a still voice--Yet a few days, and thee

The all-beholding sun shall see no more

In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,

Where thy pale form was laid with many tears,

Nor in the embrace of ocean, shall exist

Thy image. Earth, that nourish'd thee, shall claim

Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,

And, lost each human trace, surrendering up

Thine individual being, shalt thou go

To mix for ever with the elements,

To be a brother to the insensible rock,

And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain

Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak

Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.

Yet not to thine eternal resting-place

Shalt thou retire alone, nor couldst thou wish

Couch more magnificent. Thou shalt lie down

With patriarchs of the infant world--with kings,

The powerful of the earth--the wise, the good,

Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,

All in one mighty sepulchre. The hills

Rock-ribb'd and ancient as the sun,--the vales

Stretching in pensive quietness between;

The venerable woods; rivers that move

In majesty, and the complaining brooks

That make the meadows green; and, pour'd round all,

Old Ocean's grey and melancholy waste,--

Are but the solemn decorations all

Of the great tomb of man. The golden sun,

The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,

Are shining on the sad abodes of death,

Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread

The globe are but a handful to the tribes

That slumber in its bosom.--Take the wings

Of morning, pierce the Barcan wilderness,

Or lose thyself in the continuous woods

Where rolls the Oregon and hears no sound

Save his own dashings--yet the dead are there:

And millions in those solitudes, since first

The flight of years began, have laid them down

In their last sleep--the dead reign there alone.

So shalt thou rest: and what if thou withdraw

In silence from the living, and no friend

Take note of thy departure? All that breathe

Will share thy destiny. The gay will laugh

When thou art gone, the solemn brood of care

Plod on, and each one as before will chase

His favourite phantom; yet all these shall leave

Their mirth and their employments, and shall come

And make their bed with thee. As the long train

Of ages glides away, the sons of men,

The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes

In the full strength of years, matron and maid,

The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man--

Shall one by one be gathered to thy side

By those who in their turn shall follow them.

So live, that when thy summons comes to join

The innumerable caravan which moves

To that mysterious realm where each shall take

His chamber in the silent halls of death,

Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,

Scourged by his dungeon; but, sustain'd and soothed

By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,

Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch

About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

“Thanatopsis” Analysis Questions

1. To what extent does nature help people cope during times of sadness?
2. According to lines 22-30, conclude what happens when people die? Justify or argue against the philosophy.
3. Determine why people should greet death without fear?

* Identify as many characteristics of American Romanticism as you can in the poem.
  + Share the quote, the line number, and the characteristic to have a complete answer