

WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT
(1794-1878)

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website www.tarvinlit.com. Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

I. INTRODUCTION: Bryant was America's first great poet of _____, vividly describing its woods, flowers, and wildlife.

II. "THANATOPSIS"

1. What does the Greek word "thanatopsis" mean?

A meditation on _____.

2. One's religious beliefs generally reconcile a person to death. What reconciles the speaker in this poem to that "last bitter hour" (9)?

The "_____ voice" (17) of Nature, which contrasts with the " _____" (13) of human beings when they think about death.

3. In stanza two, what does the speaker say happens to one after death?

One returns to _____.

What does one surrender?

One loses all _____ identity.

4. In stanzas three and four, according to the speaker, what consolations does one have at death?

(1) Since the dead return to _____, one could not wish for a more beautiful resting place (31-33).

(2) All of the great people will be buried in this "one mighty _____" (37).

(3) Death is _____ to all (60-61).

5. Considering that this poem deals with death, stanza five (the last stanza, 73-81) ironically begins with what two words? _____

6. The last stanza contains two particularly rich similes. [Note: A simile is a comparison of two things not in the same class; it uses "like" or "as" in making its comparison.]

(1) A person who fears death is "like the _____-slave" (77)

whipped into his dungeon.

(2) A person who accepts death is "like one who _____" (80) the covering draped over "his _____" (80) about himself and takes an afternoon nap of "pleasant _____" (81).

7. The speaker mentions an "unfaltering trust" (79).
"Trust" in what? _____

III. "TO A WATERFOWL"

1. Summarize this poem. The speaker says that there is a "_____" (13)-- God--who has given the _____ the ability to find its _____ in the seemingly uncharted sky. This God who guides the bird will guide the _____ in the right _____, concerning his life.

2. Some critics have found in the form of each stanza an imitation of a bird in flight. What would lines 1 and 4 and lines 2 and 3 become?

Lines 1 and 4 are the bird's _____ and lines 2 and 3 are the _____ and the _____ of the bird.