

RL 4 Analyze the impact of specific word choice on meaning and tone. **RL 5** Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text contribute to its structure and meaning, as well as its aesthetic impact.

DID YOU KNOW?

William Cullen Bryant ...

- could say the alphabet at 16 months of age.
- helped found the Republican Party.
- was an early abolitionist and staunch supporter of Abraham Lincoln.

Thanatopsis

Poem by William Cullen Bryant

Meet the Author

William Cullen Bryant 1794–1878

In his own day, William Cullen Bryant was a literary superstar. Schoolchildren recited his poetry. Adults pored over his newspaper editorials. And other writers praised his genius. James Fenimore Cooper even went so far as to call Bryant “the author of America” for helping to create a distinctive American literature.

All-American Poet Born in 1794 in Cummington, Massachusetts, Bryant began his writing career at an early age. At 10, he translated poems written in Latin; at 13, he published “The Embargo,” a poem satirizing the policies of President Thomas Jefferson.

But the young Bryant was most inspired to write poetry about the natural world. As a boy, he spent hours exploring the forests and hills near his home. His earliest efforts reflected the influence of the English romantic poets.

In time, however, Bryant discovered his American voice. At the ripe old age of 18, he wrote “Thanatopsis,” a poem inspired by his wanderings in the countryside. The American editor who published the poem was so struck by its brilliance that he asserted, “No one on this side of the Atlantic is capable of writing such a verse.”

Career Moves At his father's urging, Bryant attended law school and spent ten years as a lawyer in Plainsfield, Massachusetts. But he was destined for a career in literature and writing. Leaving behind the “disagreeable drudgery” of his law practice, Bryant moved to New York City in 1825 to become a journalist.

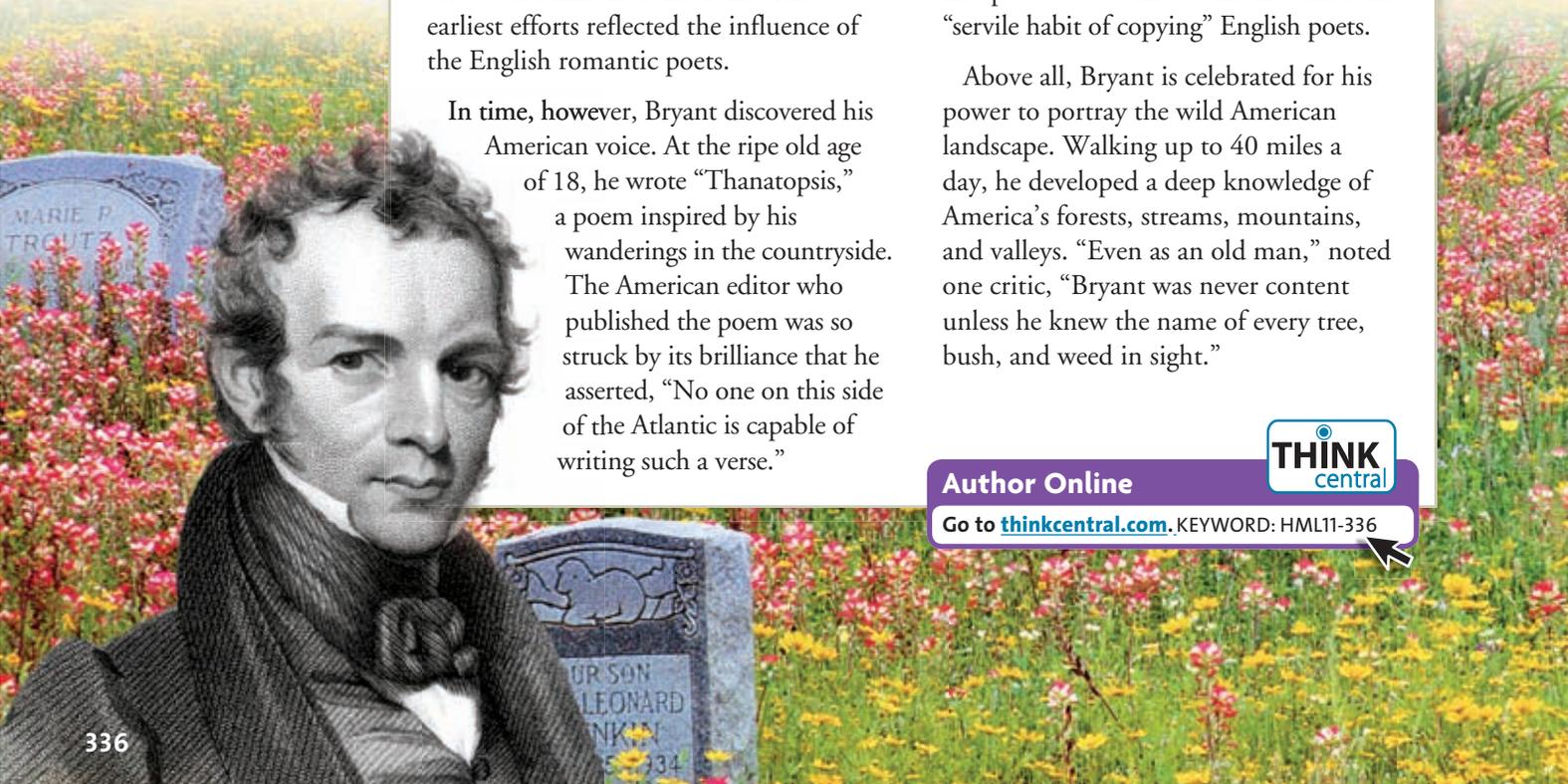
Eventually, he became the editor-in-chief of the *New York Evening Post*, a position he held until his death. A committed political and social activist, Bryant used the newspaper to advocate for human rights and the protection of the environment.

Lifelong Naturalist Unfortunately, Bryant's journalistic work took a toll on his poetry. Nonetheless, Bryant left his mark on American literature as one of the first poets to overthrow what he called the “servile habit of copying” English poets.

Above all, Bryant is celebrated for his power to portray the wild American landscape. Walking up to 40 miles a day, he developed a deep knowledge of America's forests, streams, mountains, and valleys. “Even as an old man,” noted one critic, “Bryant was never content unless he knew the name of every tree, bush, and weed in sight.”

Author Online

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● TEXT ANALYSIS: BLANK VERSE

William Cullen Bryant wrote “Thanatopsis” in a verse form known as blank verse. **Blank verse** is unrhymed poetry written in **iambic pentameter**. In this meter, each line has five iambic feet, a pattern consisting of an unstressed syllable (˘) followed by a stressed syllable (´). Poets who write in blank verse sometimes vary this rhythm, using loose iambic pentameter to add a conversational tone. Read the following lines from “Thanatopsis” aloud to hear the rhythm:

˘ To him who in the love of Nature holds
˘ Com̄munion with her v̄isib̄le f̄orms, she speaks

Notice that the first line above uses strict iambic pentameter, while the second is loose, adding a second unstressed syllable in the fourth foot. The effect of this variation is to make the poetry sound much like the way people talk. Bryant also achieves this effect through the use of **enjambment**, which means that one line ends without a pause and continues into the next line for its meaning. As you read “Thanatopsis,” notice how the poem’s rhythm imitates natural speech.

● READING SKILL: UNDERSTAND STRUCTURE

In poetry, **structure** is the arrangement of words and lines to produce a desired effect. The structure of a poem usually emphasizes important aspects of content and can help a poet indicate shifts in mood. Use the following strategies to help you understand and make inferences about the structure and effects of Bryant’s poem:

- Notice the indented line that indicates the beginning of each of the three verse sections in the poem.
- Summarize each section to understand the content and central ideas.
- Look for details and word choices that convey mood.

As you read “Thanatopsis,” use a chart like the one shown to record the ideas and mood evoked in each section of the poem.

Section	Ideas	Mood
1st	Death comes to everyone.	bleak
2nd		
3rd		



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

What can DEATH teach us about life?

Some people view death as the ultimate enemy. Others, however, consider it a natural part of life. Acceptance of that fact is a theme of William Cullen Bryant’s “Thanatopsis.” But death—and life—have other important lessons to teach us. One is recognizing that death, since it comes to us all, makes us all equal. What are some other important life lessons?

SURVEY With a partner, conduct a survey among your classmates, friends, and family and ask them to name the five greatest lessons that life—or death—has taught them. Compile the results and share them with the rest of the class.



Thanatopsis

William Cullen Bryant

To 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
5 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 **A**
Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
10 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
15 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,
20 Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears,
Nor in the embrace of ocean, shall exist
Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
25 Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix forever 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
30 Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mold. **B**

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,
35 The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good,
Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,
All in one mighty sepulcher.—The hills
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,—the vales

2 communion: a close relationship.

A BLANK VERSE

Reread lines 1–8 aloud. Identify the places where a phrase begins at the end of a line and continues on the next line. How does this **enjambment** affect the flow of the lines?

11–12 shroud . . . the narrow house:

A shroud is a burial garment, while a pall is a heavy garment draped over a coffin. The narrow house is the grave or coffin.

28–29 the sluggish clod . . . share:
the heavy mass of earth, which the farmer loosens with his plow.

B STRUCTURE

What is the central idea of the poem's first section, lines 1–30?

33 couch: bed.

36 hoary seers: ancient wise men.

37 sepulcher: grave.

Stretching in pensive quietness between;
 40 The venerable woods—rivers that move
 In majesty, and the complaining brooks
 That make the meadows green; and, poured round all,
 Old ocean's gray and melancholy waste,—
 Are but the solemn decorations all
 45 Of the great tomb of man. The golden sun, **C**
 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
 50 That slumber in its bosom.—Take the wings
 Of morning—and the Barcan desert pierce,
 Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
 Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound,
 Save his own dashings—yet—the dead are there;
 55 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
 Unheeded by the living—and no friend
 60 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 favorite phantom; yet all these shall leave
 65 Their mirth and their employments, and shall come
 And make their bed with thee. As the long train **D**
 Of ages glide 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,
 70 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
 75 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 to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
 By unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
 80 Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
 About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams. **E**

40 venerable: impressive and worthy of respect because of age.

C STRUCTURE
 Identify the **mood** in lines 31–45. How does it contrast with the mood in the first section?

51 Barcan desert: a desert region in northern Africa.

53 Oregon: old name for the Columbia River, which flows between the states of Washington and Oregon.

D BLANK VERSE
 Tap your foot to the rhythm as you read lines 61–66. Note the motion described in these lines. How does the rhythm suggest this motion?

E STRUCTURE
 Reread the last section of the poem, lines 73–81. How would you **summarize** these lines?