

A COMPARISON/CONTRAST ESSAY
BASED ON THE POEMS
“THE DEATH OF FLOWERS” AND “THE PAST”
BY WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT

Outline

1. Introduction: the Genius of W.C. Bryant
2. *The Death of Flowers*: an analysis
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Thesis statement: the fundamental notions of life and death reflected in various vivid images of natural objects and phenomena receive an insightful, yet simple, interpretation in the poems by William Cullen Bryant that speak of something important to the modern reader in a way no less powerful than to the poet's contemporaries.

Introduction: the Genius of W.C. Bryant

The task of analyzing the poetic heritage of William Cullen Bryant, America's noted figure of the 19th century, is an interesting one. And one of the reasons for this is that the creative work of the author has been put under extensive analysis beginning with his contemporaries and stretching to the modern-era researchers (Rees and Harbert 1971); therefore, seeing the way different generations perceived the themes and issues raised within Bryant's written legacy is captivating indeed, yet more captivating is an attempt to leave one's own trace of thought, one's own reflection with regards to the poet's work; and this is the primary focus of the present paper. The importance of W.C. Bryant lies in that he was one of those at the outset of the American romantic movement, "an example of disciplined imagination and expression" (Perkins et al. 1990 V. 1, p. 846), and he encouraged American poets to seek cultural independence from Europe by writing of their own American experience (ibid., p. 48; Rees and Harbert 1971, p. 57). The themes and subjects in Bryant's poetry were devoted to a not very vast circle of themes, but the response of the nation "showed plainly that he was providing what it needed at a time of national self-consciousness about the scarcity of talented poets" (Baym et al. 1989, p. 889). He rightfully deserves the title of America's first "real" poet.

The Death of Flowers: an analysis

The poem by William Cullen Bryant is a sincere reflection of the author on the wistful coming of autumn. In a descriptive manner, the poet shows all the sadness and nostalgia that the autumn world is imbued with. As if taking us by the hand and leading around a rural area, Bryant elaborates the pictures of the fall nature and makes a vivid and clear collage before the reader that is surely familiar to anyone who has been out in the country at autumn time at least once in their life. The long lines and the precise iambic rhyme (kept throughout the verse with a few exceptions) make the narration flow very slowly, as if lifelessly, in line with the state of nature the poem depicts. The poet refers to the fauna (birds, squirrels, bees, rabbits), the flora (trees, flowers), and the natural objects and phenomena (wind, rills, sky, frost) as being profoundly

affected by the season. This makes the lyrical hero feel for the entire world and experience the same state of fatigued nostalgia. Epithets like “saddest”, “wailing”, “naked”, “cold”, “still” convey the mood of the verse, and their opposition to other epithets, like “calm”, “mild”, “brighter”, “softer” enhances the poignant atmosphere of the time described. The major idea of the poem is embedded in author’s longing for the warm and beautiful days of spring and summer that remained in the past. And flowers, the symbol of that pleasant time have also vanished. Yet the longing for the flowers is a symbolic bridge to explicating the deeper sadness of the lyrical hero's heart: he misses a young and beautiful lady that died. From the very beginning of the poem, we are prepared by the author to become witness to his grief: “grieving” over flowers, the author drops every now and then the allusions to something yet greater: “they all are in their graves”, “lying in their lowly beds”, “brightness of their smile was gone”. These phrases point subtly to the death which really means more than withered flowers. Thus, the clear personification of flowers (by giving them the traits of a young beautiful woman, e.g. “stood... in a beautiful sisterhood”) emphasizes the tragic feeling of losing a close one. As if making the connection between the flowers and the young lady closer, Bryant also attributes some flower traits to the lost woman: “The fair meek blossom that grew up and faded by my side” (p. 93 – *here and further*: Bryant, 1878). And the final lines of the poem stress the author's idea that things that are beautiful and delightful don’t perpetuate here and leave the pained earth quite soon: “Yet not unmeet it was that one, like that young friend of ours,/So gentle and so beautiful, should perish with the flowers” (p. 93).

It is hard to disagree with the statement backed up by brilliant and heart-touching arguments.

The Past: an analysis

“Thou unrelenting Past!” declares the author (p. 120) in his address to the past. The past itself stands before us as a mighty force, seemingly insurmountable, a master that traps everything to ever see the world. Just consider these words used with respect to the past’s

ruthless and sinister power: “dark domain”, “fettters, sure and fast”, “in thy realm withdrawn... old empires... gorgeous ages”, “dim dominions”, “in thy abysses hide beauty and excellence unknown” etc. It feels as if whatever happens cannot be as dark and grim as the past itself. We feel in sync with the author’s fight against the past in an endeavor to retrieve all the good things it has devoured: " My spirit yearns to bring/ The lost ones back - yearns with desire intense,/ And struggles hard to wring/ Thy bolts apart, and pluck thy captives thence" (p. 121). The author takes a careful attempt and includes virtually all facets of human existence in the pasts’ “captives list”: “Childhood, with all its mirth,/ Youth, Manhood, Age that draws us to the ground,/ And last, Man's Life on earth”, “Earth's wonder and her pride”, “Full many a mighty name” etc.; and this points to the thought that time, which is inevitably prone to take on the form of the past, is master over all flesh. The past is also depicted as a grand tomb that holds all things, “gathered, as the waters to the sea”, a monster, pregnant with things that are dead to the moment of “now” (“...Lie deep within the shadow of thy womb”). However, the main idea of the work is *hope*. The hope that one day all the good things (and people) will escape the time’s claws and reunite again, leaving the sad things to the past only: “All that of good and fair/ Has gone into thy womb from earliest time,/ Shall then come forth to wear/ The glory and the beauty of its prime” (p. 122); “... And Sorrow dwell a prisoner in thy reign” (p. 123). This hope resonates in ideological opposition to the distressed despair that time seems to create by taking away all the blissful things and expresses the author’s confidence in the prospect of regaining all the good that was once yielded to the past, and never losing it again, as well as reuniting with God: “And then shall I behold/ Him, by whose kind paternal side I sprung,/ And her, who, still and cold,/ Fills the next grave – the beautiful and young” (p. 123).

Comparative insight into the two poems by William C. Bryant

When looked closely at, these poems betray one author. The style, the rhyming, as well as the sincerity and straightforward ideas of both poems seem to be among the hallmarks of W.C. Bryant’s poetry. Fundamental and philosophical questions of life are treated in each of the

verses; the mood of both works is pensive and sad to some extent; they both cast some light onto the struggle that takes place within a human heart; finally, *The Death of the Flowers* and *The Past* strike the same chord in the reader by well-created endings. Both poems, though they may seem primitive to the contemporary reader, speak of the things that have not lost value or meaning in today's world, and they do so rather well. The line about the beautiful and young girl in the latter poem (quoted above) is the major theme of the former one, which grieves over her early death.

The Death of the Flowers is a more self-oriented poem, more personal, so to say; in it, the author draws parallels between own feelings and the moods prevalent in nature. The tragedy of the situation, though reverberating in the environment around the lyrical hero, doesn't seem to be all-pervasive. Many do not experience the author's feelings and the situation firsthand. On the contrary, *The Past* is a poem that deals with a cosmic issue, that of time passing and sweeping all else away with it. Yet, though victim to the passing of time, the author expresses the lasting hope vested in the better times when all lost will be restored and will unite. This hope is absent from the verse that bewails the loss of flowers and the girl and surely could complement it.

Finally, with all the things in common and differences that they have, the two poems seem to be united into one logical whole. And this oneness is expressed in a dialogue. The sad question posed by *The Death of the Flowers* poems is: "Is death to be overcome? Will the fall of existence ever turn into immortal blossom of spring? Will the ones lost in the whirlwind of time and death find way back to life?.." *The Past* answers the question boldly and unambiguously: "Yes, yes, and yes".

Conclusions

The paper has dealt with two works from the creative legacy of William Cullen Bryant, a man who meant much to his contemporaries and who is a symbol of the budding of American literary, cultural, and social heritage. Judging from the verses looked at in the framework of this essay, we can speak the words of Sherwin Cody: "Bryant was the great American poet of

Nature” (1899, p. 9). But there is still more to our judgement. Bryant was a great American poet of the people, one could contend, as his words spoke to many longing to hear; he was a great American poet of hope and patriotism, and social struggle for the better. Yet, above all, the poems analyzed in the paper speak clearly that Bryant was a great American poet of the human heart, for whose heart could claim the feelings and moods depicted in the verses to be absolutely alien to it? Pondering the question of the fleeting human life and the hurting fact of the necessity of learning to let go, William C. Bryant persuades the reader, be it over a century ago or today, that there is a hope beyond the dying of flowers, the withering of life, and the dim oblivion of the past; and living with that hope should never become outdated. It seems like the two poems, *The Death of the Flowers* and *The Past* pose a dialogue for the reader to hear, in which the fear of losing loved ones and one’s best years is overcome by the assuredness of the promise of new life; and this idea is conceived of and becomes more mature in the progression from *The Death of the Flowers* to *The Past*.

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