Goal: To analyze William Cullen Bryant’s poem, “Thanatopsis,” and identify the universal theme it presents.

Materials:
- A photo copy of Thanatopsis
- A pen (preferably a dark color, but not black)
- Access to YouTube
  - Elton John’s “Circle of Life.”
  - The Byrds’ “Turn! Turn! Turn!”
  - Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons”
- A copy of the lyrics to Elton John’s “The Circle of Life”
- A copy of the lyrics to The Byrds’ “Turn! Turn! Turn!”

Procedure:
- The previous night’s homework was to read “Thanatopsis” by William Cullen Bryant
- As students enter Elton John’s “The Circle of Life” is playing, then is followed by The Byrds’ “Turn! Turn! Turn!”
- Students are given a photo copy of the poem and asked to take out a pen. Together, we go line by line through the poem, analyzing it. I lead them through the first stanza, then let students lead the class through the rest of the poem. My copy of the poem is projected onto to board, and students are asked to follow along with what I’m writing/markin on the paper.
- After we’ve finished, students are asked to reflect on the two songs they heard as they entered the room and connect them to the poem. As they’re thinking, I play Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons.” We discuss the first two songs, then discuss the third.
- Students are given a handout to complete either independently or with a partner. The handout asks students to relate the poem to nature and to death, as well as relate the songs to the poem and the poem’s theme.
- Students are also asked to practice MLA citations.
- As students are working, all three songs loop quietly.
To him who in the love of Nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A language, various 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
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 listen—
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 nourished 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 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
shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mold.

Yet not to thine eternal resting place
Shalt thou retire alone, nor couldst thou wish
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
Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mold.

8. ere (er): before.
11. pall (pall): coffin cover.
12. narrow house: grave.
14. list: listen.
17. Yet . . . : Here, the voice of
Nature begins to speak.

A. Critical Reading: Speculating
What if Bryant had titled his poem "Looking at Death"? What would readers gain? What would they lose?
[Possible answers: The English title would make the subject of the poem clear to everyone. However, the Greek title lends a sense of learnedness and seriousness of purpose that the English title does not convey.]

36. hoary seers: white-haired prophets.
37. sepulcher (sep'ul-kar): burial place.

Thanatos = death
Opis = seeing
Thanatopsis = Seeing Death
Caused by Bryant

Using Before You Read p. 170

Reading Focus
To help students visualize the cycles, ask them to complete the following chart. If possible, play Vivaldi's The Four Seasons while students complete the chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Events in Nature</th>
<th>Events in Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>Budding flowers</td>
<td>[Birth]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Winter</td>
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Through the Poem

Everyone's created equal in death
A. Critical Reading: Making Inferences

Why does the speaker single out this possibility to consider? [Many people fear dying alone and being forgotten when they are dead.]

B. Reader's Response: First Thoughts

Is it consoling to think that everyone must die? [Sample responses: Yes, because it makes you realize you can't avoid death, so you may as well learn to accept it; or no, because people do not like to die.]

C. Humanities Connection

Some have approached death with stoical, noble acceptance, which derives from the behavior of Socrates in the face of death in Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*, and from the urgings of Marcus Aurelius's *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*. Others reject an attitude of resignation, as in Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."

D. Reader's Response: Challenging the Text

When "Thanatopsis" was first published in *The North American Review* in 1817, it did not contain the first seventeen lines or the last fifteen lines in the present version of the poem. These were added for Bryant's book *Poems*, published in 1821. Would the poem be better without the last fifteen and one-half lines? Explain your answer. [Sample responses: Yes, because these lines merely repeat the ideas already expressed. Or no, because these lines emphasize the optimism of the ending.]

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 shall their 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 favorite 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 fresh spring, and he who goes
In the full strength of years, married and maid
The speechless babe, and the gray-haired 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 to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unaltering trust, approach thy grave;
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

51. Take . . . morning: allusion to Psalm 139:9: "If I take the wings of the morning . . . Barcan wilderness: desert near Barca (now al-Mari), Libya, in North Africa.
53. Oregon: early name for the Columbia River, which flows between Washington and Oregon.

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OPTIONS FOR TEACHING

Strategic Reading Help students monitor their own reading process by demonstrating how you read a difficult selection. Read aloud the first few lines of the poem. Talk about the image it gives you, recall related information, relate it to prior knowledge, point out a confusing phrase or word, or show how you adjust your thinking as you read. Then, have student pairs take turns reading through the rest of the poem together. Each student should read aloud a few lines, pause, and talk to the other student, using the monitoring strategies you have demonstrated.

CROSSING THE CURRICULUM

Social Studies Ask students to research and report to the class on attitudes toward death in various cultures. Have students organize the information in the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Attitude</th>
</tr>
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</table>

Art Ask students to find pictures that remind them of some of the nature scenes mentioned in the poem. Have students bring the pictures to class and explain why they chose the pictures they selected.
“The Circle of Life”
by Elton John

From the day we arrive on the planet
And blinking, step into the sun
There’s more to be seen than can ever be seen
More to do than can ever be done

Some say eat or be eaten
Some say live and let live
But all are agreed as they join the stampede
You should never take more than you give

In the circle of life
It’s the wheel of fortune
It’s the leap of faith
It’s the band of hope
Till we find our place
On the path unwinding
In the circle, the circle of life

Some of us fall by the wayside
And some of us soar to the stars
And some of us sail through our troubles
And some have to live with the scars

There’s far too much to take in here
More to find than can ever be found
But the sun rolling high through the sapphire sky
Keeps great and small on the endless round

“Turn! Turn! Turn!”
by The Byrds

To Everything (Turn, Turn, Turn)
There is a season (Turn, Turn, Turn)
And a time to every purpose, under Heaven
A time to be born, a time to die
A time to plant, a time to reap
A time to kill, a time to heal
A time to laugh, a time to weep

To Everything (Turn, Turn, Turn)
There is a season (Turn, Turn, Turn)
And a time to every purpose, under Heaven
A time to build up, a time to break down
A time to dance, a time to mourn
A time to cast away stones, a time to gather stones together

To Everything (Turn, Turn, Turn)
There is a season (Turn, Turn, Turn)
And a time to every purpose, under Heaven
A time of love, a time of hate
A time of war, a time of peace
A time you may embrace, a time to refrain from embracing

To Everything (Turn, Turn, Turn)
There is a season (Turn, Turn, Turn)
And a time to every purpose, under Heaven
A time to gain, a time to lose
A time to rend, a time to sew
A time for love, a time for hate
A time for peace, I swear it’s not too late
In Greek “thantos” means death, and “opsis” means seeing. So, “thanatopsis” literally means “seeing death.” Remember, as we discussed, this poem is not necessarily about death. Rather it’s a metaphor for life. Complete the table below to demonstrate your understanding of this metaphor.

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True or False? Do You Agree? Why?

According to the speaker, nature can help you confront death. T F

The still voice says we will keep our individuality after death. T F

The speaker says kings and the reader shall be as one after death. T F

The speaker indicates that nothing can lessen the pain of death. T F
Create three illustrations that represent three parts of the poem that you can related to or really understood. Try to zero in on the figurative language used in the poem. Label the line in which your picture represents.

<table>
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<th>Illustration #1 - Line:</th>
<th>Illustration #2 - Line:</th>
<th>Illustration #3 - Line:</th>
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In a solid paragraph (6-8 sentences), explain how “Thanatopsis” is an example of romantic poetry. Remember to use MLA in-text citations in your answer.

After listening to Elton John’s “Circle of Life,” Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons,” and the Byrds’ “Turn! Turn! Turn!” connect each song to the poem. As you answer consider how they compare in theme and whether or not the songs could be considered “romantic.” Be sure to fully explain your answer!