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William Cullen Bryant: Tone and Theme

As America’s first internationally acclaimed poet, William Cullen Bryant had a soft spot in his heart for all things nature, as is seen in many of his poems. After years of practicing law and order to support his family, Bryant gave up the profession to do what he loved, and began writing for the New York Evening Post. He believed that writing, as well as poetry, both required deep reflecting and editing. That, combined with his love of nature inspired many of his poems, such as “The Stream of Life.” In this poem, Bryant presents an underlying dark tone and theme that despite countless obstacles and changes, the progression of life is inevitable, as is death.

One strong poetic device that Bryant uses to demonstrate this theme is apostrophe. “oh silvery streamlet of the fields, that flowest full and free.” “The Stream of Life” is an example of apostrophe used in the poem. Directly addressing the stream and the seasons of change it goes through makes the reader feel more connected to it, because it’s more comfortable for humans to talk to someone (or something) directly, rather than hear about them from a secondary and questionable source. In addition, Bryant uses personification in his poem to represent that all things change and progress through some state of living. “Thy parent fountains shrink away, and close their crystal veins” (13-14), is a personification of fountains, and shows that, like people, they change throughout their lifetime. Finally, Bryant cleverly uses an extended metaphor, comparing life to stream. “And when the latest blossoms die in autumn’s chilly showers, the winter fountains gush for thee, till May brings back flowers” (5-8). This shows how, like a stream, there are so many elements that can influence good and bad changes in life. However, just like life, the stream continues to flow until the day that it finally dries up.

The tone with which Bryant chose to write the poem powerfully assists understanding of the theme. At first, as the stream is thriving through the seasons, the tone of the poem seem lighthearted and optimistic, implying that whatever goes wrong will right itself with time. This tone is represented by word choices and visuals such as “silvery,” “free,” “flowers,” and “summer dews.” These words all have cheery connotations, possibly reminding one of a scenic field or a bright summer day. They all come together to present an uplifting visual of how beautiful life can be. On the contrary, though, the tone of the poem shifts to a slightly sad and dark tone, implying that death is a part of life, although much less sought after. Words like “brief,” “alone,” “dust,” and “close” create a cold feeling for the reader, and makes them see that life does not go on gloriously forever.

It is easy to see how William Cullen Bryant’s life influenced his poetry. He believed that people should do what they love to do, because life does not last forever. He had been influenced by family to take on a role that was not fit for him, and in the end, decided to go with what he loved best: writing. He saw that life had ups and downs, but that it was important to stick with it and go with the flow. His poem, “The Stream of Life” depicted Bryant’s morals and beliefs better than any other, demonstrating that life is like a flowing stream, growing and shrinking with the seasons, until the final day when it is time to leave the stream bed dry.