American Primitive: Poems Study Guide

American Primitive: Poems by Mary Oliver

BOOKRAGS

Contents

August, Mushrooms, The Kitten, Lightning and In the Pinewoods, Crows and Owl

August, Mushrooms, The Kitten, Lightning and In the Pinewoods, Crows and Owl Summary

In "August", the blackberries hang in the woods, and the narrator spends all day eating them, the black honey of summer. Her body accepts itself for what it is. In the dark creek, there is only her life and her happy tongue. In "Mushrooms", the rain and cool winds pull the mushrooms from the ground in the fall time. Some of the mushrooms are delicious, but some are poisonous. Those who know the difference gather them. Although all of the mushrooms look innocent, to eat the wrong one is paralysis; it will cause a person to fall like the mushrooms themselves fall as they retreat back underground. In "The Kitten", in amazement, the narrator takes the stillborn kitten from its mother's bed and buries it in the field behind the house. She could have given it to a museum or called the newspaper, but, instead, she buries it in the earth. This is her way of saying that life is real and inventive. She believes that she did the right thing by giving it back peacefully to the earth from whence it came.

In "Lightning", the oaks shine as the storm begins. During five hours of howling wind, the lights go out and the branches of trees beat the roof. Everything is dark except for the lightning that flashes like "quick lessons in creation". The lightning is sensual, and it is hard to tell fear from excitement as the body's reactions bounce back and forth between the two, like the lightning tearing through the fields. "In the Pinewoods, Crows and Owl" tells of how the crow's dream of catching the owl that is fat and full. Eight crows search for the owl, aware that he is hiding somewhere in the pinewoods. Earlier this month, the owl caught a crow; the news spread through the woods, causing the crows to hate the owl. The owl is the crows' demon and quarry. A crow spots the owl and alerts his brethren who all stream toward the violent confrontation. It further enrages them to see the living proof. The owl awakes, grumpy that his rest has been interrupted. He hisses and grabs at the crows, a mournful, unalterable fact as sure as death.

August, Mushrooms, The Kitten, Lightning and In the Pinewoods, Crows and Owl Analysis

All of the poems in this section adhere to the prevalent theme of nature that pervades this collection of Mary Oliver's poems. "August" contains the metaphor of the blackberries being the black honey of summer. The narrator's body accepting itself for what it is demonstrates the peace and natural state of the woods as she searches for

blackberries. "Mushrooms" investigates the contrast between innocence and danger as the mushrooms look innocent but can actually be poisonous and kill the unwary glutton. "The Kitten" demonstrates the peace in death that results from giving the kitten back to the earth. The narrator shows her own benevolence and association with nature by her willingness to give the corpse back to its initial mother, the earth.

In "Lightning", lightning and wind are personified as the narrator describes their actions during the storm. Fear and excitement are compared and contrasted, with the conclusion that they are indistinguishable in this situation. A metaphor is used as the lightning is referred to as a burning river tearing through the fields in an attempt to escape. "In the Pinewoods, Crows and Owl" is addressed to the owl. Because the owl has previously killed and eaten a crow, the crows are at enmity with the owl and search for him through the forest, intent upon his destruction. The crows ambush the owl that is grumpy at being awoken and defeats the crows, as this is the natural order of the world.

Moles, The Lost Children, The Bobcat, Fall Song and Egrets

Moles, The Lost Children, The Bobcat, Fall Song and Egrets Summary

In "Moles", moles hide under the leaves. They are shy, quick, and rarely seen. People can see their traceries in the fields, but the rains blur their traceries. Each generation continues though they accomplish nothing during their brief, physical lives. Yet, their muzzles continually push against the earth, finding it delicious. In the first part of "The Lost Children", Lydia Osborn heads after her straying cows but does not return home. Her family and neighbors search for seven days before they find where she slept. On the fifteenth day, they find footprints by a stream, near a small house made of sticks. In the second part, the narrator laments for the girl's parents as their search enumerates the terrible possibilities. In the third part, Isaac Zane is stole by the Wyandots when he is nine years old and lives with them on the shores of the Mad River. As a grown man, he walks into the world and finds himself lost. He returns to Myeerah, the White Crane, and lives with her for fifty years in the little house he builds by the Mad River. In the fourth part of the poem, the searchers find Lydia's bonnet near the small house. The discovery of the hoof prints of Indian horses offers endless possibilities. In the fifth part, the narrator reiterates her lamentation for the parents' grief, but she thinks that Lydia drank the cold water of some wild stream and wanted to live. She believes Isaac caught dancing feet. The narrator believes that death has no country and love has no name. In the sixth part, the narrator knows why Tarhe, the old Wyandot chief, refuses to barter anything in the world to return Isaac; he does it for his own sake. In the seventh part, the narrator admits that since Tarhe is old and wise, she likes to think he understands; she likes to imagine that he did it for everyone.

In "The Bobcat", one night in Ohio, a bobcat leaps from the woods into the road. The narrator and her companion(s) are astounded. Their hearts thud and stop. They have heard about how in the north a lynx wanders through the hills. The narrator wanders what is the truth of the world. As if in a dream, they drive toward the white forest, all day and all night. In "Fall Song", another year is gone, leaving its residue behind it. When time's measure painfully chafes, the narrator tries to remember that Now is nowhere except underfoot, like when the autumn flares out toward the end of the season, longing to stay. Everything lives, shifting from one vision to another. In "Egrets", the narrator continues past where the path ends. The mosquitoes smell her and come, biting her arms as the thorns snag her skin as well. She comes to the edge of an empty pond and sees three majestic egrets. The egrets have an unbelievable faith in the world; it is this faith, not logic, which makes them sure that they will be able to step over every dark thing.

Moles, The Lost Children, The Bobcat, Fall Song and Egrets Analysis

All of the poems in this section, except "The Lost Children" continue their focus on the theme of nature; however, even "The Lost Children" is set in the wilderness and has a secondary theme centered on nature. In "Moles", the traceries in the fields that are blurred by rain are an example of how the moles accomplish nothing during their lives. The only accomplishment is washed away in the next shower. Yet, the moles demonstrate a willingness to continue forward and enjoy doing so, despite the futility of their existence. In "The Lost Children", Lydia Osborn disappears and the searchers find her footprints, a sign of hope; however, this hope is negated when they find her bonnet near the hoof prints of Indian horses. The narrator demonstrates her humanity in her concern for the fear and grief of Lydia's parents. The introduction of Isaac Zane, along with the story of him being taken by Indians, parallels Lydia's disappearance and foreshadows the discovery that the Wyandots have captured her. This foreshadowing is fulfilled in the next part of the poem when her bonnet is found near the hoof prints of Indian horses. The narrator believes that, to some extent, the children chose the life with the Indians, a life of nature's joys. Tarhe refuses to relinquish Isaac out of selfishness and the joy he finds in keeping the child near him, but the narrator hopes that there is a more selfless and universally beneficial reason to his refusal to ransom Isaac.

In "The Bobcat", the narrator compares the bobcat and the lynx. The majestic appearance of the bobcat causes the narrator and her companion to question the truth of the world. "Fall Song" focuses on the passage of time. Time and Now are personified. As visions shift, everything lives forever in momentary pastures; as everything changes, everything stays the same. In "Egrets", the narrator's perseverance in continuing beyond the end of the path and enduring the thorns and the mosquitoes yields the reward of seeing the egrets. Using a metaphor, the narrator describes the egrets as a "shower of white fire". The egrets' utter confidence in life and in the world allows them to avoid dangers because of the assuredness that they will not face it. This seems to suggest that negativity is a self-fulfilling prophecy and positivism is as well.

Clapp's Pond, Tasting the Wild Grapes, John Chapman, First Snow and Ghosts

Clapp's Pond, Tasting the Wild Grapes, John Chapman, First Snow and Ghosts Summary

In "Clapp's Pond", Clapp's Pond sprawls three miles through the woods. Pheasants fly, and a doe gallops away. In the evening, it rains, and the narrator tosses more logs on the fire. Sometimes she feels that everything closes up, causing the sense of distance to vanish and the edges to slide together. She lies in bed, half asleep, watching the rain, and feels she can see the soaked doe drink from the lake three miles away. In "Tasting the Wild Grapes", the red beast will not come out for anything, but sometimes he will explode from underfoot if one walks quietly through the woods. One will forget to be quiet and rush to name the beast with a sound rather than a word: the fox. In "John Chapman", he wears a tin pot as a hat that he also uses to cook his dinner in the Ohio forests. Apple trees spring up behind him as he walks barefoot on the roots. No one harms him, and he honors all of God's creatures. Mrs. Price recalls him speaking of women once, painfully, as deceivers. The trees he plants prosper, and he becomes a legend. In the face of pain, people are faced with the decision to die or go on caring about something. It is still possible to see signs of him in the Ohio forests during the spring.

In "First Snow", the snow begins in the morning and continues all day. The rhetoric recalls the beauty and its meaning. The lovely energy never ebbs. It finally ends, bringing immense silence. Familiar things are changed. There are no answers to the questions asked throughout the day. The questions walk into the silence. In the first part of "Ghosts", the narrator asks if "you" have noticed. In the second part, there are so many dead beasts on earth that it is hard to tell the difference between what is bone and what once was. In the third part, in 1805 near the Bitterfoot Mountains, Lewis watches a sparrow's nest with day old chicks. The chicks are content, helpless and blind. In the fourth part, the book of earth says, "nothing can die", but the book of the Sioux says that they hide in the earth and can only be coaxed out again by the people dancing. In the fifth part, the old timers say that the tongue is the sweetest meat. There are so many that passengers shooting from train windows can hardly miss their aim. The carcasses stink in the prairie heat. In the sixth part, the narrator asks if anyone has noticed how the rain falls soft without the fall of moccasins. The immense circles in the grass still mark where the herd stood, waiting to avoid the packs of wolves. The wolves are also gone now. In the seventh part, the narrator watches a cow give birth to a red calf and care for him with the tenderness of any caring woman. In her dream, she asks them to make room so that she can lie down beside them.

Clapp's Pond, Tasting the Wild Grapes, John Chapman, First Snow and Ghosts Analysis

All five of the poems in this section deal with the theme of nature. "Clapp's Pond" discusses the narrator's connection with and proximity to nature. Due to her feeling of a connection with Clapp's Pond, she feels that the distance closes and she can see the doe at the pond three miles away. In "Tasting the Wild Grapes", the red beast is a metaphor for the fox. The narrator advises anyone who wants to see the fox to imitate him by quietly sneaking up on him. In the excitement at viewing the fox, the narrator recognizes that anyone will be forced to return to their human nature and be unable to contain their excitement. "John Chapman" is about nature, but it is also about human relationships. Several similes abound in this poem. His feet are crooked as roots and the apple trees are as lovely as young girls. The poem details John Chapman's respect for nature and its inhabitants. A deceptive woman causes his pain, but he chooses to make something good and beautiful out of his pain. This effort can still be seen as the trees grow; this consolidates his reputation as a legend.

In "First Snow", the snow and heavens are personified. Questions arise while admiring nature, but no answers are found. In "Ghosts", the question "have you noticed?" is repeated several times. The narrator details Lewis' appreciation of nature as he watches the sparrow's chicks. The narrator compares and contrasts the book of the earth and the book of the Sioux. Barns are personified. The narrator dwells on the difference of America without the natural presence of the Native Americans, including the merciless slaughter f the oxen and wolves. She praises the cow's maternal care of her calf. The narrator desires to join the cow and calf, as though saying that they are more loving and natural than mankind.

Cold Poem, A Poem for the Blue Heron, Flying, Postcard from Flamingo and Vultures

Cold Poem, A Poem for the Blue Heron, Flying, Postcard from Flamingo and Vultures Summary

In "Cold Poem", it is cold now and closer to the edge. The narrator dreams about the fruit and grain of summer. Maybe cold is the time when mankind measures their secret love for their own bones, when they consider the hard knife-edged love for the warm river of themselves. Maybe it means the beauty of the shark cruising toward the tumbling seals. In the season of cold and snow, mankind grows cruel and honest, protecting their lives by taking the bodies of others like crushed red flowers. In the first part of "A Poem for the Blue Heron", the blue heron wades through the cold pond in November, finding scant food. When the water he touches turns to fire, he remembers winter. In the second part, the narrator does not remember who, if anyone, first told her that some things are impossible and kindly led her back to where she was. In the third part, the heron flies away toward evening because he has decided to go south and find a cave where he can hide and live. In the fourth part, the woods are empty now. As though she has never seen leaves, water and a bird deciding not to die, the narrator sits in her house down the road, drinking, talking and building fire after fire.

In "Flying", sometimes one will see a beautiful stranger on a plane. They want to ask if he knows how beautiful he is. They leap into the aisle, unable to let him leave until he has touched them. They stand, shaken by the strangeness of his touch. After he is gone, they stare into the clouds with the snapped chain of the life they know and the familiar earth turning thousands of feet below them. In "Postcard from Flamingo", at midnight in Flamingo, the dark palms click in an unabashed autoeroticism caused by the wind. In the red mangroves, an alligator heaves himself onto the grass and studies his poems. The narrator considers the seven deadly sins and the difficulty of her life so far. She admires the sensual splashing of the white birds in the velvet water in the afternoon. Soon, the sea will lash around the islands of sunrise. She wishes a certain person were there; she would touch them if they were, and her hands would sing. In "Vultures", they sweep over the glades like large butterflies, looking for death. No one knows how many bodies they discover, and no one wants to ponder how it will be to feel the blood cool. Locked into the blaze of their own bodies, people watch the vultures. They honor and loath the birds, their wise doctrine, their magnificent cycles, and the sweet huddle of death that fuels those powerful wings.

Cold Poem, A Poem for the Blue Heron, Flying, Postcard from Flamingo and Vultures Analysis

"Cold Poem", "A Poem for the Blue Heron", "Postcard from Flamingo", and "Vultures" are centered around the theme of nature, but "Flying" focuses more on the theme of human relationships. "Postcard from Flamingo" also refers partially to the theme of human relationships. "Cold Poem", "A Poem for the Blue Heron", and "Vultures" also contain allusions to the theme of death. In "Cold Poem", the white bear, a constellation, is personified. The narrator compares and contrasts summer and winter. She contrasts the negative of positive of winter, as people grow cold but honest. The mention of the beauty of the shark cruising toward the tumbling seals is a metaphor for the beauty of necessary cruelty. In "A Poem for the Blue Heron", it is ironic that the heron feels the water as fire since it is winter and cold that he must escape to live. This poem discusses the change of seasons and the avoidance of death by the heron's migration. The narrator refers to her realization that some things are impossible.

"Flying" alludes to the stranger's Greek nose and uses the metaphor that his smile is a Mexican fiesta. The ambiguous person in this poem fulfills their desire to touch the stranger and then compares him to the familiar earth below, causing them to feel disconnected from their real life. In "Postcard from Flamingo", the imagery is very sensual as the narrator describes the palm trees, the seven deadly sins and the birds splashing in the water. The alligator is personified as reading his poems. This poem contains an allusion to the seven deadly sins. The narrator refers to a longing to see someone special, likely a lover. In "Vultures", a simile compares the vultures to large butterflies. The vultures are a metaphor for death in this poem. No one wants to think about them; everyone honors and loathes them at the same time. These feelings also represent the conflicting emotions that most people struggle with concerning death.

And Old Whorehouse, Rain in Ohio, Web, University Hospital, Boston and Skunk Cabbage

And Old Whorehouse, Rain in Ohio, Web, University Hospital, Boston and Skunk Cabbage Summary

In "An Old Whorehouse", the narrator and her companion climb through the broken window of the whorehouse and walk through every room. The place has been out of business for years and is empty except for the cobwebs. They are fourteen years old, and the dust cannot hide the glamour or teach them anything. They whisper and imagine; it will be years before they learn how effortlessly sin blooms and softens like a bed of flowers. In "Rain in Ohio", the robin cries, "rain" and the crow calls "plunder". The blacksnake halts his climb as the thunderheads whirl out of the wind. The robin sings "rain" and flies for cover, as the crow hunches and the blacksnake hides in the ground. In "Web", the narrator notes, "so this is fear". The spider scuttles away as she watches the blood bead on her skin and thinks of the lightning sizzling under the door. She imagines that it hurts. She remembers a bat in the attic, tiring from the swinging brooms and unaware that she would let it go. The narrator gets up to walk, to see if she can walk. She repeats that this is fear. The trapdoor unnails itself, and the curtains move in the dusk as though the wind had bones.

In "University Hospital, Boston", the trees on the hospital lawn are thriving; they get the best of care like the narrator's companion and the anonymous many in the clean rooms where the doctors and the machines chart their health. When the narrator visits, she and her companion walk outside and sit under the trees. The trees are as old as the original hospital building that was built before the Civil War. They sit and hold hands. Her companion tells the narrator that they are better. The narrator wonders how many young men, blind to the efforts to keep them alive, died here during the war while the doctors tried to save them, longing for means yet unimagined. The narrator looks into her companion's eyes and tells herself that they are better because her life without them would be a place of parched and broken trees. Later, as she walks down the corridor to the street, she steps inside an empty room where someone lay yesterday. Today, the bed is made new and the machines are gone. She stands there in silence, loving her companion. In "Skunk Cabbage", the iron rinds over and the ponds dissolve. A person comes, dreaming of ferns, leaves and flowers, but finding only skunk cabbage. They kneel beside it; it is lurid, appalling, stubborn, and powerful as instinct. They love these woods where the secret name of death is life again. Daring and brawn, not tenderness and longing, pull down the frozen waterfall, the past. Ferns, leaves and flowers wait to rise and flourish, but what blazes the trail is not necessarily pretty.

And Old Whorehouse, Rain in Ohio, Web, University Hospital, Boston and Skunk Cabbage Analysis

"An Old Whorehouse" focuses on the themes of human relationships, death and corruption. "Rain in Ohio" and "Skunk Cabbage" focus on the theme of nature, while "Web" and "University Hospital, Boston" focus on both the theme of nature and the theme of human relationships. "An Old Whorehouse" provides an example of the desolation that results from corruption and sin while comparing sin, through the whorehouse, to innocence, through the narrator and her companion at fourteen-years-old. "Rain in Ohio" personifies the robin and crow by making them speak. "Web" uses the repetition of the phrase "so this is fear" while providing examples of fear. The curtains are personified in this poem. In "Web", the narrator uses specific words to signify terror: blood, spider, hurts, bat, trapdoor and bones. In "University Hospital, Boston", the narrator compares and contrasts the trees and the patients. She exhibits faith in the doctors. An allusion to the Civil War conveys hopelessness and her faith in the advancement of medicine. A metaphor in this poem compares the narrator's life without her companion to a "place of parched and broken trees". The empty room symbolizes death, and the narrator silently standing at the door shows her concern and love for her companion. In "Skunk Cabbage", the person searches for beauty but finds ugly skunk cabbage instead. Although ugly, the skunk cabbage is strong, resilient and serves a purpose, preparing the way for the beauty of the leaves, ferns and flowers.

Spring, Morning at Great Pond, The Snakes, Blossom and Something

Spring, Morning at Great Pond, The Snakes, Blossom and Something Summary

In "Spring", the narrator lifts her face to the pale, soft, clean flowers of the rain. Her dog runs off and noses packed leaves into tunnels. He sees the smells rising and notes that the beasts are waking up now. The rain rubs its hands all over the narrator. Her dog returns and barks, saying that each secret body is the richest advisor and deep in the earth lie such fuming nuggets of joy. In "Morning at Great Pond", the day begins with forks of light rising from the east, flying over one. The remainder of the night dissolves as the sun appears, and one can make out creatures, such as the herons, wood ducks, and the deer drinking, as the light lifts. One is healed from the night, and their heart wants more. They are ready to rise and look, to hurry anywhere and believe in anything. In "The Snakes", the narrator sees two snakes hurry through the woods in perfect concert. They hold their heads high and swim on their bellies under the trees and vines and over the stones. They travel like a matched team, like a dance, like a love affair.

In "Blossom", the ponds open like black blossoms in April, and the moon swims in everyone. There is fire everywhere. The frogs shout their desire and satisfaction. People know that time chops at them like an iron hoe and that death is a state of paralysis. They long for joy before death. They know they are more than blood and their hunger; they belong to the moon. When the burning begins, the most thoughtful of them dream of hurrying down into the fire, the night where time lies shattered, into the body of another. In the first part of "Something", someone skulks through the narrator and her lover's yard, stumbling against a stone. They know he is there, but they kiss anyway. This is not a pleasant story. In the second part, time loops and a man two towns away commits suicide, alone in the woods, because he can no longer bear his life. The police know, and the narrator and her lover know because no one tramples outside their window anymore. He was their lonely brother, their audience, and their spirit of the forest who grinned all night. In the third part, the narrator's lover is also dead now, and she, no longer young, knows what a kiss is worth. Time has made his pitch, yet the moonlight throws her long hair over the bed of each of us until we must love something, anything, despite the dark wound of watching.

Spring, Morning at Great Pond, The Snakes, Blossom and Something Analysis

The theme of "Spring" is nature. Similes within the poem include flower as soft as linen and as clean as holy water. The dog and the rain are personified in this poem. In "Morning at Great Pond", the theme is also nature. Forks of light are personified. One

metaphor that is used is that the ponds are plates of fire. Another metaphor is that the creatures are dark flickerings. The message of the poem seems to be that the arrival of day in such a beautiful place renews one's faith and desire to live. "The Snakes" focuses on the themes of nature and companionship. Three similes are used to compare the way the snakes travel to a matched team, a dance and a love affair. The themes of "Blossom" are nature and death. The ponds, moons, frogs, and time are personified. The simile compares the ponds to opening like black blossoms. The poem reiterates what people know and what they want, ending with the desire to hurry into the body of another. "Something" focuses on the themes of human relationships and death. The narrator and her lover ignore the fact that someone is watching them. At the end of the first part of this poem, the narrator warns the reader that this is not a pleasant story. In the second part, the watcher commits suicide due to his lonely life. The narrator uses a metaphor to compare the watcher to a lonely brother, an audience, and a spirit of the forest who grinned all night. This poem personifies time and moonlight. The last part of this poem reflects upon the narrator's loneliness after her lover's death.

May, White Night, The Fish, Honey at the Table and Crossing the Swamp

May, White Night, The Fish, Honey at the Table and Crossing the Swamp Summary

In "May", the blossom storm out of the darkness in the month of May. The bees dive into them, and the narrator also gathers their spiritual honey. The flowers possess the deepest certainty that this existence rides near the hub of a miracle that everything is part of. It is as good as a poem or a prayer and can make any dark place on earth appear luminous. In "White Night", the narrator floats all night in the shallow ponds as the moon wanders among the milky stems. Once, the narrator sees the moon reach out her hand and touch a muskrat's head; it is lovely. The narrator does not want to argue about the things that she thought she could not live without. Soon, the muskrat, with another, will glide into their castle of weeds. The morning will rise from the east, but before that hurricane of light comes, the narrator wants to flow out across the mother of all waters and lose herself on the currents as she gathers tall lilies of sleep.

In "The Fish", the fish that the narrator catches refuses to die quietly, instead flailing in the pail until the amazement of the air overwhelms his lungs and he dies in a slow pouring off of rainbows. Later, she opens and eats him; now the fish and the narrator are one, tangled together, and the sea is in her. She feels certain that they will fall back into the sea. Out of pain, this feverish plot is fed and mankind is nourished by the mystery. The honey in "Honey at the Table" fills one with the essence of vanished flowers. It becomes a sharp trickle that one follows from the honey pot, over the table, out the door and over the ground as it thickens and grows deeper and wilder. Finally, deep in the forest, one shuffles up a tree and floats into and swallows the dripping combs, bits of trees and crushed bees. It is a taste composed of everything lost in which everything lost is found. In "Crossing the Swamp", the narrator finds in the swamp an endless, wet, thick cosmos and the center of everything. Here is swamp, struggle and closure. Her bones knock together at the joints as she struggles for a foothold in the mud. Rather than wet, she feels painted and glittered with the fat, grassy mires of the rich and succulent marrows of the earth. She sees herself as a dry stick given one more chance by the whims of the swamp water; she is still able, after all these years, to make of her life a breathing palace of leaves.

May, White Night, The Fish, Honey at the Table and Crossing the Swamp Analysis

The theme of "May" is nature. The narrator compares herself to the bees as both find nourishment in the flowers. She is amazed at the flowers' certainty that existence is a miracle. "White Night" also focuses on nature. The moon is personified in this poem.

Due to the feelings of peace resulting from floating on the shallow ponds, the narrator desires to lose herself. The themes of "The Fish" are nature and death. The fish fights death, but the air eventually overwhelms him. By taking the fish into her body, the narrator becomes the fish; they are both certain to fall back to the sea. Mankind is nourished by the mystery of existence. In "Honey at the Table", the theme of nature is used again. Honey is personified as one follows it through the woods and up a tree. This enables one to touch nature by eating the honey. The ending contrast of a taste "composed of everything lost in which everything lost if found" is very oxymoronic. The theme of "Crossing the Swamp" is nature. The metaphors used compare the swamp to an endless, thick, wet cosmos and the center of everything. The narrator is out of place in the swamp but feels that the swamp gives her another chance at life. Another metaphor used portrays the narrator as a poor, dry stick.

Humpbacks, A Meeting, Little Sister Pond, The Roses and Blackberries

Humpbacks, A Meeting, Little Sister Pond, The Roses and Blackberries Summary

In "Humpbacks", this country of fire is all around. The narrator tells the reader "you know what I mean". The sky stops at nothing so something must hold back the bodies or people would fly away. The humpbacks leap through the water and play off of the Cape. They sing for reasons that mankind cannot imagine. Three humpbacks rise to the surface near a boat, and then dive deeply into the sea. People wait until they resurface. One hears someone shout for joy and realizes that it is oneself. One sees how big the humpbacks are. They can be seen flying against the sky for an unbelievable moment like nothing ever imagined or a myth. They crash into the water and the people fall back together into that wet fire. The narrator knows a captain who has seen them play with seaweed; she knows a whale that will gently nudge the boat as it passes. The narrator knows several lives worth living. She points out that nothing one tries in life will ever dazzle them like the dreams of their own body and its spirit where everything throbs with song. In "A Meeting", she steps into the swamp and drops her slippery package into the weeds. She tongues it, and it becomes a smaller creature like herself. Now, there are two of them, and they walk together under the trees. In June, the narrator meets them and stares. She is the most beautiful woman the narrator has ever seen. Her child leaps among the flowers. The narrator wants to live her live over, begin again and be utterly wild.

In the first part of "Little Sister Pond", the noise in the early morning is the wood duck calling to her hatchlings. Later, someone the narrator loves sees them enter the pond and swim their first fast circles. In the second part, a blue damselfly streaks across the water as its chest moves in quick breaths. The narrator does not know what to say when they meet eyes. In the third part, all day, the narrator turns the pages of several good books that cost plenty to set down and more to live by. All day, she also turns over her heavy, slow thoughts. In the fourth part, the narrator feels the sun's tenderness on her neck as she sits in the room. She thinks that if she turns, she will see someone standing there with a body like water. In the fifth part, it is evening and the wood hen calls to her chicks. They huddle in the water and tumble in, feeling pretty good. In the sixth part, the blue damselfly sleeps somewhere in the reeds where it flew after leaving the narrator's wrist. It breathes and stares where the moon, the white flower of dreams, rises for everyone. In "The Roses", one day in summer, the wild beds start exploding. Day after day, one sits near them as the honey keeps coming. There is no end to the inventions of summer and the happiness one's body can bear. In "Blackberries", the narrator comes down the blacktop road from the Red Rock on a hot day. Blackberries grow along the road and near a pool where the thrush nests. The narrator comes down the road from Red Rock, her head full of the windy whistling; it takes all day.

Humpbacks, A Meeting, Little Sister Pond, The Roses and Blackberries Analysis

In "Humpbacks", the theme is nature. The humpbacks are personified. The thrill of nature enlightens the nature to several lives worth living. The narrator glorifies the dreams of one's body. In "A Meeting", the theme is nature. The narrator sees the beauty of nature in the relationship between an unidentified animalistic mother and child relationship, causing her to want to begin life over again. In "Little Sister Pond", the theme is nature again. This poem also praises the mother and child relationships amongst animals. The narrator makes eye contact with a damselfly which lives her speechless in awe. Turning the pages of several good books is the same as turning over her thoughts, which she makes clear in the next stanza. The narrator personifies the sun's tenderness, even feeling that she would be able to see its body standing behind her if she turned around. The theme of "The Roses" is nature. This poem focuses on the beauty of the change of seasons and the happiness people can find in nature. "Blackberries" also has a theme of nature and suggests that the blackberries, and nature, make the narrator's tedious journey more enjoyable.

The Sea, Happiness, Music, Climbing the Chagrin River and Tecumseh

The Sea, Happiness, Music, Climbing the Chagrin River and Tecumseh Summary

In "The Sea", stroke-by-stroke, the narrator's body remembers that life and her legs want to join together which would be paradise. The sea is a dream house, and nostalgia spills from her bones. She longs to give up the inland and become a flaming body on the roughage of the sea; it would be a perfect beginning and a perfect conclusion. In "Happiness", the narrator watches the she-bear search for honey in the afternoon. The bear finds it and digs for it among the swarming bees. She digs with her tongue and claws it into her mouth until she begins to sway, either full, sleepy or drunk. The bear releases the branches and lifts her muzzle into the leaves and her arms into the air as though she would fly in order to float and sleep in sheer nets, longing to sway from flower to flower, day after day. In "Music", the narrator ties together a few slender reeds and makes music as she turns into a goat like god. Her listener stands still and then follows her as she wanders over the rocks. The listener is behind her, drowning in the music and letting the clasps out of her hair, hurrying and undressing. The narrator cannot remember when this happened, but she thinks it was late summer. In cities, she has often walked down hotel hallways and heard this music behind shut doors. The narrator asks if the heart is accountable, if the body is more than a branch of a honey locust tree, and if there is a certain kind of music that lights up the blunt wilderness of the body. The narrator claims that it does not matter if it was late summer or even in her part of the world because it was only a dream. She did not turn into a lithe goat god and her listener did not come running; she asks her listener "did you?"

In "Climbing the Chagrin River", the narrator and her companion enter the green river where turtles sun themselves. They push through the silky weight of wet rocks, wade under trees and climb stone steps into the timeless castles of nature. They skirt the secret pools where fish hang halfway down as light sparkles in the racing water. In "Tecumseh", the narrator goes down to the Mad River and drinks from it. One can call it madness, but the narrator claims that there is a sickness worse than risking death and that is forgetting what should never be forgotten. Tecumseh lived here. The wounds of the past are forgotten, but they hang on. The narrator asks her readers if they know where the Shawnee are now. She asks if they would have to ask Washington and whether they would believe what they were told. The narrator would like to paint her body red and go out in the snow to die. Tecumseh's name means "Shooting Star". He gathers and arms the troops for the last time, vowing to keep Ohio. It takes him twenty years to fail. After the fighting at the Thames, it is all over except his body is never found. Some say his people hauled his body to a secret grave; others say he turned into a little boy and rowed home in a canoe down the rivers. This much the narrator is sure of: if someone meets him, they will know him, and he will still be angry.

The Sea, Happiness, Music, Climbing the Chagrin River and Tecumseh Analysis

In "The Sea", the theme is nature. The narrator desires to be a fish. She personifies the sea and her own body. The concept of a perfect beginning and conclusion within one action is an oxymoronic thought. The theme of "Happiness" is nature as well. A simile claims honey is the secret bin of sweetness, and a metaphor suggests that the bear spreading her arms is like her flying. "Music" focuses on the themes of nature and human relationships. The narrator alludes to the pied piper as she turns into a sort of goat god. The narrator is unsure whether the narrative of this poem is a dream or not, showing a confusion between fantasy and reality. In "Climbing the Chagrin River", the theme is nature. The turtles are personified. A metaphor compares the eddies to timeless castle, and a simile compares the fish to tarnished swords. In "Tecumseh", the theme is nature yet again. The narrator seems to criticize the American government's displacement of Native American tribes while praising Tecumseh's battle to maintain the territory of the Shawnee. She offers several theories for the cause of Tecumseh's missing corpse, but she does not know the answer. What she does suggest is that he will still be angry should anyone ever encounter him. This reiterates her condemnation of the treatment of Native American tribes.

Bluefish, The Honey Tree, In Blackwater Woods, The Plum Trees and The Gardens

Bluefish, The Honey Tree, In Blackwater Woods, The Plum Trees and The Gardens Summary

In "Bluefish", the narrator has seen the angels coming up out of the water. They appeared as she was drifting. They fly through the waves, charging hungrily after a school of minnows. She wonders where the earth tumbles beyond itself and becomes heaven. The bluefish pour over the minnows like fire and then fall back through the waves as the sea holds them quietly. In "The Honey Tree", the narrator climbs the honey tree at last and eats the pure light, the bodies of the bees, and the dark hair of leaves. There is such frenzy, but she is told that joy does that in the beginning. Maybe later she will return only sometimes and with a middling hunger, but now she climbs like a snake or bear to the light. Anyone can see that she loves herself at last. The narrator loves the world as she climbs in the wind and leaves, the cords of her body stretching and singing in the heaven of appetite. In "In Blackwater Woods", the narrator calls attention to the trees turning their own bodies into pillars of light and giving off a rich fragrance. The cattails burst and float away on the ponds. Every named pond becomes nameless. Everything that the narrator has learned every year of her life leads back to this, the fires and the "black river of loss where the other side is salvation" and whose meaning no one will ever know. One must be able to do three things to live in this world, love what is mortal, hold it against one's bones knowing one's life depends on it & let it go when the time comes to let it go.

In "The Plum Trees", richness flows through the branches of summer and into the body, carried inward on five rivers. Disorder and astonishment rattle one's thoughts and one's heart cries for rest. One must not succumb because there is nothing so sensible as sensual inundation. Joy is a taste, and the body can devour the important moments for hours. The only way to tempt happiness into the mind is by taking it into the body first. In the first part of "The Gardens", the moon rises through the garden of leaves, and the stars ride in flickering slicks of water. The burly trees hunch toward each other. It is summer on earth. The narrator whispers a prayer to no god but to another creature like herself: "where are you?" The wind stands still and the lightning flings its flares. Something wanders in the orchard and she asks her question again, hurrying over the silky sea of night into the garden of fire. In the second part, the narrator asks how she will know the addressees' skin that is worn so neatly. The addressee gleams as they lie back, breathing like a sea creature except for their two trembling, human legs. The narrator keeps dreaming of this person and wonders how to touch them unless it is everywhere. The narrator begins here and there, finding them, the heart within them,

the animal and the voice. She asks for their whereabouts and treks wherever they take her, deeper into the trees toward the interior, the unseen, and the unknowable center.

Bluefish, The Honey Tree, In Blackwater Woods, The Plum Trees and The Gardens Analysis

All of the poems in this section contain the theme of nature, like many of the preceding poems. "Bluefish" contains a simile comparing the bluefish to small blue sharks, to fire, and to messengers. The sea welcomes these carnivorous creatures back into its depths. This poem personifies the bluefish and the sea. In "The Honey Tree", a metaphor compares the honey to chunks of pure light. Similes show the narrator climbing like a snake and clambering like a bear. The narrator personifies her own body in this poem. "In Blackwater Woods" contains the metaphor of trees as pillars of light. It personifies the cattails. The named ponds becoming nameless shows a reversion to the natural state of things. The narrator believes the no one will ever know the meaning of everything ever learned. She also provides guidance for the three things necessary to live in this world. "The Plum Trees" glorifies the joy in nature. A simile compares joy to the small wild plums. The narrator imparts her wisdom that it is necessary to take happiness into one's body before it can be tempted into the mind. In "The Gardens", the narrator offers a prayer to man. The question "where are you?" is repeated throughout the poem. Throughout the poem, she asks many questions which go unanswered.

Characters

Narratorappears in Entire Collection

The narrator in this collection of poem is the person who speaks throughout, Mary Oliver. The poems are written in first person, and the narrator appears in every poem to a lesser or greater extent. In "August", the narrator spends all day eating blackberries, and her body accepts itself for what it is. In "The Kitten", the narrator takes the stillborn kitten from its mother's bed and buries it in the field behind the house. She could have given it to a museum or called the newspaper, but, instead, she buries it in the earth. This is her way of saying that life is real and inventive. She believes that she did the right thing by giving it back peacefully to the earth from whence it came. In "In the Pinewoods, Crows and Owl", the narrator addresses the owl.

In "The Lost Children", the narrator laments for the girl's parents as their search enumerates the terrible possibilities. The narrator reiterates her lamentation for the parents' grief, but she thinks that Lydia drank the cold water of some wild stream and wanted to live. She believes Isaac caught dancing feet. The narrator believes that death has no country and love has no name. The narrator knows why Tarhe, the old Wyandot chief, refuses to barter anything in the world to return Isaac; he does it for his own sake. In the seventh part, the narrator admits that since Tarhe is old and wise, she likes to think he understands; she likes to imagine that he did it for everyone.

In "The Bobcat", the narrator and her companion(s) are astounded when a bobcat leaps from the woods into the road. The narrator wanders what is the truth of the world. In "Fall Song", when time's measure painfully chafes, the narrator tries to remember that Now is nowhere except underfoot, like when the autumn flares out toward the end of the season, longing to stay. In "Egrets", the narrator continues past where the path ends. The mosquitoes smell her and come, biting her arms as the thorns snag her skin as well. She comes to the edge of an empty pond and sees three majestic egrets.

In "Clapp's Pond", the narrator tosses more logs on the fire. Sometimes she feels that everything closes up, causing the sense of distance to vanish and the edges to slide together. She lies in bed, half asleep, watching the rain, and feels she can see the soaked doe drink from the lake three miles away. In "Ghosts", the narrator asks if "you" have noticed. Later in the poem, the narrator asks if anyone has noticed how the rain falls soft without the fall of moccasins. In the seventh part, the narrator watches a cow give birth to a red calf and care for him with the tenderness of any caring woman. In her dream, she asks them to make room so that she can lie down beside them. In "Cold Poem", the narrator dreams about the fruit and grain of summer. In "A Poem for the Blue Heron", the narrator does not remember who, if anyone, first told her that some things are impossible and kindly led her back to where she was.

In "Postcard from Flamingo", the narrator considers the seven deadly sins and the difficulty of her life so far. She admires the sensual splashing of the white birds in the

velvet water in the afternoon. She wishes a certain person were there; she would touch them if they were, and her hands would sing. In "An Old Whorehouse", the narrator and her companion climb through the broken window of the whorehouse and walk through every room. They are fourteen years old, and the dust cannot hide the glamour or teach them anything. They whisper and imagine; it will be years before they learn how effortlessly sin blooms and softens like a bed of flowers. In "Web", the narrator notes, "so this is fear". The spider scuttles away as she watches the blood bead on her skin and thinks of the lightning sizzling under the door. She imagines that it hurts. She remembers a bat in the attic, tiring from the swinging brooms and unaware that she would let it go. The narrator gets up to walk, to see if she can walk.

In "University Hospital, Boston", the narrator and her companion walk outside and sit under the trees. They sit and hold hands. Her companion tells the narrator that they are better. The narrator wonders how many young men, blind to the efforts to keep them alive, died here during the war while the doctors tried to save them, longing for means yet unimagined. The narrator looks into her companion's eyes and tells herself that they are better because her life without them would be a place of parched and broken trees. Later, as she walks down the corridor to the street, she steps inside an empty room where someone lay yesterday. She stands there in silence, loving her companion.

In "Spring", the narrator lifts her face to the pale, soft, clean flowers of the rain. The rain rubs its hands all over the narrator. In "The Snakes", the narrator sees two snakes hurry through the woods in perfect concert. In the first part of "Something", someone skulks through the narrator and her lover's yard, stumbling against a stone. They know he is there, but they kiss anyway. The narrator and her lover know about his suicide because no one tramples outside their window anymore. He was their lonely brother, their audience, and their spirit of the forest who grinned all night. In the third part, the narrator's lover is also dead now, and she, no longer young, knows what a kiss is worth.

In "May", the blossom storm out of the darkness in the month of May, and the narrator gathers their spiritual honey. In "White Night", the narrator floats all night in the shallow ponds as the moon wanders among the milky stems. Once, the narrator sees the moon reach out her hand and touch a muskrat's head; it is lovely. The narrator does not want to argue about the things that she thought she could not live without. The morning will rise from the east, but before that hurricane of light comes, the narrator wants to flow out across the mother of all waters and lose herself on the currents as she gathers tall lilies of sleep.

In "The Fish", the narrator catches her first fish. Later, she opens and eats him; now the fish and the narrator are one, tangled together, and the sea is in her. She feels certain that they will fall back into the sea. In "Crossing the Swamp", the narrator finds in the swamp an endless, wet, thick cosmos and the center of everything. Rather than wet, she feels painted and glittered with the fat, grassy mires of the rich and succulent marrows of the earth. She sees herself as a dry stick given one more chance by the whims of the swamp water; she is still able, after all these years, to make of her life a breathing palace of leaves. In "Humpbacks", the narrator knows a captain who has seen them play with seaweed; she knows a whale that will gently nudge the boat as it

passes. The narrator knows several lives worth living. She points out that nothing one tries in life will ever dazzle them like the dreams of their own body and its spirit where everything throbs with song. In "A Meeting", the narrator meets the most beautiful woman the narrator has ever seen. The narrator wants to live her live over, begin again and be utterly wild.

In "Little Sister Pond", the narrator does not know what to say when she meets eyes with the damselfly. All day, the narrator turns the pages of several good books that cost plenty to set down and more to live by. All day, she also turns over her heavy, slow thoughts. She feels the sun's tenderness on her neck as she sits in the room. She thinks that if she turns, she will see someone standing there with a body like water. In "Blackberries", the narrator comes down the blacktop road from the Red Rock on a hot day. The narrator comes down the road from Red Rock, her head full of the windy whistling; it takes all day. In "The Sea", stroke-by-stroke, the narrator's body remembers that life and her legs want to join together which would be paradise. The sea is a dream house, and nostalgia spills from her bones. She longs to give up the inland and become a flaming body on the roughage of the sea; it would be a perfect beginning and a perfect conclusion. In "Happiness", the narrator watches the she-bear search for honey in the afternoon.

In "Music", the narrator ties together a few slender reeds and makes music as she turns into a goat like god. Her listener stands still and then follows her as she wanders over the rocks. The narrator cannot remember when this happened, but she thinks it was late summer. In cities, she has often walked down hotel hallways and heard this music behind shut doors. The narrator asks if the heart is accountable, if the body is more than a branch of a honey locust tree, and if there is a certain kind of music that lights up the blunt wilderness of the body. The narrator claims that it does not matter if it was late summer or even in her part of the world because it was only a dream. She did not turn into a lithe goat god and her listener did not come running; she asks her listener "did you?" In "Climbing the Chagrin River", the narrator and her companion enter the green river where turtles sun themselves. They push through the silky weight of wet rocks, wade under trees and climb stone steps into the timeless castles of nature. They skirt the secret pools where fish hang halfway down as light sparkles in the racing water.

In "Tecumseh", the narrator goes down to the Mad River and drinks from it. The narrator asks her readers if they know where the Shawnee are now. She asks if they would have to ask Washington and whether they would believe what they were told. The narrator would like to paint her body red and go out in the snow to die. This much the narrator is sure of: if someone meets Tecumseh, they will know him, and he will still be angry. In "Bluefish", the narrator has seen the angels coming up out of the water. She wonders where the earth tumbles beyond itself and becomes heaven. In "The Honey Tree", the narrator climbs the honey tree at last and eats the pure light, the bodies of the bees, and the dark hair of leaves. The narrator loves the world as she climbs in the wind and leaves, the cords of her body stretching and singing in the heaven of appetite.

In "In Blackwater Woods", the narrator calls attention to the trees turning their own bodies into pillars of light and giving off a rich fragrance. The cattails burst and float

away on the ponds. Every named pond becomes nameless. Everything that the narrator has learned every year of her life leads back to this, the fires and the black river of loss where the other side is salvation and whose meaning no one will ever know. In "The Gardens", the narrator whispers a prayer to no god but to another creature like herself: "where are you?" The narrator asks how she will know the addressees' skin that is worn so neatly. The narrator keeps dreaming of this person and wonders how to touch them unless it is everywhere. The narrator begins here and there, finding them, the heart within them, the animal and the voice. She asks for their whereabouts and treks wherever they take her, deeper into the trees toward the interior, the unseen, and the unknowable center.

The Addresseeappears in Entire Collection

In many of the poems, the narrator refers to "you". Sometimes, this is a specific person, but at other times, this is more general and likely means the reader or mankind as a whole. The addressees in "Moles", "Tasting the Wild Grapes", "John Chapman", "Ghosts" and "Flying" are more general. Other general addressees are found in "Morning at Great Pond", "Blossom", "Honey at the Table", "Humpbacks", "The Roses", "Bluefish", "In Blackwater Woods", and "The Plum Trees". In "The Bobcat", the fact that the narrator is referring to an event seems to suggest that the addressee is a specific person, part of the "we" that she refers to. Many of the other poems seem to suggest a similar addressee that is included in some action with the narrator.

In "In the Pinewoods, Crows and Owl", the narrator specifically addresses the owl. She seems to be addressing a lover in "Postcard from Flamingo". The addressee of "University Hospital, Boston" is obviously someone the narrator loves very much. "Skunk Cabbage" has a more ambiguous addressee; it is unclear whether this is a specific person or anyone at all. "Something" obviously refers to a lover. It appears that "Music" and "The Gardens" also refer to lovers.

Tecumsehappears in Tecumseh

Tecumseh lives near the Mad River, and his name means "Shooting Star". He gathers the tribes from the Mad River country north to the border and arms them one last time. Tecumseh vows to keep Ohio, and it takes him twenty years to fail. After the final, bloody fighting at the Thames, his body cannot be found. No one knows if his people buried him in a secret grave or he turned into a little boy again and rowed home in a canoe down the rivers. The narrator is sure that if anyone ever meets Tecumseh, they will recognize him and he will still be angry.

John Chapmanappears in John Chapman

John Chapman wears a tin pot for a hat and also uses it to cook his supper in the Ohio forests. He wears a sackcloth shirt and walks barefoot on his crooked feet over the roots. He plants lovely apple trees as he wanders. No one ever harms him, and he

honors all of God's creatures. John Chapman thinks nothing of sharing his nightly shelter with any creature. Sometimes, he lingers at the house of Mrs. Price's parents. He speaks only once of women as deceivers. The apple trees prosper, and John Chapman becomes a legend. One can still see signs of him in the Ohio forests during the spring.

Somebodyappears in Something

Somebody skulks in the yard and stumbles over a stone. The narrator and her lover know he is there, but they kiss anyway. A man two towns away can no longer bear his life and commits suicide. No one lurks outside the window anymore. He is their lonely brother, their audience, their vine-wrapped spirit of the forest who grinned all night.

Lydia Osbornappears in The Lost Children

Lydia Osborn is eleven-years-old when she never returns from heading after straying cows in southern Ohio. The search for Lydia reveals her bonnet near the hoof prints of Indian horses. The narrator is sorry for Lydia's parents and their grief. The narrator believes that Lydia knelt in the woods and drank the water of a cold stream and wanted to live.

Isaac Zaneappears in The Lost Children

Isaac Zane is stolen at age nine by the Wyandots who he lives among on the shores of the Mad River. As an adult, he walks into the world and finds himself lost there. He returns to the Mad River and the smile of Myeerah. Isaac builds a small house beside the Mad River where he lives with Myeerah for fifty years.

Tarheappears in The Lost Children

Tarhe is an old Wyandot chief who refuses to barter anything in the world to return Isaac Zane, his delight. He does it for his own sake, but because he is old and wise, the narrator likes to imagine he did it for all of us because he understands.

Myeerahappears in The Lost Children

Myeerah's name means "the White Crane". She lives with Isaac Zane in a small house beside the Mad River for fifty years after her smile causes him to return from the world.

Strangerappears in Flying

The stranger on the plane is beautiful. He has a Greek nose, and his smile is a Mexican fiesta. One feels the need to touch him before he leaves and is shaken by the strangeness of his touch.

Lewisappears in Ghosts

Lewis kneels, in 1805 near the Bitterfoot Mountains, to watch the day old chicks in the sparrow's nest.

Objects/Places

Pinewoodsappears in In the Pinewoods, Crows and Owl

The pinewoods are where the crows and owl live and fight.

Mad Riverappears in The Lost Children and Tecumseh

The Mad River is where Lydia Osborn's bonnet is found near the hoof prints of Indian horses. It is also where Isaac Zane builds his house with Myeerah and lives for fifty years. In "Tecumseh", it is where Tecumseh lives.

Clapp's Pondappears in Clapp's Pond

Clapp's Pond lies three miles through the woods from the narrator's cottage and where she feels that she can see the doe drink when the distance between her house and the pond seems to vanish.

Ohio Forestsappears in John Chapman

The Ohio forests are where John Chapman travels and plants trees which still flourish, leaving him a legend. Most of the other poems are also set in the forests of Ohio.

Planeappears in Flying

The plane is where a person is amazed by the beauty of a stranger and yearns to touch him.

Flamingoappears in Postcard from Flamingo

In Flamingo, the palms click in the wind and the birds play in the velvet waters as the sun rises over the blue sea. The narrator's hands would sing if her lover were in Flamingo for her to touch.

Whorehouseappears in An Old Whorehouse

The whorehouse has been out of business for years, resulting in its decrepit appearance. The narrator and her companion, at fourteen years old, see only the glamour, unaware for many years of how sin blooms and dies.

University Hospitalappears in University Hospital, Boston

University Hospital is built before the Civil War, and the narrator wonders how many young men died within its walls. She visits someone very dear to her at the University Hospital, and they walk on the lawn and sit under the lush trees.

Great Pondappears in Morning at Great Pond

At Great Pond, the light slicks out of the east and creatures emerge. This sight can heal people from the night and make them ready to believe in anything again.

Honeyappears in Honey at the Table

The honey fills one with the soft essence of vanished flowers. It becomes a sharp trickle that one follows over the table, out the door, through the woods and up a tree into the combs.

Swampappears in Crossing the Swamp

The swamp is a wet, thick cosmos and the center of everything. The narrator struggles through the mud and feels that the swamp gives her another chance to make of her life a breathing palace of leaves.

Little Sister Pondappears in Little Sister Pond

At Little Sister Pond, the wood duck calls to her hatchlings, and the narrator makes eye contact with the damselfly as it streaks through the water.

Chagrin Riverappears in Climbing Chagrin River

The narrator and a companion enter Chagrin River and follow the frivolous rocks and find secret pools. This is where herons rest, turtles sun themselves, and nails of light sparkle in the racing waters.

Blackwater Woodsappears in In Blackwater Woods

In the Blackwater Woods, the trees turn into pillars of light and give off the fragrance of cinnamon and honey. The named ponds become nameless. Everything the narrator learns in life leads back to this: the fires and the black river of loss whose other side is salvation and whose meaning no one will ever know.

Themes

Nature

Most of the poems in this collection of fifty poems at least mention the theme of nature. All but one take place in a natural setting. In "August", the blackberries hang in the woods, and the narrator spends all day eating them, the black honey of summer. In "Mushrooms", the rain and cool winds pull the mushrooms from the ground in the fall time. In "The Kitten", in amazement, the narrator takes the stillborn kitten from its mother's bed and gives it back peacefully to the earth from whence it came. In "Lightning", the lightning flashes like "quick lessons in creation".

"In the Pinewoods, Crows and Owl" tells of enmity between the crows and the owl. In "Moles", moles nothing during their brief, physical lives. Yet, their muzzles continually push against the earth, finding it delicious. "The Lost Children" is set in nature. In "The Bobcat", one night in Ohio, a bobcat leaps from the woods into the road. In "Fall Song", another year leaves its residue behind it, and the autumn flares out toward the end of the season, longing to stay. In "Egrets", the narrator continues past where the path ends. In "Clapp's Pond", Clapp's Pond sprawls three miles through the woods. Pheasants fly, and a doe gallops away.

In "Tasting the Wild Grapes", the red beast will not come out for anything, but sometimes he will explode from underfoot if one walks quietly through the woods. In "John Chapman", no one harms John Chapman, and he honors all of God's creatures. The trees he plants prosper, and he becomes a legend. In "First Snow", the snow begins in the morning and continues all day. In "Ghosts", the narrator notes that there are so many dead beasts on earth that it is hard to tell the difference between what is bone and what once was. She laments the deaths of so many oxen and wolves.

In "Cold Poem", it is cold now and closer to the edge. The narrator dreams about the fruit and grain of summer. In "A Poem for the Blue Heron", the blue heron wades through the cold pond in November and decides to fly south in order to live. In "Postcard from Flamingo", the dark palms click in an unabashed autoeroticism caused by the wind and an alligator heaves himself onto the grass and studies his poems. The narrator admires the sensual splashing of the white birds in the velvet water in the afternoon. In "Vultures", the birds sweep over the glades like large butterflies, looking for death. In "Rain in Ohio", the robin cries, "rain" and the crow calls "plunder". The blacksnake halts his climb as the thunderheads whirl out of the wind. The robin sings "rain" and flies for cover, as the crow hunches and the blacksnake hides in the ground. In "University Hospital, Boston", the trees on the hospital lawn are thriving.

In "Skunk Cabbage", a person comes, dreaming of ferns, leaves and flowers, but finding only lurid, appalling skunk cabbage. Ferns, leaves and flowers wait to rise and flourish, but what blazes the trail is not necessarily pretty. In "Spring", the narrator lifts her face to the pale, soft, clean flowers of the rain. In "Morning at Great Pond", the day begins with

forks of light rising from the east, flying over one. The remainder of the night dissolves as the sun appears, and one can make out creatures, such as the herons, wood ducks, and the deer drinking, as the light lifts. In "The Snakes", the narrator sees two snakes hurry through the woods in perfect concert.

In "Blossom", the ponds open like black blossoms in April, and the moon swims in everyone. In "Something", the setting is the woods, and the narrator constantly refers to nature. In "May", the blossom storm out of the darkness in the month of May. The bees dive into them, and the narrator also gathers their spiritual honey. In "White Night", the narrator floats all night in the shallow ponds as the moon wanders among the milky stems. Once, the narrator sees the moon reach out her hand and touch a muskrat's head; it is lovely. The honey in "Honey at the Table" fills one with the essence of vanished flowers. It becomes a sharp trickle that one follows from the honey pot, over the table, out the door and over the ground as it thickens and grows deeper and wilder. Finally, deep in the forest, one shuffles up a tree and floats into and swallows the dripping combs, bits of trees and crushed bees. In "Crossing the Swamp", the narrator finds in the swamp an endless, wet, thick cosmos and the center of everything. Here is swamp, struggle and closure.

In "Humpbacks", the sky stops at nothing so something must hold back the bodies or people would fly away. The humpbacks leap through the water and play off of the Cape. In "A Meeting", she steps into the swamp and drops her slippery package into the weeds. She tongues it, and it becomes a smaller creature like herself. Now, there are two of them, and they walk together under the trees. She is the most beautiful woman the narrator has ever seen. Her child leaps among the flowers. In "Little Sister Pond", the noise in the early morning is the wood duck calling to her hatchlings. A blue damselfly streaks across the water as its chest moves in quick breaths.

In "The Roses", one day in summer, the wild beds start exploding. Day after day, one sits near them as the honey keeps coming. There is no end to the inventions of summer and the happiness one's body can bear. In "Blackberries", blackberries grow along the road and near a pool where the thrush nests. In "The Sea", stroke-by-stroke, the narrator's body remembers that life and her legs want to join together which would be paradise. In "Happiness", the narrator watches the she-bear search for honey in the afternoon.

In "Music", the narrator ties together a few slender reeds and makes music as she turns into a goat like god. In "Climbing the Chagrin River", the narrator and her companion enter the green river where turtles sun themselves. They push through the silky weight of wet rocks, wade under trees and climb stone steps into the timeless castles of nature. They skirt the secret pools where fish hang halfway down as light sparkles in the racing water. In "Tecumseh", the narrator goes down to the Mad River and drinks from it. In "Bluefish", the narrator has seen the angels coming up out of the water. The bluefish pour over the minnows like fire and then fall back through the waves as the sea holds them quietly. In "The Honey Tree", the narrator climbs the honey tree at last and eats the pure light, the bodies of the bees, and the dark hair of leaves.

In "In Blackwater Woods", the narrator calls attention to the trees turning their own bodies into pillars of light and giving off a rich fragrance. The cattails burst and float away on the ponds. Every named pond becomes nameless. In "The Plum Trees", richness flows through the branches of summer and into the body, carried inward on five rivers. In "The Gardens", the moon rises through the garden of leaves, and the stars ride in flickering slicks of water. The burly trees hunch toward each other. It is summer on earth. The wind stands still and the lightning flings its flares. The narrator treks deeper into the trees toward the interior, the unseen, and the unknowable center.

Death

Death is a recurring theme throughout this collection of poems. Some of the appearances of this theme are overt while others are subtler. In "The Kitten", the narrator buries the stillborn kitten in the field, giving it back to the earth from whence it came. In "The Mushrooms", some of the mushrooms are poisonous and can cause death if eaten. "In the Pinewoods, Crows and Owl" tells about the enmity between the crows and owl. The owl killed a crow earlier in the month, and the crows plot the owl's death. In "Fall Song", the death of the year has come and the narrator tries to keep perspective when time's measure painfully chafes. Although John Chapman is dead, he lives on in the apple trees that he has scattered throughout the forests in Ohio. "Ghosts" talks of all of the dead creatures on earth, specifically the oxen and wolves in American, which have been hunted to endangerment. "Cold Poem" talks of the shark swimming toward the tumbling seals, and the beauty of such necessary cruelty.

In "A Poem for the Blue Heron", the blue heron flies south to find a cave in order to escape death from the cold weather that is approaching. In "Vultures", the narrator uses the vultures as a metaphor for death. No one wants to know the extent to which it is prevalent in the world, nor do they want to feel their blood cool. People loathe and honor death at the same time. In "University Hospital, Boston", the narrator worries about the person that she visits because her life without this person would be a place of "parched and broken trees". In "Blossom", people know that death is a state of paralysis and long for joy before death. In "Something", the stranger outside the window commits suicide because he can no longer bear his life. Also, the narrator's lover is now dead by the third part of this poem. The narrator catches and eats the fish in "The Fish". In "Tecumseh", Tecumseh is killed in the final, bloody fighting at the Thames, though his body is never found. In "Bluefish", the bluefish eat the minnows.

Relationships

Relationships are different varieties are a recurring theme in Mary Oliver's collection of poems. "The Kitten" shows the narrator's relationship with the earth as well as her respect for mother nature. "In the Pinewoods, Crows and Owl" demonstrates the enmity between these two types of birds. "The Lost Children" shows the romantic relationship between Isaac Zane and Myeerah. It also shows the narrator's respect for the grief of Lydia Osborn's parents. Additionally, it shows that Tarhe values Isaac Zane. In "Tasting

the Wild Grapes", a relationship exists between the fox and the person searching for the fox by imitating him. "John Chapman" mentions the only time that John Chapman mentioned women; he called them deceivers, insinuating that he has been deeply hurt in the past. In the seventh part of "Ghosts", the narrator demonstrates respect and desire to emulate the cow and the red calf, wanting to lie with them.

In "Flying", one feels the need to touch a beautiful stranger on a plane. In "Postcard from Flamingo", the narrator wishes a specific someone were with her so that she could touch them. In "An Old Whorehouse", the relationship between youth and age, innocence and experience, is mentioned. In "University Hospital, Boston", the narrator shows her love for the person that she visits; she worries greatly about that person because her life without them would be a "place of parched and broken trees". "The Snakes" details the synchronization of two snakes traveling through the woods, like a matched team, a dance or a love affair. In "Something", the narrator and her lover kiss despite the fact that someone is watching from the window. In "Humpbacks", the whales rub against the boat and play in the water. "A Meeting" shows the loving relationship between a mother and her child in the animal kingdom. "Music" shows the narrator becoming a lithe goat god and the addressee following her as she plays music. In "The Gardens", the narrator searches for someone and talks of touching every part of their body.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this collection of poems is first person. The point of view is limited and unreliable, which is due to the subjectivity that is a necessary component of the genre of poetry. This collection of poetry expresses the way that the poet, Mary Oliver, views different things in life. All of these poems are written in such a way that they can be considered as exposition or as individual monologues. Some of these poems are narrative, telling a story, while others are speculative, just meditating on some aspect of nature or life.

In this collection, "August", "The Kitten" and "In the Pinewoods, Crows and Owl" are narrative. Other narrative poems in this collection include "The Bobcat", "Egrets", "Clapp's Pond", "Tasting the Wild Grapes", and "John Chapman", as well as "A Poem for the Blue Heron", "Flying", and "An Old Whorehouse". Additionally, "Rain in Ohio", "Skunk Cabbage", "Spring", "The Snakes", and "Something" are narrative poems. The narrator also uses the narrative form in writing "White Night", "Honey at the Table", "Crossing the Swamp", "A Meeting", "Little Sister Pond", and "Blackberries". The final narrative poems in this collection are "The Sea", "Happiness", "Climbing the Chagrin River", and "The Honey Tree".

The speculative poems in this collection are "Lightning", "Moles", "Fall Song", "First Snow", "Cold Poem", and "Vultures", as well as "Web", "Blossom", and "May". The final two speculative poems are "In Blackwater Woods" and "The Plum Trees". Several of the poems in this collection can be seen as either narrative or speculative, or some combination of the two. These poems include "The Lost Children", "Ghosts", "Postcard from Flamingo", "University Hospital, Boston", and "Morning at Great Pond". Additional poems that combine these two forms are "The Fish", "Humpbacks", "The Roses", "Music", "Tecumseh", "Bluefish", and "The Gardens".

Setting

The setting of this collection of poems varies from poem to poem. The majority of the poems are set in the woods of Ohio. Some of the poems have specific settings while others do not. "August" is set simply in the woods. "Mushrooms" is set in the ground on fall mornings. "The Kitten" is set in a field. The setting of "Lightning" is a yard and the surrounding landscape. "In the Pinewoods, Crows and Owl" is set in the pinewoods. "Moles" is set in a field. "The Lost Children" is set in southern Ohio, near the Mad River. "The Bobcat" is set in Ohio. "Fall Song" is set along the island of summer. "Egrets" is set at the path's end, along the edge of the pond. "Clapp's Pond" is set at Clapp's Pond.

"Tasting the Wild Grapes" is set along the side of the hills. "John Chapman" is set in the Ohio forests. "First Snow" is set in the wilderness, specifically amongst trees and fields.

"Ghosts" is set on earth and near the Bitterfoot Mountains. "Cold Poem" is set during the winter. "A Poem for the Blue Heron" is set in the woods, near a cold pond. "Flying" is set on a plane. "Postcard from Flamingo" is set in Flamingo at midnight. "Vultures" is set through the skies. "An Old Whorehouse" is set at an old whorehouse. "Rain in Ohio" is set in the Ohio forests during the rain. "Web" is set under the door, in an attic and near a trapdoor. "University Hospital, Boston" is set primarily on the lawn of the University Hospital in Boston. "Skunk Cabbage" is set on a trail. "Spring" is set in the woods. "Morning at Great Pond" is set at Great Pond. "The Snakes" is set in the woods.

"Blossom" is set near a pond. "Something" is set in the woods, near the narrator's home. "May" is set in the woods in May. "White Night" is set in the shallow ponds. "The Fish" is set in the sea and in the narrator's stomach. "Honey at the Table" is set at the table and in the woods. "Crossing the Swamp" is set in the swamp. "Humpbacks" is set off the Cape. "A Meeting" is set in the swamp. "Little Sister Pond" is set at Little Sister Pond. "The Roses" is set in the rose beds along the sea. "Blackberries" is set on the blacktop road from Red Rock. "The Sea" is set in the sea. "Happiness" is set in the woods and in a tree. "Music" is set in the woods, and "Climbing the Chagrin River" is set in the river. "Tecumseh" is set by the Mad River. "Bluefish" is set in the sea, and "The Honey Tree" is set in a honey tree. "In Blackwater Woods" is set in Blackwater Woods. "The Plum Trees" do not have a setting because the poem is purely speculative, but "The Gardens" is set in a garden where the narrator cannot find the addressee and follows deeper and deeper into the woods.

Language and Meaning

The language used in this collection of poems by Mary Oliver is very diverse. Mostly it is informal and abstract. Occasionally, it is more concrete. Sometimes, Oliver uses her poetic license to diverge from the path of grammatical accuracy, yet her poems retain their fluidity and ease in reading. Some of the poems contain action while others are purely speculative. Some poems take place in the present, others in the past.

The language used in this collection is important as it allows the reader to become familiar with Mary Oliver and her feelings about different aspects of the world which her poems discuss. Mary Oliver uses many literary devices to enhance the quality of her poetry. Among these, similes and metaphors are the most predominant. Additionally, she uses alliteration and repetition throughout this collection of poems, making the poems much more enjoyable.

Structure

This collection of poems contains fifty poems and is eighty-eight pages long. Each poem ranges from one to 4 pages. Some of the poems are long and descriptive while others are short and vague. Some poems are narrative, others are speculative. A few of these poems are broken into sections. "Clapp's Pond" and "Humpbacks" are separated into sections by asterisks. "The Lost Children", "Ghosts", "A Poem for the Blue Heron",

"Something", "Little Sister Pond", "Music", and the "The Gardens" are broken into numbered sections.

Each poem has its own plot that it reveals; however, the theme of nature plays a dominant role throughout all of the poems, either in the message or by virtue of being the setting. All of the poems are quick paced and very interesting, due to Mary Oliver's unique perspectives on life and mankind. Some of the poems are linear and others recall past events. As a whole, this collection is very entertaining and manages to maintain its unity while discussing a broad range of topics.

Quotes

"When the blackberries hang swollen in the woods, in the brambles, nobody owns, I spend all day among the high branches, reaching my ripped arms, thinking of nothing, cramming the black honey of summer into my mouth; all day my body accepts what it is." August, page 3

"But instead I took it out into the field and opened the earth and put it back saying, it was real, saying, life is infinitely inventive, saying, what other amazements lie in the dark seed of the earth, yes, I think I did right to go out alone and give it back peacefully, and cover the place with the reckless blossoms of weeds." The Kitten, page 6

"each bolt a burning river tearing like escape through the dark field of the other." Lightning, page 8

"You are the pine god who never speaks but holds the keys to everything while they fly morning after morning against the shut doors." In the Pinewoods, Crows and Owl, page 9

"I think death has no country. Love has no name." The Lost Children, page 14

"Yet, because he was an old man, and a wise man, I think he'd understand how sometimes, when loss leans like a broken tree, I like to imagine he did it for all of us." The Lost Children, page 15

"What should we say is the truth of the world? The miles alone in the pinched dark? or the push of the promise? or the wound of delight?" The Bobcat, pages 16-17

"this Now, that now is nowhere except underfoot, moldering in that black subterranean castle of unobservable mysteries- roots and sealed seeds and the wanderings of water. This I try to remember when time's measure painfully chafes." Fall Song, page 18

"Later, lying half-asleep under the blankets, I watch while the doe, glittering with rain, steps under the wet slabs of the pines, stretches her long neck down to drink from the pond three miles away." Clapp's Pond, page 22

"Well, the trees he planted or gave away prospered, and he became the good legend, you do what you can if you can; whatever the secret, and the pain, there's a decision: to die, or to live, to go on caring about something." John Chapman, page 24-25

"The snow began here this morning and all day continued, its white rhetoric everywhere

calling us back to why, how, whence such beauty and what the meaning; such an oracular fever!" First Snow, page 26

"In the book of the earth it is written: nothing can die. In the book of the Sioux it is written: they have gone away into the earth to hide. Nothing will coax them out again but the people dancing." Ghosts, page 29

"Maybe what cold is, is the time we measure the love we have always had, secretly, for our own bones, the hard knife-edged love for the warm river of the I, beyond all else; maybe that is what is means, the beauty of the blue shark cruising toward the tumbling seals." Cold Poem, page 31

"I do not remember who first said to me, if anyone did: Not everything is possible, somethings are impossible, and took my hand, kindly, and led me back from wherever I was." A Poem for the Blue Heron, page 32

"Consider the sins, all seven, all deadly! Ah, the difficulty of my life so far!" Postcard from Flamingo, page 36

"Locked into the blaze of our own bodies we watch them wheeling and drifting, we honor them and we loathe them, however wise the doctrine, however magnificent the cycles, however ultimately sweet the huddle of death to fuel those powerful wings." Vultures, page 37-38

"It would be years before we'd learn how effortlessly sin blooms, then softens, like any bed of flowers." An Old Whorehouse, page 39

"Yesterday someone was here with a gasping face. Now the bed is made all new, the machines have been rolled away. The Silence continues, deep and neutral, as I stand there, loving you." University Hospital, Boston, page 43

"But these are the woods you love, where the secret name of every death is life again- a miracle wrought surely not of mere turning but of dense and scalding reenactment." Skunk Cabbage, page 44

"What blazes the trail is not necessarily pretty." Skunk Cabbage, page 44

"each secret body is the richest advisor, deep in the black earth such fuming nuggets of joy!" Spring, page 45

"You're healed then from the night, your heart wants more, you're ready to rise and look! to hurry anywhere! to believe in anything." Morning at Great Pond, page 46-47

"they traveled like a matched team like a dance like a love affair." The Snakes, page 48

"What we know: that time chops at us all like an iron hoe, that death is a state of paralysis. What we long for: joy before death... What we know: we are more than blood- we are more than our hunger and yet we belong to the moon and when the ponds open, when the burning begins the most thoughtful among us dreams of hurrying down into the black pearls, into the fire, into the night where time lies shattered, into the body of another." Blossom, page 49-50

"Now you are dead too, and I, no longer young, know what a kiss is worth. Time has made his pitch, the slow speech that goes on and on, reasonable and bloodless. Yet over the bed of each of us moonlight throws down her long hair until one must have something. Anything. This or that, or something else: the dark wound of watching." Something, page 51-52

"Mute and meek, yet theirs is the deepest certainty that this existence too- this sense of well-being, the flourishing of the physical body- rides near the hub of the miracle that everything is a part of, is as good as a poem or a prayer, can also make luminous any dark place on earth." May, page 53

"Now the sea is in me: I am the fish, the fish glitters in me; we are risen, tangled together, certain to fall back to the sea. Out of pain, and pain, and more pain we feed this feverish plot, we are nourished by the mystery." The Fish, page 56

"you float into and swallow the dripping combs, bits of the tree, crushed bees- a taste composed of everything lost, in which everything lost is found." Honey at the Table, page 57

"There is, all around us, this country of original fire. You know what I mean. The sky, after all, stops at nothing, so something has to be holding our bodies in its rich and timeless stables or else we would fly away." Humpbacks, page 60

"I know several lives worth living. Listen, whatever it is you try to do with your life, nothing will ever dazzle you like the dreams of your body." Humpbacks, page 62

"there is no end, believe me! to the inventions of summer, to the happiness your body is willing to bear." The Roses, page 67

"Stroke by stroke my body remembers that life and cries for the lost parts of itself- fins, gills opening like flowers into the flesh- my legs want to lock and become one muscle, I swear I know just what the blue-gray scale shingling the rest of me would feel like! paradise!" The Sea, page 69

"call it what madness you will, there's a sickness worse than the risk of death and that's forgetting what we should never forget." Tecumseh, page 77

"Have you ever wondered where the earth tumbles beyond itself and heaven begins?" Bluefish, page 79

"Oh, anyone can see how I love myself at last! how I love the world! climbing by day or night in the wind, in the leaves, kneeling at the secret rip, the cords of my body stretching and singing in the heaven of appetite." The Honey Tree, page 81

"To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go." In the Blackwater Woods, page 83

"Joy is a taste before it's anything else, and the body can lounge for hours devouring the important moments. Listen, the only way to tempt happiness into your mind is by taking it into the body first, like small wild plums." The Plum Trees, page 84

"How shall I touch you unless it is everywhere? I begin here, and there, finding you, the heart within you, and the animal, and the voice; I ask over and over for your whereabouts, trekking wherever you take me, the boughs of your body leading deeper into the trees, over the white fields, the rivers of bone, the shouting, the answering, the rousing great run toward the interior, the unseen, the unknowable center." The Gardens, page 86-87

Topics for Discussion

Choose two narrative poems; compare and contrast.

Choose a poem about nature, and analyze how it reveals a truth or generalization about humanity.

Investigate the effectiveness of Mary Oliver's use of simile and metaphor in at least three of these poems.

Analyze the way a certain theme (such as death, nature, love, etc.) plays a part in this collection of poems.

Which two poems do you believe are the most similar and why?

Which poem do you find the most difficult to understand and why? Attempt to analyze it.

Choose your favorite poem from this collection. Why is it your favorite? What makes it better than the other poems?