Music Lessons Study Guide

Music Lessons by Mary Oliver

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Contents

Introduction

Mary Oliver is usually and conveniently referred to as a New England nature or pastoral poet and thought to descend from a line of other New Eng-*197-7* land pastoralist writers, from Thoreau to Robert Frost. "Music Lessons," from Oliver's third volume of poetry, *Twelve Moons* (1979), however, is somewhat uncharacteristic since its inspiration and situation begin in a house at a private music lesson where a teacher takes a break from teaching and plays for her probably younger student and for herself. Perhaps the poem documents a memory from Oliver's childhood.

In "Music Lessons" a teacher, perhaps growing tired with the student's fumblings or imperfections, decides to take over the keyboard. The music acts upon the student as challenge and adventure and upon the pianist as escape from domesticity and mortality. Quietly feminist and more loudly a paean to music, the title, "Music Lessons," is apropos in that the paean was, in its earliest known instance in *The Iliad* of Homer, a song praising and calling for Apollo, the *Paian,* or "healer." Apollo is the ancient Greek god of arts and civilization, and specifically, patron of music (whose instrument is the lyre which is also the name of the frame holding the strings of the piano). Music, Apollonian or otherwise, may not serve as healer of life's ills, but it does depict an act that seems to defy the duties of life and the inevitability of death□at least temporarily.

Author Biography

Mary Oliver was born September 10, 1935, in Maple Heights, Ohio, to Helen and Edward Oliver (a teacher). Oliver has described herself as a serious thirteen-year-old who wanted to write. At the age of fifteen, she wrote a letter to Norma Millay Ellis, the sister of the then recently-deceased Edna St. Vincent Millay to ask permission to visit Mil-lay's home in upstate New York. This visit was followed by more and eventually a longer stay at which time Oliver assisted in organizing Millay's papers. The influence of Millay upon Oliver is apparent, and similarities can be seen in the lives of Millay and Oliver: both were familiar with country life, studied at Vassar, and moved in the bohemian circles of Provincetown, Massachusetts. Oliver studied atOhio State University from 1955-56, and then at Vassar from 1956-57. Since then, she has had a series of scholarly engagements at various academic institutions includingCaseWestern Reserve University,SweetBriar College, andDuke University. Her last appointment, in 1996, was to the Catharine Osgood Foster Chair for Distinguished Teaching atBennington College. In 1998, Oliver completed a second poetry handbook, *Rules for the Dance,* on metrical poetry to compliment^ *Poetry Handbook* (1994), which discussed free, as well as metered, verse. Oliver is writing another volume of essays titled *Winter Hours,* which she expects to publish in 1999. Among Oliver's many honors are a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1972), a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship (1980), and anAmerican Academy and Institute ofArts and Letters Achievement Award (1983). In 1984 Oliver was the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for her volume of poetry, *American Primitive* (1983). Another book of poems, *House of Light* (1990) won both the Christopher Award and the L. L. Winship Award in 1991, and *New and Selected Poems* (1992) won the National Book Award that same year.

Poem Text

Sometimes, in the middle of the lesson,
we exchanged places. She would gaze a moment at
her hands
spread over the keys; then the small house with its
knickknacks
its shut windows,
its photographs of her sons and the serious
husband,
vanished as new shapes formed. Sound
became music, and music a white
scarp for the listener to climb
alone. I leaped rock over rock to the top
and found myself waiting, transformed,
and still she played, her eyes luminous and willful,
her pinned hair failing down
forgetting me, the house, the neat green yard,
she fled in that lick of flame all tedious bonds;
supper, the duties of flesh and home,
the knife at the throat, the death in the metronome.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-3:

From the title we know this is a music "lesson" (line 1). The first line immediately alerts the reader to a shift in the action when the narrator says "Sometimes, in the middle ..." (line 1) "we exchanged places" (line 2). The reader can guess that the student and the teacher are the "we." And perhaps this is a private lesson. Oliver further evokes a shift in the reader's experience by starting the poem as if it were the middle of a larger piece. At this point, the teacher takes her place at the keyboard, and the reader can safely conclude that the poem's narrator is the student when the teacher prepares herself before playing as "She would gaze a moment at her hands / spread over the keys" (line 2).

Lines 3-6:

In concentration and in playing, the piano teacher's house vanishes from her mind, or from another perspective, she escapes her home as it vanishes from her mind. The parts of the house the narrator mentions suggest the teacher's rather insular life focused on family and home.

Lines 6-9:

What takes the place of house and home is sound and then music as the sound begins to become shapely, become an object, an object the student-narrator describes as a "scarp," also known as an "escarpment," a wall of high rocks, a cliff. The musical piece, as scarp, is white to give it the in-substantiality of an imagined thing and give it a positive sense as well. The narrator also points out that this scarp can only be climbed "alone" (line 9), as if listening to a piece of music were like scaling a cliff. The word *scale,* in fact, could have been what connected a musical piece on one hand with the cliff on the other.

Lines 9-10:

The metaphor might now become difficult to follow, for instead of climbing a wall of music to the top, the narrator is leaping over rocks to the top. Perhaps after climbing awhile, the way to the very top became a gentle incline that could have been run or walked? Whatever the case, the narrator arrives at the top transformed, and waits as if she had reached the destination before her teacher, and as if she must now wait for her teacher to catch up. It is possible that the student has realized, before the musical piece ends, where it is going and how it will get there. The student has learned something about music by listening as well as by playing.

Lines 11-12:

The teacher, in these lines, is losing herself to the music, becoming, as they say, wild and abandoned, quite a different thing than what most people think of when they think "piano teacher," an image that may conjure up something like "librarian." The loosening of the hair is the loosening of bonds in general.

Lines 13-16:

But if the student is waiting for the piano teacher to meet her, the teacher seems to have forgotten her student, perhaps has even forgotten herself in her playing. Both teacher and student appear to have transcended their circumstances in different ways (playing and listening) but by experiencing the same piece of music. A difference between them, however, remains: while the teacher has figuratively transcended "the duties of flesh and home" and even danger and death, the student apparently has not, for she notices□in the metronome□time moving relentlessly toward death. The music that had become the pinnacle of living (adventure and challenge) now becomes a reminder of death, which the student connects with the metronome that describes an arc like the scythe of Time, or a pendulum connected to a morbid clock just beneath the music.

Themes

Creativity and Imagination

Several layers of creativity and imagination are at work in "Music Lessons": the composer having created a musical composition out of his/her imagination; the pianist recreating the score in her imagination and on the keyboard; and the listener processing the music in her imagination to create a poem that readers imagine, and may one day play a part in reimagining and creating a further object of attention. The playing of a piece of music inspires in the student an image of rockclimbing, and the metronome provokes her to imagine death. Other things inspire their opposite in a kind of counterpoint: inside inspires imaginings of outside, relative inactivity of the lower torso inspires imaginings of intense physical activity of the same area, culture (music) inspires an image in nature, constant motion of the metronome inspires the stillness of death. And this is just the point of the poem: that the playing of music allows one to transcend one's circumstances, to flee to, in many cases, to what seems farthest, most opposite. The imagination is under no commandment to compromise its desire, can travel as far as it wants to get what it needs to soothe lived experience. The teacher uses the piano, a time machine, to do her travelling, to leave her domestic circumstances and duties, even leave the confines of her own body so she can escape death. But while the teacher is able to escape her circumstances, empty out her existence in a kind of heavenly death that is the furthest state away from morbidity, the student cannot forget (that incessant metronome!) what music is: a stalling, a delay, a detour along the way to a death whose time it tries to delay with imagination and creativity.

Time

A metronome is a time machine, a serious time machine unlike the more playful time machine, the piano. A metronome can be adjusted to go faster or slower; it cannot be played; it either works or it does not. While the piano transports teacher and student to another place and another time□a time devoid of responsibility and duty, a time devoid of time□the metronome brings the student back to the teacher's insular home, to a reminder of time passing (already indicated with family photos and knickknacks), of time, like a shadow at the end of day, lengthening behind and shortening ahead. The metronome is a pendulum without a clock. A clock can be a kind of taskmaster keeping one from thinking of death because of its marking of appointments and opportunities. The metronome, however, is a more severe taskmaster than the clock, for no matter how one tries to play with or around the time of the metronome one inevitably returns to it, the mind numbing, tick-tocking of time passing. In a musical piece played on the piano one knows or can find out where one is either in the piece or on the piano. But with the metronome one might as well be here as there. Finally, while piano and composition allow one to know where one is, the effect can be a feeling of timelessness in the best sense of the word: time without concern. But the metronome produces no

sense of timelessness, only incessant and eternal monotony, marking time without reason, here (tick) and there (tock) as different places without difference.

Death

Both piano and metronome mark time but only the piano yields timelessness: the piano produces the timelessness of a pleasurable, transcendent state of death while the metronome produces never-ending time in a miserable and mired state of hellish death. This may be the reason for Oliver's, or if you must, the student's association of the metronome with death, and the piano with vigorous activity allowing one to forget time. The metronome is a kind of upside down or standing pendulum, a pendulum that might remind one of Poe's story "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), where the pendulum is fitted with a blade like Oliver's "knife at the throat." Or the metronome might remind one of a pendulum inverted so as to give primacy to the constant beating of time. The metronome, then, is both a symbol of terror and eternal boredom. But one might conclude□as does Oliver□that the metronome is as necessary an evil for the joys of music-making as death is necessary to produce and maintain life. Music reminds us of time, time reminds us of life and death, and life and death provoke many of us to seek transcendence from time through a medium such as music□ founded, paradoxically, on time. If the paradox works, it is because people usually find in music a greater amount of life than death.

Style

"Music Lessons" is a free verse poem, that is a poem without rhyme (except the last two lines whose rhyming promotes finality) and without regular meter. But the poem does have a kind of 4/4 time□a common time signature in music□since it has four stanzas of four lines (quatrains). The poem makes occasional use of enjambment as in lines 6-7 and 7-8, but why? As Mary Oliver writes in *A Poetry Handbook:* (1994) "We leap with more energy over a ditch than over no ditch." But an additional reason is that Oliver's enjambed lines make "Music Lessons" consistent, since no line, except the last, ends in the full stop of a period. Such a technique keeps the reader moving, even over gaps (the ends of lines), somewhat like music, an art-form that does not allow the listener to speed or slow the pace. Or for that matter, like film or dance which move at their own speed over gaps or pauses and must be followed or lost. Unlike the usual experience of reading (or of viewing fine art) where one has some choice in pacing, "Music Lessons" might be attempting the character of the more "coercive" arts (film, music, dance) by making us leap whether we are ready or not. In this way, "Music Lessons" is more like a poem being read to us, turning it into a "coercive" experience like heard music and watched film, rather than the less coercive experience of reading it ourselves.

"Music Lessons" is heavy with sibilants, the sound perhaps evolving out of the writing of the poem and then developed further to help keep the poem a unified whole. If there is another reason why whispering, buzzing, and hissing sibilants, say, instead of liquids, were employed it might be their connection to vibration, especially the vibration of the strings in the piano. Once in a while, the poem also employs assonance, as in "rock over rock to the top" or "neat green," which seem little more than pleasurable sound symmetries to keep one interested in reading.

To illuminate the free verse aspects of "Music Lessons," it seems best to quote Oliver on free verse. The following passages are taken from her work of criticism, *A Poetry Handbook:* "The free-verse poem sets up, in terms of sound and line, a premise or an expectation, and then, before the poem finishes, it makes a good response to this premise. This is the poem's design. What it sets up in the beginning it sings back to, all the way, attaining *a felt* integrity." This, by the way, is often a characteristic of metrical verse, as well. But what is far less characteristic of metered verse is Oliver's statement about the tone of a free-verse poem. This has to do with poetry changing, in modern times, from metered to free verse because of the onset of printing which produced a trend away from hearing a poem read in performance to reading a poem oneself, alone. In reading poetry alone, Oliver says, "What was needed was a line which, when read, would feel as spontaneous, as true to the moment, as talk in the street, or talk between friends in one's own house.... Speech entered the poem. The poem was no longer a lecture, it was time spent with a friend. Its music was the music of conversation."

Free verse's more conversational feel then, might be said to fill the gap left by the increasing individuation, privacy, and loneliness of lived life, including the loneliness always threatening reading (and writing).

Historical Context

From the Kent State shootings (1970), to the Watergate scandal (1972-74), to the end of the Vietnam War (1965-73), to the Three Mile Island disaster (1979) and the Iran hostage crisis (1979), the dominant key of seventies America can be characterized as skepticism□about the rightness of U.S. expansionism on the one hand, and about possibilities for substantive change in U.S. domestic affairs on the other. Both instances of scepticism point to the decade's overall disenchantment with big government, a feeling which, by the nineties, would split into a left-winged critique of big corporations thought to control big government with big money, and a right-winged reaction against big government (controlled by international elements?) thought to infringe on the rights of individual American citizens. The American seventies, from other perspectives, however, wore an expression hard to read because it was in transition; from this perspective, the seventies was less a decade with its own cultural countenance than one with a slowly changing expression: from an extrovert sixties□angry and anguished□to an introvert eighties□withdrawn and self-centered. Some historians, unwilling to give the 1970s its due, demarcate 1965-75 as "the sixties," even call the seventies the "five-year decade."

The most obvious blow to common political assumptions in the seventies was the defeat (in terms of traditional twentieth-century warfare) of the United States in the Vietnam War, a defeat covered up by the Nixon administration with a 1973 "peace treaty." The war forced Americans to begin to question two basic assumptions about their place vis a vis the world. The first□in place since at least the 1840s□assumed that the United States possessed the world's best form of government. The second held that American corporate capitalism was the best method of economic organization and should control a world still full of inefficiency. By the seventies, Nixon knew that the strategy of communist containment, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War was overextending U.S. resources, crippling U.S. competitiveness with nonmilitary nations like Japan and Germany, and turning the domestic sphere into a war zone with police and national guard on one side, anti-war protesters on the other. The war forced the American coalition of big business and big government to abandon grand designs for a world economy and re-concentrate itself on maintaining competitiveness in an increasingly competitive world□that is, if it wanted to remain stable and prosperous at home. The seventies was a decade of self-centered-ness (the "me decade" was a term coined by author Tom Wolfe in 1976). The characterization was a response to magazines, paperbacks, pop music, television, and movies filled with discussions of human sensitivity and feelings. Looking good, feeling right, and eating healthy became ritualistic preoccupations of increasing numbers of people.

Folksingers moved from protest songs to confessional ballads. The psychologist Heinz Kohut made the narcissistic personality the focus of his clinical study; John Ashbery published his Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry collection *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror;* cultural critics such as Christopher Lasch and Daniel Bell weighed in against narcissism in culture; even artists such as Vito Acconci's manipulation of his skin, and Lucas Samaras's resourceful Polaroid serf-portraiture gave expression to the period's self-

obsession. But running counter to the skepticism and self-centeredness of the seventies was an inconsistency: the environmental movement was picking up strength (even to the point that some think that twentieth-century envi-ronmentalism began with the first Earth Day in 1970, rather than 1962, the year Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published). While it can be convincingly argued that Americans never escaped the me decade with regard to the environment-damaged nature still being understood primarily as an entity *for us,* as either a spectacle for human entertainment, or threat to human health, Americans did become apprised of at least some of the damage being done to plants, animals, land, and of course, themselves, from Love Canal to Three Mile Island to numerous publicized oil spills, including the largest ever near Trinidad and Tobago (97 million gallons). The American public's political and social response was tremendous: Earthfirst!, Greenpeace, Worldwatch, The Cousteau Society, League of Conservation Voters, National Resources Defense Council, and Ralph Nader's PIRGs (Public Interest Research Groups) were established. Even the federal government wanted to show its concern by establishing the Environmental Protection Agency (1970), passing the Endangered Species Act (1973), and passing emendations to strengthen the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts (1977). But though the song of the environmental seventies was played with passion and conviction, Americans continued to adhere to life-as-usual, never escaping me-ness, arguably the most lasting legacy of the seventies and before.

Critical Overview

Robert DeMott writes that Oliver, along with Theodore Roethke and Galway Kinnell, is "sensitive to visitations by the 'dark things' of the wood." Two characteristics emerge here: that Oliver is a poet of death and of nature. But Diane Wakoski notices that "If Oliver writes of 'dark things,' they are friendly, benevolent dark things. Even her vision of death is gentle, pastoral and haunting, rather than fearful or violent." Perhaps Wakoski forgot the "knife at the throat" in "Music Lessons."

As to nature, the ambitious collection of fifty-one poems entitled *Twelve Moons* (1979), from which "Music Lessons" comes, primarily concentrates on the imagery and cycles of nature, including twelve poems dedicated to different lunar phases. Oliver celebrates the natural cycles of birth, decay, and death as flourishing in all life. In the poetic landscape of Oliver's mythic worlds, starry realms are connected to the realms of flora and fauna, including humans. The poet invites the reader to become engulfed in the natural world, become connected to all things, all creatures. "Music Lessons" generally fits this description since the teacher escapes the world of domestic culture and the student immerses herself in climbing the scarp. But it is through music that such an immersion is made. "Music Lessons" is therefore less a nature poem of connection than a culture poem of connection. In "Music Lessons" music links player and listener to human movement, the outside, to life, to death. Jean B. Alford writes that "To Oliver, man's inward struggles to be immortal through art, work, or love do not cancel mortal existence but rather create a fleeting sense of stay. In 'Music Lessons,' when the teacher takes over the piano, 'sound becomes music' that flees 'all tedious bonds: / supper, the duties of flesh and home, / the knife at the throat, the death in the metronome.' The grand finale, though, is only a momentary transformation." In Alford's eyes, though the music in "Music Lessons" fills the pupil with images of life lived at the frontiers, in the end, she is brought back to its connection with the ultimate unknown and unexplored frontier: death. Here, it might only be added that while the piano catapults the student into life, when it stops, the ticktock of death in the metronome is all that is audible. In a way, "Music Lessons" is the ultimate unsentimental culture poem, for while it romanticizes music, and in so doing culture, the poem also exposes culture's underbelly□the pulse□which in one direction indicates life, while in the other it points to death. This is only to say that culture emerged but never escaped from nature.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Alice Van Wart teaches literature and writing in the Department of Continuing Education at the University ofToronto. She has published two books of poetry and has written articles on modern and contemporary literature. In the following essay, Van Wart analyzes the relationship between the teacher and student in "Music Lessons" while elaborating on Oliver's exploration into human nature (and nature) and the fleeting transcendence of life's tedious experiences inspired by the medium of music (or culture) and its playing.

Mary Oliver caught the attention of the public with her third collection of poetry, *American Primitive,* for which she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1984. The poems in this collection pulse with the drama of human life and nature, and with wit, love, yearning and grief, qualities that define Oliver's poetry. Writing on a wide range of subjects in both free verse and in the traditional discipline of rhyme and meter, her poems are immediately accessible and flawless in their craft.

Oliver's poetry provides an intimate exploration of nature and human relationships. She sees in life an ancient need for union both with the natural world and other people. Profoundly aware of nature's unaffected beauty, she never sentimentalizes it and though well aware of the dark side of life she never loses sight of the rich physical landscape we inhabit□its beauty, its terror, and its persistent promise of renewal. Oliver's poems illuminate by revealing to us anew the world we live in, but often do not see or feel.

There is a persistent spiritual quality in her work that is neither pantheist nor transcendental in nature, but a result of the poet's sense of the vital force that animates life. "Music Lessons," published in *Contemporary American Poetry* (edited by A. Polin Jr., Houghton Mifflin, 1985) and never collected into a book reveals the poet's awareness of her need to be close to the intense vital forces of life. In this economical poem of four quatrains using image, enjambment, contrast, and opposition, Oliver interweaves subject and technique to reveal the poet's unconscious fear of losing her own intense, passionate engagement with life.

At the center of the poem is the relationship between the student and the teacher. The portrait the poet creates of her music teacher is based on what she thought were the opposing, antithetical qualities she saw in her teacher when she was a music student. In the first part of the poem the poet presents her teacher as someone who lives in a "small house" full of "knickknacks" with her sons and "serious husband," giving an impression of a prim and serious woman. The images convey a sense of stiffness and stuffiness. On the few occasions when the student and teacher "sometimes" exchanged places "in the middle of a lesson," and the teacher played for the student, the poet became aware of another side of her teacher.

The second part of the poem shows the poet's picture of the teacher as she played on, forgetting her student, and her stiff role as a teacher fell away, as does her "pinned hair."

She forgets "the house, the neat green yard;" her eyes became "luminous and willful." The student sees her teacher transformed by the passion she feels in her playing for the music, what the poet calls "that lick of flame."

As a student the poet saw her as escaping "the knife at the throat, the death in the metronome." Contained in the structure of the poem, however, is not just the sense of the teacher being surveyed by the student, but also the poet's unconscious response to her teacher and her music lessons.

This is not a usual music lesson as the poet makes clear by their exchanged position. Usually it was the poet, who as a student "would gaze a moment at her hands / spread over the keys" and look about the room before beginning to play. Now it is the teacher who looks about "the small house with its knickknacks" and "its shut windows." The shortened final line of the first stanza draws attention to the "shut windows," suggesting a tight, closed atmosphere that is airless and stuffy. The enjambment between the first and second stanza shows the poet's recollection of her response to the room, as well as her perceptions of her teacher's life. It is clear, however, that the responses are not those of the teacher but of the student. Before beginning her lesson, it is the student who noticed the "photographs of her sons and the serious husband."

The continuation of the first line of the second quatrain into the second line shows the poet's response to her teacher when the teacher begins to play. The knickknacks, the shut windows, and the photographs suddenly "vanished," and in their place "new shapes formed." By placing the active verb "vanished" at the beginning of the second line, the poet reinforces the sudden shift in focus from the teacher to the poet as the student.

When the teacher begins her playing the trivial, domestic details of the teacher's life that have been bothering the student disappear. Her focus changes from the details of her teacher's life to the sound of the music. Her previous thoughts vanish as "new shapes formed. / Sound" and as "Sound / became music." Clearly it is the student, not the teacher, who saw "new shapes formed." By ending the second line with "sound" and using an en-jambment between the second and third line, the focus turns into the interior consciousness of the student.

As she listens to her teacher's playing, the student's mind takes off in a flight of fancy. The music becomes "a white / Scarp for the listener to climb." Initially the image of the "white scarp" seems an unlikely one to describe the student's response, but in the context of the second stanza, with its suggestion of rugged, fractured cliffs, the image is apt. It perfectly reveals the student's inner consciousness as she imagined herself leaping, "Alone ... rock over rock to the top."

The enjambment connecting the last line of the second stanza with the first line of the third creates a complex interplay of meanings. The shift in the poem is into the subjective consciousness of the student as she imagines herself leaping rock over rock. Both the student and teacher seem momentarily alone, isolated by the music from the world around them. The image the student has of herself leaping freely over the rocks

stands in direct contrast to what she feels about the small airless room full of knickknacks and photographs, where she feels stifled.

As the energy of the music pushes her in her thoughts and she reaches the rock's pinnacle, she realized her teacher is still playing on, so she waits "transformed." The syntax of the lines in the third stanza not only connects the exterior and interior focus, but also shows an identification on the part of the student with the teacher; they are, in fact, both "transformed." The music has carried the student out of the small, airless room into a place in her imagination where she feels free of the constraints put on her by her music lesson. The teacher is lost in her playing.

In the third line of the stanza the focus returns to the student's perceptions of the teacher as the student waits for her to finish playing. She noticed her eyes are "luminous and willful / her pinned hair falling down." The poet's description of the teacher's eyes as "luminous and willful" reinforces the poem's interplay between external and internal focus and suggests further it is the poet's own sense of herself she saw. At the sight of her teacher's "pinned hair falling down," completely engaged in her playing, the student imagines her teacher "forgetting me, the house, [and] the neat green yard."

The student's perceptions are again purely subjective, based on what she feels. She sees in her teacher's passionate playing an escape from "all tedious bonds; / supper, the duties of flesh and home." The use of the verb "fled" and the syntax of the second line, however, show it is the student who imagines fleeing the stifling room and "all tedious bonds" in "that lick of flame." The student has projected onto her teacher her own fears of the "tedious bonds" and the "duties of flesh and home."

In her choice of diction the poet reveals the unconscious fear she had as a student. She feared becoming like her teacher, living in a small house full of knickknacks, and teaching music in a room with shut windows. The enjambment in the poem between the last two lines of the final quatrain with its rhyming couplet underlines the student's unconscious fear, as "the tedious bonds" and "the duties of flesh and home" become "the knife at the throat, the death in the metronome."

The image of the "knife at the throat" is particularly poignant, suggesting the poet's unconscious awareness at the time that she would have to make a choice in her own life, perhaps between the artistic and the domestic life. The metaphoric linking of the metronome, and its use for beating out time, with death suggests the poet's awareness even as a young student of the eternal ticking of time. For the poet it was symbolic of the incessant repetition of the music lessons as she sat in the airless room. For the poet the music lessons and her teacher's life represented a form of death.

Though the focus on the poem appears to be on the music teacher and the different sides of her nature. In fact, the teacher represents what the student believes she does not want to become. The brief identification between the student and her teacher points to what the student believed the teacher had lost to domestic life. In the poet's

recollection of her teacher and her music lessons she reveals more about her own feelings at the time than about her music lessons.

Source: Alice Van Wart, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Topics for Further Study

Imagine the metronome as a symbol of life and the piano as an object of death. Write a small essay on how these objects might be so configured. For help, see the Themes section where the opposite is argued.

Do research on the word *scale,* on its derivations and meanings and how those meanings might be related and how understanding the word might help in a discussion of this poem.

Attempt to tie "Music Lessons" to the history of the 1970s supplied above, or to your own research or knowledge of the seventies. While this might seem futile in illuminating Oliver's (timeless and time filled) poem, it can be done and might be further effectual for tying other objects and events to their times.

Compare and Contrast

1979: A new study linked lead in children's blood, even at low levels, with lower intelligence scores. A ban on lead-containing paint in 1980, and successively lower maximum acceptable lead blood levels followed. Lead had been banned in Europe in the 1950s.

June, 1999: Several cities across the U.S. sue companies for using lead in house paint. Hiring lawyers fresh from state victories over big tobacco companies, cities claim that the paint companies were well aware of lead's dangers.

1979: Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlevi fled Iran on January 16, appointing Shahpur Bakhtiar prime minister of a new democratic government. But Ayatollah Rhuollah Khomeini returned to Iran on February 1 and quickly took power. Iran took 66 American hostages at the Tehran embassy on November 7 and held 52 of them for 444 days, winning several concessions from the U.S. and greatly harming American prestige and the Carter presidency.

June, 1999: Tens of thousands of Iranians crowd the mausoleum of the former Ayatollah to commemorate the tenth anniversary of his death.

1979: At the Three Mile Island nuclear plant near Middletown, Pennsylvania, a partial core meltdown occurs on March 28 after equipment failures and human errors caused overheating of the reactor. A major containment-breaching explosion like what happened at Chernobyl in 1986 was averted. The state ordered the evacuation of pregnant women and children nearby. After this event no new U.S. orders for nuclear plants were placed, and those ordered after 1973 were canceled.

1999: A leading U.S. scientific organization produces new findings supporting the suitability of Nevada'sYucca Mountain nuclear site for the long-term storage of spent nuclear fuel. The reason for the news is that water is not expected□based on research into the geologic past of the site□to seep into the area.

1979: Charles Mingus (b. 1922), a leading jazz composer, bandleader, and bassist, is found dead.

1999: New Jersey mother, wife, and composer Melinda Wagner receives the Pulitzer Prize for music.

What Do I Read Next?

Aesthetic Theory (1970), by Theodor Adorno is a philosophical treatise by the most important thinker of theFrankfurt School. Adorno was a musician and composer as well as one the twentieth century's greatest theoreticians. A great deal in this volume addresses the meanings of music.

Critical Theory and Performance, edited by Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach is an anthology of essays about performance under the rubrics of cultural studies, semiotics and decon-struction, post-Marxism, feminism, theater history, psychoanalysis, and philosophy.

An Equal Music by Vikram Seth is a wonderful novel about a string quartet and the experience of music. Seth is also a poet.

Godel Escher Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid by Douglas R. Hofstadter (1979) is a consistently engaging and challenging meditation on puzzles and paradoxes of logic, mathematics, physics, music, art, and philosophy, presented in a series of essays and dialogues. The book won the 1979 Pulitzer Prize.

Further Study

Runciman, Lex, "Knocking on Nature's Door: Religious Meaning in Twentieth Century U.S. Poetry," *Literature of Nature,* Patrick Murphy, editor, Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998.

This essay has a section devoted to Oliver discussing her notion of nature as "an ever-renewing and endlessly elemental present."

Oliver, Mary *American Primitive,Boston:* Little Brown, 1983.

This collection of Oliver's poems won the Pulitzer Prize and is primarily concerned with pastoral subject matter.

Oliver, Mary, *House of Light,* Boston: Beacon, 1990. This volume contains poems of air and seaside and is dominated by poems about birds.

Oliver, Mary, *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse,* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

While the title of this book is self explanatory, the book also includes a hundred pages of poems that serve as examples. The book is written clearly and simply for those without a background in technical language about metrical verse.

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Graham, Vicki, "Into the Body of Another: Mary Oliver and the Poetics of Becoming Other," *Papers on Language and Literature,* Vol. 30, No. 4, Fall, 1994, pp. 352-72.

Oliver, Mary, *New and Selected Poems,* Boston: Beacon, 1992.

Oliver, Mary, *A Poetry Handbook,* San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, 1994.

Scully, James, ed., *Modern Poetics* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965.

Wakoski, Diane, "Oliver, Mary," in *Contemporary Women Poets,* edited by Pamela L. Shelton, Detroit: St. James, 1998, pp.270-271.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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