New and Selected Poems Study Guide

New and Selected Poems by Mary Oliver

Contents

New Poems (2004 - 2005)

New Poems (2004 - 2005) Summary

Mary Oliver's New and Selected Poems, Volume Two (2005) includes new and previously published works from 1994 through 2005. The volume itself features poems grouped together according to their publishing date, beginning with the newest works first. The first section, "New Poems," is comprised of 42 pieces written between 2004 and 2005. The next two sections feature works from Blue Iris and Why I Wake Early (both from 2004), and consist of five and 18 poems, respectively. The fourth group of poems contains six selections from Owls and Other Fantasies (2003), followed by four poems taken from Winter Hours (1999). Fifteen selections from West Wind (1997) and 21 poems from White Pine (1994) complete the volume.

Mary Oliver is widely known as a poet who addresses human concerns by watching and witnessing what happens in the non-human world around her. However, in this case, the poet's relationship to things in the natural world goes beyond simple observations and colorful descriptions. These poems are all microscopic in terms of attention to detail and rich in that each one offers multiple avenues of interpretation. Oliver's poems are not just about plants and animals but about the way things work in the world for humans and non-humans. In several instances, Oliver uses anthropomorphism (assigning human traits and/or characteristics to inanimate objects or other creatures) as a tool for broadening understanding of human life and human behavior. By using plants and animals as foils, the poet is able to address a broad range of subjects from the importance of living in the moment to getting older.

New Poems (2004 - 2005) Analysis

The 42 poems which appear in the first section, "New Poems (2004 - 2005)," cover a substantial amount of experiential ground and provide the first-time reader with the opportunity to ease into Oliver's work. The language in these pieces is basic and unadorned. There are no obscure references or inside jokes. Each poem stands as a self-contained unit and most of them are quite brief. Structurally, these works as well as the others in this volume offer no formal surprises. That is to say, Oliver does not employ unusual line breaks, pagination, or awkward formatting in these first new selections. Similarly, the titles of Oliver's poems leave the reader with no guesswork.

Section I: "New Poems (2004 - 2005)"

"Everything" (Page 4): Here, the author plays with gravity in terms of word choice. There is weight and lilt in this piece. The poet establishes for the reader how she perceives what she produces and expresses faith in her vision and her art. The main subject of this poem is how to go beyond language in the poetry; how to transcend the intellect while examining one's emotions.

"Work, Sometimes" (Page 6): Sometimes words and living through words alone places the poet outside her authentic self. The conversational tone implies an intimacy between reader and author. The poet identifies a shared human experience: "You have had days like this, no doubt." Observing nature is what prompts the poet to resume a self-referencing posture.

"Mysteries, Four of the Simple Ones" (Page 9): Deals with questions of becoming "who" one is. The events described themselves are commonplace to the subjects but somehow miraculous to the observer. For the poet, choosing the right word is the same as choosing fruit in that it is a "natural" activity. "Pluck from the basket" shows that language in and of itself is not the creation of the poet, but a mélange of vocalized potentialities. Any word can be chosen, but the "ripe" word gives the poem a brisk quality that would effectively laud/celebrate the mysteries that greet us daily.

"The Real Prayers Are Not the Words, but the Attention that Comes First" (Page 15): In this case, the prayer focuses on the vastness available to the hawk. The earth and sky "belong" to this small creature. The way to pray is observing and meditating on what the eye witnesses, not simply seeing or noticing.

"The Measure" (Page 23): The poet examines her role as universal Samaritan. By way of the non-human experience, the narrator is able to see her own position as responsible co-habitant of the world. The "measure" refers to the poet's own life and her ability to think beyond her (human) self.

Sections II through VII

Sections II through VII Summary

There are only five selections in this volume which were chosen from Oliver's Blue Iris, published in 2004. Interestingly, each of these poems has to do with a different flower: bleeding-hearts, touch-me-nots, goldenrod, everlasting and finally sunflowers. The first and fourth poems, "The Bleeding-heart" and "How Would You Live Then?" which appear on pages 61 and 66, respectively, are formatted on the page as prose pieces rather than divided into stanzas like the others in this section. The fifth poem, entitled "On Goldenrod at Field's Edge" is made up of seven stanzas of four short lines each which run diagonally from left to right down the page. The effect creates a cascade of words which move steadily back and forth before the reader's eye.

The remaining five sections comprise sixty-four poems published between 1994 and 2004. It should be noted that all of the poems in this volume's fourth section, "From Owls and Other Fantasies (2003)," have to do with various types of birds. For Oliver, there is something fascinating about these creatures. The miraculous reality of birds' physical forms, their distinct songs, and the manner in which they display a type of mystical "knowing" is more than evident in these selections.

In terms of form, the pieces from West Wind are by far the most adventurous. Most notable in terms of appearance on the page are the numbered poems from the volume of the same name. West Wind, poem 1 contains a line which reads simply, "sooooooooooooooooooooooooo," as descriptive of the sound snowflakes make. These pieces are arranged in prose form and appear to be more like cantos (in other words, parts of a larger work) than separate poems. Also in this section is the volume's longest piece, "Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches" (pages 141 - 144). Because of the irregular arrangement of lines and stanzas, and the inclusion of small visual separators, one could say that this is more a meditation than a poem. Any assertion that this piece does not flow as smoothly on the page is well-supported by the presence of italics and uneven, seemingly random indents that make this selection stand out from the others structurally as well.

Sections II through VII Analysis

Section II: "from Blue Iris (2004)"

"The Bleeding Heart" (Page 61): The speaker fondly remembers her grandmother's love of the cyclical order of things such as the end of winter and the reawakening that comes with the spring. Moreover, this is a contemplative piece which presents the wonder of witnessing natural phenomena through time and their connection to human lives.

"How Would You Live Then?" (Page 66): A series of "What if...?" questions ask the reader to imagine how his/her life would be different if the distance between human

beings and nature was perceived as negligible. This piece admonishes the reader to re-examine the "value" of things in the non-human world which are priceless to those who understand the actual worth of the world surrounding us.

Section III: "from Why I Wake Early (2004)"

"Many Miles" (Page 85): This poem deals with the matter of the body and how each creature's physicality is its own kind of perfection. The poet draws a parallel between human and non-human bodies, identifying them as functional, miraculous, and temporary.

"Mindful" (Page 90): The poet marvels at the simple profundity of "the ordinary, / the common, / the very drab." There is wonder in the smallest, most seemingly insignificant manifestations in Nature. The poet expresses delight in being able to recognize the grandeur of even "the ocean's shine" or "the prayers that are made / out of grass."

"Song of the Builders" (Page 92): The smallest creatures, going about their daily business, contribute as much to the wealth of the Universe as human beings. Even when one is enraptured with lofty thoughts of spiritual matters, there is still power in the simple, reverent observation of one's immediate surroundings.

"Daisies" (Page 93): All the answers to one's questions can be found in a close examination of the natural world. Revelation, like the yellow center of a daisy surrounded by delicate white petals, is often so subtle that it can be overlooked or even over-thought.

"The Soul at Last" (Page 94): A brief meditation recounting the poet's experience of giving a eulogy. The "soul" in this piece is something unidentifiable, diaphanous as "a thousand spider webs / woven together, or a small handful of aspen leaves." What matters is that while the appearance of the individual soul may defy definition or categorization, the fact of its existence is irrefutable.

"The Soul at Last" (Page 94): A brief meditation recounting the poet's experience of giving a eulogy. The "soul" in this piece is something unidentifiable, diaphanous as "a thousand spider webs / woven together, or a small handful of aspen leaves." What matters is that while the appearance of the individual soul may defy definition or categorization, the fact of its existence is irrefutable.

Section IV: "from Owls and Other Fantasies (2003)"

"Spring" (Page 101): For humans, Spring is often seen as a time of courtship and burgeoning love. In this piece, the same is true in the natural world as well. Beautifully descriptive, the narrator observes a pair of flickers; a brightly-colored "dapper" male and the female he chooses as his mate, in their dance of a new season as they celebrate the arrival of a sweet new season.

"While I Am Writing a Poem to Celebrate Summer, the Meadowlark Begins to Sing" (Page 106): A meditation comprised of ten non-rhyming couplets (two-line stanzas). The

speaker/poet offers a prayerful reflection on her years on earth, spent watching and envying God's non-human creatures. The "thrill-song" of the meadowlark is likened to a hymn of thanks and praise which permeates creation with sweet effect.

"Long Afternoon at the Edge of Little Sister Pone" (Page 108): This poem's structure is four non-rhyming quatrains (stanzas of four lines each), followed by two non-rhyming couplets and three more quatrains (also non-rhyming). The piece functions as a reflection on the poet's life and it's quality of alternating between being "hard as flint, / and soft as a spring pond." Simultaneously, the poet gives voice to an ever-present sense of awe when looking into Nature: "Every day I walk out into the world / to be dazzled, then to be reflective." These two themes converge for the poet as she moves into thoughts on the end of life, the end of the cycle which all beings must experience. Interestingly, the poet also acknowledges that while death certainly means the ceasing of one body, death nonetheless entails the transfer of the soul's energy from one state of physical existence to another: "As for death, / I can't wait to be the hummingbird [...]"

Section V: "From Winter Hours (1999)

"Prose Poem 1" (Page 113): The shortest of these three poems, this selection is a mere five lines in length. The overall feeling is one of nostalgia; how people often look back wistfully and how the past always seems brighter, bolder than the present. Here, summer is recalled with a sense of longing for lost possibilities and opportunities unfulfilled: "How hopeful we were on those summer days [...]" There is a hint of sadness in the tone.

"Prose Poem 2" (Page 113): This piece is a vignette; a snapshot of time, using rather impressionistic language which produces a "painterly" quality when read. That is to say, the words Oliver uses here help the reader to form vivid pictures in his/her mind. While the story itself is somewhat simple (a hawk attacks a hummingbird), there is a quality of the profound in the final few lines. In the presence of the ominous hawk, the hummingbird "hunkered [...] God's gorgeous, flashing jewel: afraid." It is not until the end of the piece does the reader learn that "[a]ll narrative is metaphor," and one is left to decipher the meaning of the episode for oneself.

Section VI: "From West Wind (1997)"

"Seven White Butterflies" (Page 121): This poem consists of six non-rhyming quatrains followed by one non-rhyming couplet. The white butterflies in this piece symbolize the intricate yet complex simplicity so often found in Nature. She writes, "who / would have thought it could be so easy?" The second quatrain fairly glows by virtue of Oliver's use of a color spectrum which includes mustard yellow, orange, and gold. There is a richness in this quatrain which contrasts with the fluidity of the language in the rest of the poem. There is a certain light agitation embedded in these stanzas. In the third quatrain, the speaker references (William) Blake and (Walt) Whitman; two poets whose works often examined humankind's relationship with the natural world. The butterflies prove the poet's declaration that "all eternity is in the moment."

"At Round Pond" (Page 123): This piece speaks to the equally insistent quality of life and death. The speaker bids an owl to "make [its] little appearance now" as one would summon a ghost or a spirit from beyond. The owl is simultaneously a symbol of life (in that it is a living creature that does not respond to the whims of others) and death for much the same reason. Death comes at its own pace; one cannot simply wish or request that it manifest in a particular place at a particular time. By the end of the poem, the speaker is also aware of the paradox of the owl. This is evidenced by the statement that under the gaze of the owl's "golden eyes," life and living creatures tremble before accepting their place in the "lush of meaning."

"Forty Years" (Page 128): Again, the speaker/poet struggles on the page with the limitations of language. Structurally, the poem is made up of six non-rhyming quatrains, followed by one non-rhyming couplet. This piece reveals the poet's self-resignation to the necessity of using words to convey her experience of the world surrounding her. While the letters themselves are graceful and possess singular characteristics, like the "soldierly Hs" and Ws with "webbed feet" for instance, the poet's markings on the page still fall far short of the miracles one finds in Nature. Even something as commonplace as "a black ant traveling briskly modestly" holds wonder beyond the effect of words.

"May" (Page 148): This poem (in block paragraph form) is a vignette which tells of the poet's evening encounter with a bold copperhead snake "at last, golden under the street lamp." Her marvel at coming upon the snake is evident when she declares, "I hope to see everything in this world before I die." While the speaker is evidently impressed by the dangerous, formidable snake, the creature exhibits no such mutual regard. The chance meeting leaves the speaker startled yet invigorated: "When the thumb of fear lifts, we are so alive."

"Grass" (Page 156): Time spent regretting and/or reliving the past and past hurts takes the focus off the now, which is the most important time of all. Nature regrets nothing and accepts everything. The reader is reminded that humanity means often living at the mercy of one's emotions, but that it is also possible to take a clue from the non-human realm and simply flow with whatever is happening in one's life at that moment.

Characters

Percy (the dog)

Percy, whose head is "wild and curly" is the poet's new dog who was named for "the beloved poet" Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). Percy is the subject of three separate poems, each of which is devoted to revealing something wise and fairly mystical about the energetic black little dog.

In the first of the three selections, entitled Percy (One), the dog chews up a book which the poet admits was "left unguarded." This event turns out to be less than a tragedy when the reader is told that, luckily, Percy chewed up a book of which there are multiple copies available. The owner interprets Percy"s choice of ubiquitous book as wise and he receives praise, "Oh wisest of little dogs" (pg. 19).

Next, the reader encounters the little black dog in "Percy (Two)," a poem with an overtly political sentiment. The poem opens with, "I have a little dog who likes to nap with me." Following this, the reader is informed of Percy's virtues. He is "sweeter than soap," and "more wonderful than a diamond necklace." The poem continues with the speaker expressing a desire to introduce Percy to people in the world who are suffering, "that the sorrowing thousands might see his laughing mouth." It is apparent that the poet experiences Percy as a being whose presence is soothing, healing, and a great comfort to those with whom he spends time. The final lines of the poem directly criticize former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. The poet voices a desire to "take [Percy] to Washington, right into the Oval office," giving Rumsfeld the opportunity to "crawl out of [President Bush's] armpit." Similar to his effect on the poet herself, Oliver is convinced that frolicking with Percy with a moment would return Rumsfeld to the condition of "a rational man."

Percy makes his final (named) appearance in "Little Dog's Rhapsody in the Night (Percy Three)." Here, the reader is given a glimpse into Percy's ability to "ask for" and receive affection from his owner by rolling over on his back, "his four paws in the air." With what is described as a "fervent" look in his eyes, Percy seems to be saying, "Tell me you love me [...] / Tell me again." The poet finds Percy's request for attention irresistible and the relationship between dog and owner ("Could there be a sweeter arrangement?") is established as something which, in its repetition, fulfills both creatures.

Toadappears in Page 164

The toad symbolizes the innate wisdom of the natural world. In other words, the toad's lack of interaction with the poet shows that he has somehow managed to relate to other creatures outside of language and is none the worse for wear. It is the poet's human arrogance which leads her to believe that the toad is interested in what she has to say. The last line shows that the poet understands the toad's silence by referring to "the

refined anguish of language." These words prove that even the poet knows that in some instances, language is simply not enough.

Likening the toad to the Buddha gives the creature an air of quiet sagacity that goes beyond mere conversation. As such, the reader is left with the impression that if it could speak to the poet, the toad's words would be few, but the message would be profound. His bulging, gold-rimmed eyes seem to be guarding a secret which has nothing to do with spoken language. The toad remains silent and still, patiently giving the poet a chance to say what she needs to say. It is almost as if the toad understands that the words coming out of the poet's mouth, while completely meaningless in his estimation, are nevertheless very important to the woman speaking. The inscrutable toad realizes the speaker's egotism as she talks on and on about herself and her human experience but he still allows her to prattle on. There is more to the "sand-colored" toad than meets the eye.

Sea Mouseappears in Page 167

What distinguishes the sea mouse from the other creatures described in this volume is its pitiable ugliness. The poet uses grotesque phrases like "the soaked mat of what was almost fur" and "toothless, legless, earless too" to describe the unfortunate drowned little victim she finds at the seashore. However, even in its unsightliness, the sea mouse is nonetheless recognized as rather unique and graceful. The animal's ugliness becomes secondary to the poet's affection for its being: "I stroked it, / tenderly, little darling, little dancer [...]" The poet's tender description of the ugly little sea mouse, "all delicate and revolting," elevates its status in the natural world. The reader is encouraged to look beyond the external and realize the juxtaposition which rests in all natural phenomena. There is an element of the sublime in the helpless dead creature. The limitless beauty that lives side-by-side with the cold horror of Nature is one of the great paradoxes of life.

Williamappears in Page 169

Although William is a human child, the poet nevertheless describes him in terms of creatures in the non-human realm: "He comes pecking, like a bird, at my / heart. His eyebrows are like the feathers of a wren." Interestingly enough, this description transports the child from ordinary human-ness to somehow mysterious and otherworldly. With "ears like seashells," William is bound to be someone special when he grows up as the sea denotes depth and ancient wisdom. As might be expected, the poet analogizes herself as well, saying: "I feel myself begin to wilt, like an old flower, weak in the / stem." Thus, the reader learns that the poet's sense of wonderment is not limited to flowers and woodland creatures alone. However, unlike the creatures she encounters on her outings in Nature, the poet admits her weakness for this human child. William's presence reminds Oliver of her vulnerability. She knows that at some point, William will become another entity who needs and wants; who demands and takes.

Similarly, the poet understands that it will be her foolish pleasure to relinquish everything she has simply to ensure his continuity.

Winstonappears in Page 149

Described as "a big dog" of indeterminate breed, the poet comes upon Winston in the moments just before dawn. The scenario of "Beside he Waterfall" entails Winston dragging a young dead fawn ("scarcely larger than a rabbit") out of some foliage and eating it while she watches. There is no malice in Winston's behavior he simply follows what he knows to be a natural directive. Thus, the portrait of the dog painted by Oliver's language is extremely compassionate. The fact that Winston has "kind eyes" automatically mitigates any hostility one might register at the sight of him devouring the "flower-like head" of a fawn. Winston is without pretense; he didn't kill the young animal, but he has taken it upon himself to complete the cycle. Life and death to a dog such as Winston are nothing more than points on a continuum. His recognition of the fawn as dead functions only as a signal that it is acceptable that the fawn be eaten. Winston, and all other creatures, can be forgiven for following a predetermined path.

Billappears in Page 138

Bill is an acquaintance of the poet; someone she sees "only occasionally." This is evident from the poet's gauzy description of the man. There are not many details given about Bill himself, which lets the reader know that Oliver does not know him very well. Her representation of Bill is more like a dotted line drawing than a complete recollection. He owns an antique shop "on the main hot highway to Charlottesville." His wife is deceased and he has a son who seems to stay close-by. The son is beginning to look more like Bill's wife each day. In the back of the antique shop are things which are unfit to sell, like "bits of rusty metal, and odd pieces of china, a cup or a / plate with a fraction of its design still clear [...]" Like the odds and ends at the rear of the shop, Bill himself is something of a lost soul. The piece gives the reader an impression of Bill as a sweet, shy, melancholy kind of person. The way the poet recounts Bill's story about a mockingbird that takes cherries out of a bowl on the front stoop and returns them to the ground under the tree strikes a bittersweet chord. Bill is incomplete in the poet's mind and therefore incomplete in the reader's mind's eye as well.

Benjaminappears in Page 11

Benjamin is another dog who comes under the watchful observance of the poet/speaker. There is no specific physical description of Benjamin given in the poem. Rather, the poet endearingly paints the dog as a creature among other creatures; one who is unaware of the interconnectedness of things in Nature. Oliver writes of Benjamin, "No use to tell him that he and the raccoon are brothers," which implies that even if he could understand his position in the animal world, he would probably remained unconcerned. Here, Benjamin is the predator. He suffers no pangs of conscience in his

desire to catch, and ultimately kill, the raccoon. As is the case with so many of the creatures Oliver writes about, Benjamin is simply being Benjamin. It is this inhabiting of the true essential self which is at odds with Oliver's concern for the raccoon's safety. This preoccupation with the hunter/hunted dichotomy is, the reader learns, a luxury available only to humans.

Miss Violetappears in Page 5

While not a character per se; Miss Violet is nonetheless an exquisite example of anthropomorphism. That is, Oliver attributes human traits and characteristics to an inanimate object; in this case, a flower. As a character, Miss Violet is a lonely lady who dresses to impress. The fact that "[s]he sits / in the mossy weeds and waits / to be noticed" tells the reader that this character thrives on the attention of others. Miss Violet wouldn't put on her "dress the color of sunlight" for her own individual pleasure, but to be admired and loved. Miss Violet could be a middle-aged or older lady who hungers for the affection of someone younger: "She loves especially to be picked by [...] young fingers, entranced by what has happened to the world." As such, Miss Violet becomes a figure who has seen a great deal of life and has perhaps become jaded by her experiences. She is a character who is invigorated by the touch of one more innocent than herself. The reader learns that Miss Violet's search for love is something which happens regularly: "We [...] call it Spring and we have been through it many times." This situates the character as hopeful and sympathetic. Each spring, Miss Violet once again feels excitement about the newness of a season of the heart.

Morningappears in Pages 30, 71, 124, 175

Morning is more than just the beginning of the day. It is emblematic of the fullness and the possibility of life and one's capacity to take it all in. Morning is a time of opportunity to see things clearly before the busyness of the day commences. Morning is a treasured time for Oliver, as she makes her way into a completely new set of observances and small wonders. Besides giving one the chance to watch the world awaken, morning also furnishes quiet time for reflecting on what has passed; days, weeks, months or years, and how time neatly fits into itself every time the sun rises. Morning ushers in life as well as death, and as such, is a mystery unto itself. One morning may appear to be much like another, and yet, each day brings with it the element of surprise. Neither good nor bad, morning means more than watching the moon set or hearing the birds sing after a long night of silence.

Mountain Lionappears in Page 28

Oliver's description of a mountain cat she encounters borders on the fantastic. "She stepped from under a cloud," gives the reader the impression that the cat is mythical and extremely rare. Unlike anything else in Nature, truly magnificent, "[h]er wide face / was a plate of gold [...] her shoulders shook like water [...]"gives the impression that the

poet considers herself fortunate to finally be catching even a small glimpse of the creature. The poet's tone sets the cat before the reader as the Other; a prize specimen or an oddity not often seen by intruders who visit "the last unviolated mountains [...]." The poet seems aware of trespassing on the cat's territory and threatening the animal's feeling of safety. She writes: "When she saw that I saw her, instantly flames leaped in her eyes [...]" As punishment for accidentally sighting the cat, the poet comes to doubt her experience and reassesses the animal as "a lean and perfect mystery that perhaps I didn't see [...]" The poet comes to an understanding that the cat may well be wild but not as free as one would imagine, given the surprising nature of their chance meeting and the cat's reaction to being found in its once-secure habitat.

Objects/Places

Dogs

In several pieces, dogs are represented as creatures whose loyalty is beyond reproach. As with other animals in this volume, dogs are possessed of certain instincts which human beings do not have. Dogs, for Oliver, are completely comfortable with their role as companions, with no need to be the ringleaders among Nature's creations. In addition, dogs are shown to have an innate awareness of their position in the non-human realm in terms of their relationships with other animals. There is nothing "personal" about dogs' interactions with other animals, as they are by nature expected to hunt, to pursue, to flush out smaller creatures.

Love

One of the most important ingredients in a human being's life. Love takes the form of admiration, want, lust, and sometimes remembrance. More than one manifestation of love can be present in a person's experiential landscape at any given time. There is "dog love, water love, little-serpent love, sunburst love, or love for that smallest of birds..." (Page 109). The subject itself is, for Mary Oliver, inexhaustible. Love is observance, love is reverence, love is life.

Birds

For the poet, birds are marvels of creation whose free-wheeling flights remind her of the freedom of the soul when it is in its element. The poet is particularly drawn to owls as harbingers of death and powerful symbols of the blood coursing through the veins — the insistence of life is inherent in the owl. Insistence because there is something indefatigable about the owl and its comings and goings. Also, the owl is strong-willed and somewhat mysterious, both of which can be qualities of life and/or death.

Water

Rivers, lakes and ponds appear many times in this volume of poetry. It is the carrier of ideas, the transporter of thought and experience and memory. There is redemption in water; forgiveness and the fluidity of time rest in the ocean's movements toward and away from the shore. Also, water serves to illuminate, in that it reveals the truth about the creatures it bathes, drowns and commands with its tides.

Aging

Aging is a natural part of the process, certainly. However, where Oliver is concerned this is a concept which bears much careful observance and concentrated attention. To pay attention to the aging of the body, the mind, the universe, is something for which the poet takes personal responsibility. Oliver's grandmother appears in several of the pieces in this volume, which would lead one to surmise that aging is a salient issue in the poet's personal life as well as her literary and artistic life.

The Seasons

Cycles, seasons of change, periods of great transformation. Each season prompts a set of human emotions that correspond to the physical changes evident in Nature. A human life also has seasons: youth, middle-age and old age. By watching the plants and animals in one's immediate surroundings during any particular season, one is able to apply life lessons and work through the seasons of age.

Flowers/Plants

Often used by Mary Oliver as examples of human behavior and/or characteristics, flowers are given an especially privileged place in this volume. From the morning glories who meet death willingly, to "Miss Violet" who serves as a reminder of everyone's desire to be desired, the blooms hold the key to many mysteries for the poet. Daisies are also mentioned several times in Oliver's poetry. Their simplicity and understated grandeur are repeatedly revealed to the reader.

God/Higher Power

The creative force of the universe is the subject of several of Mary Oliver's poems. To Oliver, it is her duty to give thanks and praise to something outside herself (she refers to it as God) for providing the wonder, beauty, and mystery she witnesses in her work. Many of her poems are, in fact, prayers or meditations on what she observes in the natural world and the emotions which are evoked when she goes out into the world to look, to observe, to smell, taste and feel what it means to be alive.

Morning

The beginning of the day is especially important to Oliver and morning is the subject of quite a few of these pieces. To the poet, the start of the day is the start of a new story in Nature. With sunrise comes not only the awakening of the world around her, but the birth of new observation. Each day's beginning brings with it an air of possibility and newness that is only presented to the poet once in the moments following dawn.

Death

In this volume, death is established as more than the end of a creature's life. Death is Nature's way of giving a creature permission to allow its soul to experience other, different ways of existence. There is physical death, but that simply opens a new chapter along the spectrum of "being." Death, in all its forms, is a continuation of life in more than the spiritual sense. Death is necessary in order for the natural world to fulfill it's overriding directive which is decay and dessication which leads directly to awakening and renewal.

Themes

Death as a Continuation of the Natural Order of Things

Several of the poems included in this volume focus on death and decay as necessary components in any life-cycle. Also, in many of the poems, death is portrayed as a purposeful and decidedly impersonal phenomenon, especially in terms of the plant and/or animal world. For example, "Morning Glories" (page 157), tells of beautiful flowers growing "all caught up in the cornstalks," and that regardless of "their finery," the flowers will be cut down when the corn is harvested. In other words, death comes to everything, irrespective of one's readiness or one's real or imagined worth. That the flowers are beautiful is not at issue here. The issue is that while the flowers may have much to offer the observer's eye and while the moment of observation allows the opportunity for recall from memory, this is often all that remains when something or someone dies. Also, in "Morning Glories," the poet demystifies the role of death. Here, death is referred to simply as "the reaper." The poet offers a representation of the reaper as an entity whose actions are cyclical as well. In other words, just as the corn is harvested each year, the reaper experiences its own cycle of repetition. The narrator says, "The reaper's story is the story of endless work." There is a feeling of weariness in this description. It conveys a sense of the mundane, the ordinary, when it comes to the reaper's work. This view of death's function as somewhat commonplace stands in direct opposition to emotion one usually associates with death and the knowing that someone or something is about to die.

This same idea of death as something that comes to every creature is conveyed in "Black Bear in the Orchard" (page 16). The piece recounts an episode which takes place after a bear awakens from hibernation and goes in search of honey. The poem begins with an image of the industrious, orderly bees "in their perfect house, / the workers whirling their wings / to make heat." The bees have worked tirelessly together throughout the winter, simply following an instinctual directive to form the hive and manufacture the honey. The bear is no different. His instinctual directive is to find food after the long winter. In the process of the bear's foraging, many of the bees die "slumped under the bear's breath" or disappear "into the curl of his tongue." Even after doing exactly what was required of them by nature, the bees are killed. Much like the morning glories, the bees possess a brand of uniqueness. Nevertheless, that uniqueness does not forestall the bear in its efforts to find nourishment. Each thing in nature, no matter how magnificent it may seem in its moment, will meet the same necessary end.

The Painful Complexity of Romantic Love

Love is another prevalent theme throughout this volume. The poet alternately addresses romantic love, familial love, love for the natural world and love for God. Two striking examples of the romantic love theme are "West Wind 9" (page 140) and "March" (page

173). Both poems are written from the perspective of a present narrator and both are conversational in tone. Here the narrator functions as the sage who imparts knowledge and experience and the reader takes on the role of the student. While both works seem to have as their focus the rigors of love rather than its virtues, "West Wind 9" conveys a more hard-edged underlying message. For instance, the poem begins, "And what did you think love would be like? / A summer day? [...] / Flowers in every / field, / in every garden, with their soft beaks and / their pastel shoulders?" The speaker admonishes the imaginary listener for mistakenly thinking love would somehow be neat and tidy with no surprises or pitfalls. The reader is told that warm summer days and sweet-smelling flowers blooming everywhere are ideas that belong to the mythology surrounding romantic love. As a warning that these things have nothing to do with the actual experience of loving, the narrator continues, providing more stark images to convey love's actuality.

"On one street after another / the litter ticks in the gutter. / In one room / after another, the lovers meet, quarrel, sicken, / break apart, cry out." This, the reader is informed, is what romantic love is really like. Love is a process whereby couples spend countless moments coming together with varying levels of success followed by periods of falling away from one another. In certain instances, love will even drive some individuals to take their own lives. The result of loving constantly, if inconsistently, is a feeling of defeat for both parties. The narrator continues, "Most simply lean, exhausted, their / thin arms on the sill. / They have done all that / they could." In other words, the narrator paints a picture of love as an independent entity, something that "behaves" in whichever way it chooses, without respect to those who call themselves lovers. The closing lines of "West Wind 9" are especially thought-provoking. In effect, the narrator likens love to something majestic and grand, in this case, a golden eagle. The narrator states, however, that the golden eagle "has a thousand tiny feathers / flowing from the back of its head, each one / shaped like an infinitely small but perfect spear." The reader is reminded that love, like those things which are grand and impressive from far away, can be treacherous when closely examined.

The Process of Growing Older

The poet approaches the prospect of aging with a reverence akin to that found in her observations of the natural world. In "While I Am Writing a Poem to Celebrate Summer..." a prayerful, grateful mood is established. The first line says, "Sixty-seven years, Oh Lord, to look at the clouds, / the trees in deep moist summer, / daisies and morning glories / opening every morning / their small, ecstatic faces—." It is apparent to the reader that even upon turning sixty-seven, there is still a sense of amazement in the poet's work, still a depth of emotion that has remained fresh through the years. For Oliver, the process of getting older also brings with it a certain strengthening of one's powers of concentration and discernment. In other words, the poet observes that at such a late stage in life, it is a given that older does indeed mean wiser.

In "The Cricket and the Rose" (page 55), the poet asserts that "the cricket's song / is surely a prayer, / and a prayer, when it is given, / is given forever." The reader is given

an assurance that the poet is absolutely sure of this truth, as the speaker expresses this certainty as a product of advancing years: "This is a truth / I'm sure of, / for I'm older than I used to be, / and therefore I understand things / nobody would think of / who's young and in a hurry." With age also comes the ability to not only appreciate, but relish a slower pace. For instance, in "Patience" (page 46) the poet says that much of her younger life was spent rushing from one place to another, but that the passage of time and specifically its effect on the body, has resulted in an expansiveness of spirit. "Patience," the poem reads, "comes to the bones / before it takes root in the heart / as another good idea." These lines let the reader know that slowing down is often a choice the body makes independently of the mind and that the most effective way to deal with such a change is to simply go with it.

Whereas in most of the selections devoted to aging do so from the perspective of a speaker who is in possession of all faculties, the poet does briefly deal with the subject of dementia or senility. Oliver's grandmother is the subject of the poem "In Praise of Craziness, of a Certain Kind" (page 45). In it, the reader learns that the poet's grandmother has "ownership of half her mind— / the other half having flown back to Bohemia—." The older woman arranges newspapers on the porch to give the ants shelter and warmth. While acknowledging the strangeness of her grandmother's behavior, the poet nevertheless chooses to take a rather wistful view of her grandmother's senility. According to the poem, "being so struck by the lightning of years" can cause internal changes which lead a person to being more compassionate, more loving, than before.

Style

Point of View

The majority of the poems in this volume are written from the first person perspective. In select pieces, an omniscient narrator voice is used. When the omniscient narrator voice is employed, the tone is observational. That is to say, the narrator recounts a scene and then addresses the reader with thoughts, opinions or questions related to the subject of the poem. One example of this type of observational narrator is "Rumor of Moose in the Long Twilight of New Hampshire" (pg. 165). In this selection, the narrator acts as a news reporter of sorts, telling the reader about a moose that had been sighted by someone in the author's neighborhood. The reader is coaxed into forming a picture in the mind's eye by the way the poet describes the moose's wanderings. There are other poems which also utilize the omniscient narrator voice which manage to maintain a distance between the reader and the speaker. That is to say, the narrator addresses the reader from a subject position that seems unconcerned with the reader's reaction such as in "Fireflies" (page 50). At times, the poet addresses the reader directly, as though there were an exchange happening. "You" is used often, giving the reader a feeling of inclusion. This device of including the reader in the poem leads one to invest in the process of close reading more fully than in other types of poetry in which the reader is kept at a distance by the language being used. It is also important to note that since Oliver is a nature writer, a writer whose poetry concerns itself with the workings of the natural world, an invested reader will be more likely to understand and perhaps adopt the poet's appreciation for the subject matter.

Setting

Since nearly all of these poems address what occurs in the world of plants and animals, the settings used often pertain to a time of day, a particular month, or a specific season. For example, poems entitled "March" and "August" appear in the section "From White Pine (1994)" and selections called "Song for Autumn" and "Children, It's Spring" are included in "New Poems (2004 - 2005)." In addition, there are several poems whose titles give the reader a specific geographical location such as "Truro, the Blueberry Fields," or "Mountain Lion on East Hill Road, Austerlitz, N.Y." found on pages 24 and 28, respectively. By providing the reader with an exact location, the author grounds herself in time and space. The locations mentioned in Oliver's poems, Including "In Pobiddy, Georgia," and "Long Afternoon at the Edge of Little Sister Pond" as well as poems whose titles include New Hampshire and Indiana, all work to give the reader a sense that the poet deals with things one could locate on a map. This lends credence to the poets thoughts and experiences in these various places. Also, if the reader has visited any of the locations mentioned in this volume, it stands as a point of connection between reader and author. In addition, using specific place names allows the reader to travel to these places as well, and in a sense, follow the poet's path of discovery.

Language and Meaning

Mary Oliver's language throughout this volume of poetry is simple and straightforward. The words used are purposefully and perhaps deceptively accessible. The tone of each of the selections is conversational and flows easily. More so than in a novel or another work of non-fiction, the success of a poem hinges on the words chosen and their arrangement on the page. In Mary Oliver's case, language in this volume is used to describe sights, sounds, and happenings in the world of plants and animals and is therefore intentionally evocative. In other words, the language used here is supposed to make the reader see and feel something. In terms of the poetry itself, very little is left to chance. This means that there is a simplicity to the way words are put together in sentences and stanzas. The author makes simple statements so that the reader can engage the material more effectively. Oliver uses plain language without being perceived as condescending to the reader. The words are plain, the things the words describe and tell are not.

Structure

This volume of poetry is divided into seven sections. Each section name tells which prior work the poems were taken from, the only exception being "New Poems (2004 - 2005)." The sections themselves have no set length. For example, the author has chosen to include only five poems from "Blue Iris (2004)," while eighteen works have been included from "Why I Wake Early (2004)." In terms of the layout on the page of specific poems, most of the works included here are divided into stanzas with line breaks inserted as the poet sees fit. However, there are a number of selections which are formatted in block paragraphs. These selections are conversational in their tone and are more reflective of the poet's inner monologue. These poems are also more meditative in terms of subject, requiring the reader to ponder what is being said. One example of a poem in block paragraph style is "The Real Poems are Not the Words, but the Attention that Comes First" (page 15). Also, the "West Wind" poems (1 -3, and 7 - 9, inclusive) are formatted in prose style and as such, function as layers of experience rather than as stand-alone pieces. It can also be said that the prose style selections read more like letters or journal entries than poems as such.

Quotes

"I want to make poems / that look into the earth and the heavens / and see the unseeable. I want them to honor / both the heart of faith, and the light of the world; / the gladness that says, without any words, everything" ("Everything," page 4).

"[I]f the heart has devoted itself to love, there is / not a single inch of emptiness. Gladness gleams / all the way to the grave" ("Honey Locust," page 18).

"What I know / I could put into a pack / as if it were bread and cheese, and carry it / on one shoulder, / important and honorable, but so small!" ("What Is There Beyond Knowing," page 20).

"Oh, sometimes already my body has felt like the body of a flower! / Sometimes already my heart is a red parrot, perched / among strange, dark trees, flapping and screaming" ("Reckless Poem," page 40).

"[A] little while and then this body / will be stone; then / it will be water; then / it will be air" ("What the Body Says," page 49).

"What we must do, / I suppose, is to hope the world / keeps its balance; / what we are to do, however, / with out hearts / waiting and watching — truly / I do not know" ("The Owl Who Comes," page 52).

"I tell you this / to break your heart, / by which I mean only / that it break open and never close again / to the rest of the world" ("Lead," page 54).

"Can one be passionate about the just, the / ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit / to no labor in its cause? I don't think so." ("What I Have Learned So Far," page 57).

"Be ignited or be gone" ("What I Have Learned So Far," page 57).

"If you can sing, do it. If not, / even silence can feel, to the world, like happiness, / like praise, / from the pool of shade you have found beside the everlasting" ("Just Lying on the Grass at Blackwater," page 64).

"What if you suddenly saw / that the sunflowers, turning toward the sun all day / and every day — who knows how, but they do it — were / more precious, more meaningful than gold?" ("How Would You Live Then?" page 66).

"Understand, I am always trying to figure out / what the soul is, / and where hidden, / and what shape" ("Bone," page 72).

"I know what you think: this is fool- / ishness. They're only vegetables. / Even the blossoms with which they / begin are small and pale, hardly sig- / nificant. Our hands, or

minds, our / feet hold more intelligence. With / this I have no quarrel. / But, what about virtue?" ("Beans," page 76).

"The geese / flew on. / I have never / seen them again. / Maybe I will, someday, somewhere. / Maybe I won't. / It doesn't matter. / What matters / is that, when I saw them, / I saw them / as through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly" ("Snow Geese," page 82).

"Oh, good scholar, / I say to myself, / how can you help / but grow wise / with such teachings / as these— / the untrimmable light / of the world, / the ocean's shine, / the prayers that are made / out of grass?" ("Mindful," page 90).

"Every day I walk out into the world / to be dazzled, then to be reflective" ("Long Afternoon at the Edge of Little Sister Pond," page 103).

"Maybe the idea of the world as flat isn't a tribal memory / or an archetypal memory, but something far older — a / fox memory, a worm memory, a moss memory" ("Moss," page 115).

"What can we do / but keep on breathing in and out, / modest and willing, and in our places?" ("Stars," page 126).

"What misery to be afraid of death. / What wretchedness, to believe only in what can happen" ("I Looked Up," page 174).

"And now, I have finished my walk. And I am just standing,/quietly, in the darkness, under the tree" ("White Pine," page 175).

"I think serenity is not something you just find in the world, / like a plum tree, holding up its white petals" ("Yes! No!" page151).

"After excitement, we are so restful. When the thumb of fear / lifts, we are so alive" ("May," page 148).

"Only last week I went out among the thorns and said / to the wild roses: / deny me not, / but suffer my devotion" ("Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches," page 141).

"There is life without love. It is not worth a bent / penny, or a scuffed shoe. It is not worth the body of a dead dog nine days unburied" ("West Wind 2," page 136).

"And, therefore, let the immeasurable come. / Let the unknowable touch the buckle of my spine. / Let the wind turn in the trees, / and the mystery hidden in dirt swing through the air. / How could I look at anything in this world / and tremble, and grip my hands over my heart? / What should I fear?" ("Little Summer Poem Touching the Subject of Faith," page 130).

Topics for Discussion

Using "Children, It's Spring" (page 5) as your primary reference point, define anthropomorphism and explain how it is used in the poem. Examine the descriptive language used to determine what kind of character "Miss Violet" is.

In the poem "Wild, Wild" (page 36) the author mentions three pairs of lovers taken from classical literature: Romeo and Juliet; Tristan and Isolde; Faust and Marguerite. Using the context of the poem, consider the following: What does each pair "say" about the nature of love? Why would the poet use these three specific pairs? If the pairs had not been used, how would the author have conveyed this same message to the reader?

In "Stars" (page 127) the writer talks about writing as a way of having a dialogue with the natural world. What, exactly, is the process as Mary Oliver describes it? According to the author, what is the most important obstacle to writing about Nature?

"Goldfinches" (page 103) and "May" (page 148), like other poems in this collection, appear on the page in standard block paragraph form. How much time passes in each poem? How does the structure of the poems support the time frame being presented to the reader?

The poem "In Pobiddy, Georgia" (page 152) recounts an episode in a graveyard. Why does the author identify the exact location of the encounter? Discuss the significance of the last line of the poem: "perfectly finished, perfectly heartbroken, perfectly wild," and explain how this piece fits with others by the same author that deal more overtly with nature and the natural world.

Read "Morning Glories" (page 157). This poem is comprised of two long sentences. The first sentence provides a description of the morning glories. The second talks about "the reaper's story." Who or what, exactly, is "the reaper" mentioned in line 11? What is significant about the wording of the second long sentence and what does it say about Oliver's view of death?

Read "Freshen the Flowers, She Said" (page 75). Taking into account the structure of the piece, why is it significant that the poet breaks the line after "gave them?" How does this structural choice set the reader up for the "music" to which the poet refers in line 13? What, specifically, is the music Oliver is talking about?

In "The Poet With His Face in His Hands" (page 37), Oliver admonishes those who "want to cry aloud for [their] mistakes" to surrender feelings of regret or self-pity to Nature. According to the poem, what is the impact of such feelings once they have been released?

How does the poem "Tiger Lilies" (page 31) illustrate the concept of self-sacrifice? How does the structure of the poem (on the page) reinforce the intimacy of the situation being described?

The opening line of "West Wind, 9" (page 140) asks, "And what did you think love would be like?" Discuss what makes the eagle a suitable analogy for love. What do the "small but perfect spear[s]" in the last line represent?

Read "Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches" (page 141) and discuss what the reader is being asked to do. Which specific lines let the reader know that the speaker is more concerned with the "here and now" than the past or even the future?

"The Old Poets of China" on page 86 is a short piece consisting of four sentences arranged on the page in five lines. Given that there is no rhyme scheme and no specific meter, can this still be considered a poem? Why or why not? Use the text to support the reasoning.

Considering the title, what kind of faith is addressed in "Little Summer Poem Touching the Subject of Faith" on page 130? In line five, the speaker says, "[...] I can't see anything—" What, specifically, is the speaker unable to see? Is it necessary for transformations to have a witness in order to be legitimate? How could this poem be interpreted as a type of prayer? Using examples from the text, discuss the possibility that faith in Nature is the same as faith in a higher power or an omnipresent universal force.