Wild Geese Study Guide

Wild Geese by Mary Oliver

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Contents

Introduction

"Wild Geese," which first appeared in Mary Oliver's *Dream Work*, published in 1986, is one of the poet's most anthologized poems. It is also one of her most arresting. In it, she explores the connection between the human mind, nature in general, and wild geese in particular. Oliver is well noted for her poetry of the natural world, and she often relates animals and varieties of plant life to the human condition. Typical themes involve the beauty and wonders of nature and how much better the world would be if people were more in tune with it. In "Wild Geese," she encourages the reader to be more imaginative and to shed loneliness by discovering his or her place "in the family of things"□namely, the family of sun and rain, prairies and trees, mountains, rivers, and, ultimately,~ wild geese flying home.

Although the premise of this poem may seem simple, or even trite, the real gut of its message is quite provocative. From its first line□rife with intriguing ambiguity□the poem draws the reader in with a sense of immediacy and a keen awareness of how "you" may be feeling and what "you" may be thinking. This is a brief poem written in casual language, but it still manages to be stimulating and powerful. Not all poets can pull that off, but Oliver is one of the noted few who can.

Author Biography

Mary Oliver was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1935. Her father was a teacher and her mother a stay-athome mom. Oliver knew early on that she wanted to be a writer, and her demeanor, even as a young teen, was serious and determined. When she was fifteen, she sent a letter to Norma Millay Ellis, the sister of the late poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, asking if she could visit Steepletop, Millay's home in upstate New York. Touched by the young girl's admiration of her recently deceased sister, Ellis consented to the visit, and it became only the first of several that Oliver would make to Steepletop. Eventually, she was invited for an extended stay during which time she helped to organize Millay's papers.

From 1955 to 1956, Oliver studied at Ohio State University and then at Vassar from 1956 to 1957. Without earning a degree, she left college and moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, a noted bohemian community that had earlier attracted Edna St. Vincent Millay. All the while, Oliver had been writing and publishing poetry. Millay's influence was apparent in her work, but it also showed striking original ability for a young poet in her twenties. In 1963, Oliver published her first full-length collection, *No Voyage, and Other Poems*, which was reissued in an expanded edition two years later. Oliver's second collection, *The River Styx, Ohio, and Other Poems*, did not come out until 1972, the same year she accepted the position of chair of the creative writing department at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. Other distinguished teaching positions followed: poet-in-residence and visiting professor positions at Case Western Reserve University, Bucknell University, the University of Cincinnati, and Sweet Briar College. In 1996, Oliver became the Catharine Osgood Foster Chair for Distinguished Teaching at Bennington College, where she remains today.

For over four decades, Oliver has been a prolific writer of both poetry and nonfiction. She has published some sixteen volumes and has received several prestigious awards, including a National Endowment for the Arts, a Guggenheim fellowship, and, for *American Primitive*, published in 1983, the coveted Pulitzer Prize. Oliver followed this collection three years later with *Dream Work*, which contained the poem "Wild Geese." In 1992, Oliver received yet another prestigious prize□a National Book Award for *New and Selected Poems*□but this acceptance ceremony marked a new era in the poet's life. On stage, she openly thanked supporters, including Molly Malone Cook, whom she called "the light of my life." Over the years, many readers and critics had attempted to find evidence of Oliver's lesbian lifestyle in her work, but this speech was the first time she publicly referred to it. Ultimately, Oliver's sexual preference has made little or no difference in her literary endeavors, and she has remained out of any political spotlight concerning the issue. She and Cook make their home in Vermont.

Poem Text

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you
mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the
rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue
air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and
exciting□
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Plot Summary

Line 1

The first line of "Wild Geese" is one that many readers recall long after putting the poem aside. The use of the second person "you" may seem generic at first, but later in the poem, the reader understands that he or she is the one directly addressed. This line is ambiguous in meaning because one is not sure if the speaker is saying that "You do not have to be good" in the moral sense of good versus evil, or whether one does not have to be good *at doing* something. The first meaning is probably the one most people believe is intended, and the next two lines of the poem appear to verify it.

Lines 2-3

The religious connotation in lines 2 and 3 supports the notion that you do not have to be a "good" person if you do not want to be. The "walk on your knees" phrase implies someone praying or displaying worship, and the addition of "for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting" implies suffering and a willingness to be punished for sinful behavior. In general, the idea of crawling through a desert on one's knees infers humility and an acceptance that one must "pay" for future comfort and happiness with present pain and sacrifice. More specifically, the notion refers to the forty days that Jesus spent in the desert without food or water, being tempted by Satan.

Lines 4-5

Lines 4 and 5 contain the first comparison of the human being to the natural world. The speaker claims that "your body" has a "soft animal" within it, and that you need to let it "love what it loves." This idea of self-indulgence and personal pleasure is directly opposed to the previous description of self-abasement and repentance. Therefore, while the first three lines tell you what you "do not have to do," these two lines explain what you "only" have to do.

Line 6

Line 6 now brings the reader specifically into the poem. If the "you" seemed generic before, here the direct address is unmistakable. Note how the placement of the words in this line emphasizes the address: "Tell me about despair, yours." If the line read, "Tell me about your despair," think of how much weaker, and perhaps still generic, the second person would seem. As is, however, the speaker makes a very poignant request, calling attention to human despair and showing a strong willingness to share stories of it with the reader in particular.

Lines 7-11

These five lines imply that despair is a strictly *human* quality. While human beings may sit around and bemoan their misfortunes and hopeless states, "the world goes on." The "world" here, however, belongs to nature. It is the world of sun and rain "moving across" earth's various landscapes, "the prairies and the deep trees, / the mountains and the rivers."

Lines 12-13

So far, the poem has addressed nature in somewhat general terms, but in these lines, a specific animal is identified. Like the sun, rain, and landscapes, however, the wild geese are going about their business, oblivious to human despair. The portrayal of a flock of geese flying "high in the clean blue air" is a pleasant scene, one that humankind could benefit from if people would pay more attention to the events in nature happening all around them.

Line 14

Line 14 is another direct address to the reader, and it is clear that at least one form of despair the speaker fears "you" may be feeling is loneliness. Although the speaker may not know the reader personally, she says that "whoever you are," if "you" are lonely and despairing, this poem is for "you."

Lines 15-16

In these lines, the speaker reveals the method by which humans can relate to nature. The "world" here may be either the natural world or the human world, for both are available for whatever "your imagination" would like to make of them. This does not necessarily mean that people should live in imaginary worlds instead of trying to cope in the real one. Instead, by being *creative* and *thoughtful*, individuals can start to appreciate things they may have previously ignored and to see the beauty in nature to which they used to be blind. Line 16 compares the world that awaits your imagination to the calls of the wild geese, "harsh and exciting." Although, the word "harsh" typically has a negative connotation, here it seems to imply only loud and determined.

Lines 17-18

The final two lines of "Wild Geese" are an assurance to readers that they are not alone in their loneliness. The speaker implies that the world is adamant about welcoming everyone into it, for it calls out "over and over announcing your place / in the family of things." Here the "family" consists of all of nature□the sun and rain, rivers and

mountains, and every member of the animal kingdom, including wild geese and human beings. One needs only to have a receptive imagination to find a place to belong.

Themes

Nature and Humankind

The reader does not have to know that Mary Oliver is a nature poet to know that "Wild Geese" is a nature poem. That fact resonates throughout the work, as it compares nature's condition to the human condition. As with most poems that make this comparison, nature comes out on top. One should not dismiss the work as another tirade on how bad people are and how good animals, plants, mountains, and so forth are. The person addressed here is lonely but not necessarily bad. Although the speaker declares up front that "You do not have to be good," there is no indication that "you" are anything other than despairing and lonely. That description, of course, evokes more pity for the human condition than anger or animosity.

"Wild Geese" is also different from many other natural world vs. human world poems in its portrayal of nature's response to humanity. Sometimes poets describe nature as indifferent or superior to people, essentially ignoring human suffering and rebuffing any attempt by an individual to be more compassionate about it. But in Oliver's poem, nature□" the world"□is both sympathetic and welcoming to human beings. It uses the voices of wild geese to call out to individuals in despair and to let them know that there is a place for them in nature's family. The overall theme, then, is not that nature is superior to humankind, but that humans could be just as content, just as carefree as nature if they wanted to. This sentiment, obviously, oversimplifies the poem's main premise, but the bottom line is that the troubled human condition could be eased somewhat by letting "your imagination" be more creative and natural.

Hedonism

Hedonism is defined as the pursuit of things that bring pleasure, especially pleasure to the senses. The first five lines of "Wild Geese" suggest a favorable response to this philosophy. Although the first line may appear ambiguous, at least one of its meanings is clear: you do not have to be "good" in the religious or moral sense of showing humility, contrition, and repentance as exemplified throughout religious teachings. In other words, you do not have to be like Jesus of the New Testament who proved allegiance to God by spending forty days in the desert refusing temptations by Satan. Lines 4 and 5 capture the essence of the hedonistic belief that seeking personal, physical pleasure should outweigh any spiritual endeavors. The speaker implies that the surest avenue to happiness is "to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves." Animals, after all, do not think in terms of morality or of good and evil. They simply follow their natural instincts, which are comprised of built-in survival tactics. *Staying alive* is the goal of wild geese, cows, elephants, oak trees, petunias, and so on, but human beings must contend with something more□something called a *conscience*. It is unlikely that the intent of this theme is to promote abandoning the checks and balances that the human conscience places on behavior in favor of total self-indulgence and

physical pleasure. It seems apparent, however, that an occasional delve into hedonism is recommended, at least for the sake of relieving a bit of despair and loneliness.

Style

Lyric poets attempt to appeal to human emotions and intellect without falling into pathos or confessional poetry. Oliver's soft, sensual tone speaks directly to the reader, as though to create an intimate bond for at least as long as she has the reader's attention. In "Wild Geese," the lines are unrhymed but still melodic in rhythm and repetition. Listen to the rhythm in the three lines that begin with "You": "You do not have to be good," "You do not have to walk," "You only have to let." The same effect is heard in the three lines that begin with "Meanwhile": "Meanwhile the world goes on," "Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles," "Meanwhile the wild geese." Repeating the words lends a quiet, hypnotic quality to the speaker's voice, luring the reader with its gentleness but at the same time stimulating the intellect with their meaning.

Oliver's images are rarely provocative or surprising. Instead, she uses clear, simple language that, alone, may not seem compelling, but crafted into a complete work becomes seductive and rewarding. The image of a flock of wild geese sailing across the sky is not complex, but it is gratifying when set against the backdrop of sun and rain "moving across the landscapes" of prairies and forests and mountains. Oliver uses the same geese image to describe the world calling out to lonely people□again, not complex, but an intriguing metaphor all the same. She may be called a poet of understatement, but she can't be labeled unsophisticated or dull. Instead, her traditional lyric style maintains old-fashioned gracefulness while incorporating contemporary thought on nature and humanity. Perhaps Oliver says it best herself in "The Swan" chapter from her semi-autobiographical book, *Winter Hours*:

> I want every poem to "rest" in intensity. I want it to
> be rich with "pictures of the world." I want it to carry
> threads from the perceptually felt world to the intellectual
> world. I want each poem to indicate a life
> lived with intelligence, patience, passion, and
> whimsy (not my life□not necessarily!□but the life
> of my *formal self*, the writer).

Historical Context

The decade of the 1980s in America was dominated by a cultural, social, and political turn toward conservatism. Ronald Reagan's two-term presidency, beginning in 1980, marked a general shift in societal values, from the emphasis on social justice that characterized the 1960s and 1970s, towards a concentration on individuality and material gain. Reagan's agenda included reducing the size of the federal government and abolishing federal regulations to free up business□big and small□to produce mass quantities of goods and services for a highconsumption economy. On the social and cultural level, a return to conservatism meant an attempt to undo the counterculture lifestyle of previous years, bringing back old-fashioned values and moral standards. For many Americans, this turn translated into less tolerance for individuals and groups that did not fit the prescribed right-wing model, including various racial and ethnic groups, feminists, and gays and lesbians. Political factors that helped support cultural conservatism included the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982, large funding cuts in social and affirmative action programs, an increase in antiabortion legislation, and an initial disinterested response from government toward AIDS□the new and devastating disease that many Americans initially ignored, in the mistaken belief that it affected only homosexuals.

Oliver's poetry reveals nothing about how it may have been influenced by 1980s conservatism, and her *Dream Work* collection, which came out in the heart of the decade, does not appear to have been based on a response to any right-wing backlashes, including those against the gay and lesbian communities. Instead, Oliver's work, then as before, centered on nature and the human relationship to the natural environment.

Interestingly, the 1980s saw not only shifts in social attitudes and political movements, but also in the fields of science and technology, which had a profound impact on what human beings have always perceived as "natural." During the Reagan administration, some of the resources diverted from social programs and government went to fund what became known as "big science," especially from its critics. Astronomers and physicists lobbied for billions of dollars to support building large-scale particle accelerators, and NASA fueled an ongoing campaign for its long-projected space station. Although both these projects had their funding severely cut by the end of the decade, neither was as controversial as Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, or "Star Wars," as it was dubiously termed. The effort's aim was to construct an impenetrable "space shield" to protect the United States from a nuclear attack, but the sheer mathematics of stopping thousands of enemy missiles simultaneously, coupled with an estimated one-trillion-dollar price tag, grounded the project before it got too far off the ground. Two other wake-up calls for big science□ tragic, in these cases□came in 1986 with the explosion of the *Challenger* space shuttle, which killed all on board, and the meltdown at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Soviet Union, which claimed the lives of at least 8,000 people.

Although technological advances and defeats during the 1980s provoked loud opinions on both sides of the issues, perhaps the most controversial scientific "achievements" were made in the area of biological manipulation, which gave mankind the ability to alter nature at its very core. The discovery in the 1970s of how to recombine genetic material into new life forms spurred research scientists at universities and corporations in the 1980s to produce new genetic codes and to begin to map the three billion nucleotides that make up human DNA. Proponents of biological engineering touted the possibilities of developing stronger, longerlasting food sources, including not only fruits and vegetables, but also grains, beef, pork, and chicken. They dreamt of curing deadly diseases once and for all, and of creating life forms that could be used in special cases, such as lab animals genetically coded for cancer in order to help scientists understand the disease better.

Opponents, however, viewed those same possibilities as dangerous and unethical, if not immoral. They pointed to the disasters in technology that occurred in the 1980s and wondered if the same tragedies might not happen in biology. What if modified produce and meats became toxic and greatly depleted the food supply? What if a genetically engineered virus escaped the boundaries of the lab and introduced an incurable plague into the general population? What if the godlike power to alter human genes fell into the wrong hands□the hands of someone who wanted to destroy certain races and strengthen others? These questions may at first sound as though they have been lifted from the pages of a science fiction thriller, but biological manipulation is now a fact of life; therefore, many feel that questioning how far humankind is willing to go in this volatile direction should be taken just as seriously.

Fears about physical calamities are not the only basis for opponents to speak out against genetic engineering. Many also fear, and detest, the idea of altering nature to suit human desire. Perhaps they fear, as well, a future in which a poet would not be able to write of lonely individuals finding their place "in the family of things." The family, after all, may someday be unrecognizable due to modern changes.

Critical Overview

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the critical reception of Oliver's work is that she has been both commended and denounced for the same things□her simple, clear language and her predominant use of nature as a subject. Some critics find her treatment of the natural world not necessarily provocative, but intellectually stimulating all the same. Writing for the *Kentucky Review*, Robin Riley Fast says that

> A strong sense of place, and of identity in relation to it, is central to [Oliver's] poetry. Her poems are firmly located in the places where she has lived or traveled . . . ; her moments of transcendence arise organically from the realities of swamp, pond, woods and shore.

Other critics appreciate Oliver's emphasis on nature, too, but also recognize that there are those who do not. In *Papers on Language and Literature*, Vicki Graham writes that

> Oliver's celebration of dissolution into the natural world troubles some critics: her poems flirt dangerously with romantic assumptions about the close association of women with nature that many theorists claim put the woman writer at risk.

For centuries, romantic nature poetry has been considered the domain of male poets, and even feminists have tended to shun Oliver's work, believing that a strong female voice gets lost in praise for nature. The biggest complaint about the language in Oliver's poetry is that it is too "plain" and describes conventional imagery instead of unusual takes on nature. The poet, however, finds no need to manipulate or spruce up what already speaks for itself in terms of beauty, elegance, and power. More often than not, critics who have made negative comments about her poetry end up admitting that her lyrical style is still captivating, and that she has managed to deal with commonplace subjects without lapsing into sentimentality. The number of awards her poetry has received is certainly evidence of her power as a poet, despite mixed critical response.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill questions the necessity of advocating profane self-indulgence in an otherwise serene, benevolent poem of natural beauty and human kindness.

Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese" is a difficult poem to like and an even more difficult poem to dislike. Its initial ambiguity is cleared up all too soon, and the apparent message leaves some readers unsettled: you do not have to be a good human being. Instead, you can opt for whatever physical pleasure you desire and not have to worry about feeling guilty nor have a need to repent. Once this sentiment is out of the way in the first five lines, however, the remainder of the poem expresses a kind gesture from the poet to the reader□an invitation to share his or her loneliness and despairing thoughts and to come to understand that there is a place in nature's family for everyone. Even the imagery shifts from a philosophical, allusion-based metaphor in the first few lines to a more concrete, direct description throughout the rest of the work.

It seems, then, that "Wild Geese" is really two poems in one. The first suggests hedonism and the pursuit of pleasure as a remedy for human depression and loneliness. The other recommends paying attention to the beauty of nature and to using your imagination to see how you really do fit into "the family of things." Simply because the latter theme is allowed more space in the poem, one may think it is the work's "true" message, but the very provocative idea that "You do not have to be good" cannot be ignored. If the latter theme *is* the real point here, the poem would have echoed it much more strongly without the first five lines.

The largest concern a doubtful reader may have is this: why it was necessary for Oliver to include the notion about not being good, going so far as to link "good" to biblical references regarding Jesus and, perhaps, Moses and the Israelites. It's a good question. First, one can probably dispel any idea that the poet is completely anti-religion and advocates reckless, pleasure-seeking behavior in place of traditional values set forth in the doctrines of good versus evil. Nothing else in the poem, or in any of Oliver's other known works, supports such a claim. In fact, many of her poems point to a concern for immortality and thankfulness for the natural wonders and loved ones she has encountered as a mortal being. Atheism and evilness aside, then, what is the motive behind saying, "You do not have to be good" and that "You only have to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves"? Perhaps by addressing an intangible, philosophical ideal□goodness□and handily casting it aside at the outset of the poem, Oliver is better able to highlight the remarkableness of the tangible□ prairies, trees, mountains, rivers, and wild geese. Or perhaps she recognizes that human beings, especially lonely or troubled ones, are more apt to grasp the beauty of things they can see and touch than some intellectual concept. Yet, this poem, like so many of Oliver's, is based on human intellect and the connection between the human mind and the natural world. Given that, one can only assume that these two possible answers are pure

speculation, at best. Unfortunately, this means that the question regarding the purpose of including the first five lines remains unanswered.

Telling people they "do not have to walk on [their] knees / for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting" seems to fly in the face of traditional morality. Most world religions teach followers that humility and worship are not just looked upon favorably by a supreme being, but are *required* of the truly faithful. That is why the selfserving, possibly heretical lines that open "Wild Geese" are so disturbing to many readers. How, then, does one account for the fact that this poem is one of Oliver's most popular? The answer to that probably lies in the sentiment she expresses in the rest of the poem.

By far, the dominant force of "Wild Geese" is the speaker's—or the poet's—benevolent attitude toward the reader, offering to listen to his or her troubles and suggesting a heartwarming solution. The immediacy of the poet's words is aided by her addressing "you" directly, a style that many readers find appealing. There is something more than conversational, in fact something deeply personal, about two people speaking intimately of their own despair, and that is the relationship between poet and reader that Oliver desires. To use a popular phrase, she *feels your pain*. More importantly, she wants to help the reader get rid of it.

So far, the discussion here has centered on the psychological, philosophical, and intellectual concerns of the poem—all very intangible. Yet Oliver is known for creating nature poems, works full of descriptions of things one can see, hear, and touch, and she stays true to her reputation in "Wild Geese," using the natural world as a vehicle to explain her solution to despair and loneliness. By portraying "the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain," the prairies, "deep trees," mountains, and rivers as lovely, carefree entities, she offers, metaphorically, a picture of how the reader's own life could look. Assuring "you" that "the world goes on" and that the wild geese "are heading home again" provides the reader with a model to imitate, as well as a reason to open "your imagination" to the world that "offers itself" and "calls to you like the wild geese." This is what makes Oliver's poem so attractive. She uses simple language and soft descriptions to drive home a powerful point: the reader, too, has a place "in the family of things"—a thought that sounds like it comes from the mouth of a homey grandmother.

It is the friendly, inviting tone and message in the middle and end of this poem that makes the reader forget—or, perhaps, forgive—the beginning. A casual, light reading of "Wild Geese" probably elicits kind appreciation and brief pondering on the part of the reader, and little more. In the world of poetry, that is enough to make a work popular. But one who lingers on Oliver's poem a little longer or one who studies it carefully, line by line, may be nagged by the apparent profanity of its opening. By *themselves*, the first five lines are not disturbing, and if they opened a poem that carried through the same sentiment to its end, they still would not be disturbing. But in "Wild Geese," they seem strange and out of place. The bold notion that "You do not have to be good" is misleading when followed by such strong examples of the speaker being just that—*good*. Still, the positives in this poem outnumber the negatives based on line count alone. For each reason not to like it, there are two or three to like it quite a bit. **Source:**

Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Wild Geese," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Perkins teaches American and British literature and film. In this essay, Perkins examines Oliver's call for a sympathetic union between the self and nature.

Commenting on Mary Oliver's body of work, Janet McNew writes in an article for *Contemporary Literature*, "at its most intense, her poetry aims to peer beneath the constructions of culture and reason that burden us with an alienated consciousness to celebrate the primitive, mystical visions" of the natural world. In "Wild Geese," Oliver explores how we have been oppressed by these "constructions of culture" and offers us fruitful, fresh alternatives. In her clear and eloquent voice, she privileges the power of the imagination to help us break free from the confines of society and so be able to reconnect with our more elemental, natural selves.

The poem begins with the speaker urging an unnamed listener to separate him or herself from social notions of "goodness." She does not identify the gender of the speaker or the listener in an attempt to include all in the experience of the poem. By refusing to define oneself according to accepted standards, one would therefore not have to accept punishment for disregarding those standards. One would not need to repent by walking on one's knees "for a hundred miles through the desert."

The speaker suggests that a separation from the social be followed with a union with nature, where one could recover one's elemental connection with natural creatures. Vicki Graham, in her article,"'Into the Body of Another': Mary Oliver and the Poetics of Becoming Other," argues, "rooted in the binary oppositions that structure Western thinking, Oliver can never fully escape the teaching of her culture that . . . identity depends on keeping intact the boundaries between self and others." Colin Lowndes in a review of Oliver's work for the Toronto *Globe & Mail* seems to contradict Graham when he insists that Oliver is "a poet of worked-for reconciliations" who focuses on the "points at which opposing forces meet." In "Wild Geese," Oliver accommodates both of these points of view in her establishment of an ironic juxtaposition of individual and collective, insisting that we first need to establish our independence from cultural constructions of value before we can open ourselves to more natural unions. We could reestablish this attachment by allowing "the soft animal" of our bodies to "love what it loves" without any direction from artificial sources. Thus, as a strong sense of place shifts from the social to the natural world, so too does identity in relation to place.

The process of becoming another, more primitive self depends on first establishing a direct association with the natural world. We must love through our bodies not our minds to establish the connection we need to effect a change in ourselves. By seeing and touching, we identify with and therefore become a part of nature.

This union with nature would be enhanced by a connection with the community of mankind as articulated through the speaker's suggestion that "despair" should be expressed and shared. As the speaker and listener communicate their suffering to each

other, they align themselves with the ebb and flow of nature. The "world goes on" around them; the sun and the "clear pebbles of the rain" move "across the landscapes."

Oliver insists that we begin to pay attention to what nature can offer us as she offers her insight through observations of a delightful world. As she focuses on the luminous qualities of nature, "the clear pebbles of the rain" and the "harsh and exciting" wild geese, she shows us how to take note of and savor the entirety of an experience with the natural world. She illustrates the extent of the potential for a harmonious communion with nature in her delineation of the landscapes that stretch from prairie to forest to mountain to river. The potential depth of the communion is expressed by the reference to the landscape of "deep trees." In the twelfth line, Oliver reinforces our connection to nature by imagining wild geese "heading home again." She suggests that if we reclaim our original bond with nature, we can fly like the wild geese, free of social constrictions "in the clean blue air." Nature becomes a mirror through which we can discover a new, truer perspective of ourselves.

The redemptive power of nature becomes evident in the next line when the speaker reassures the listener that the loneliness caused by the limits of the social world can be alleviated and transcended through an imaginative connection with the natural world. By opening ourselves to natural experience, by responding to the "harsh and exciting" calls of the universe, we, like the wild geese, can maintain our identity, our "place," yet at the same time understand our inherent connection with the "family of things." This fusion with nature reestablishes our core self, which becomes more open and encompassing than our social selves. As we allow "the soft animal" of our bodies to emerge and discover our animal essence, in a revelatory moment, we can become wild as the geese. As a result of this transcendence, we become open to the possibility of experiencing a profound satisfaction and joy.

Marilyn Chancler McEntyre, in her assessment of the poem in the *Santa Barbara Review* writes that through the poem, Oliver invites us to "enter into the gentle, humble, wild, free, authoritative work of the imagination," and shows us how to "learn the language of the inarticulate natural world and hear its message, reiterated in every sentient thing," a message telling us "to be is the holiest thing." Oliver avoids sentimentality in this transcendent moment by maintaining her clear vision of this "harsh and exciting" world.

Oliver structures the poem into three movements employing present tense to provide readers with a more dynamic experience. First, she directs us to explore our present situations, specifically how social constructions have restricted us and separated us from the natural world. Then, only when we throw off cultural restraints can we begin to come to a heightened awareness of nature and our relation to it. This readiness to investigate ways to redefine ourselves leads to an epiphany. As we envision ourselves in an individual and a collective sense through an imaginative response to our world, we reestablish our natural selves. We go beyond knowing into being. This process moves us from guilt, despair, and loneliness to a sense of completion and happiness. The speaker communicates with the readers by speaking in the second person, which helps

us break through the social boundaries we have allowed to form around us, separating us from nature, and establish a real connection with humanity and our world.

Oliver's poetic vision is expressed through pleasing rhythms and a thoughtful, finely tuned merging of statement and image. The construction of short lines helps to reinforce the parallels she makes between self and world. Her conversational tone as she enumerates the abundance of nature and the possibilities for our union with it reinforces the sense of peace achieved by the end of the poem.

In her article in *Women's Review of Books*, Maxine Kumin writes that Oliver is an "indefatigable guide to the natural world . . . particularly to its lesser-known aspects." She admits that she trusts whatever Oliver tells her "about moths and marsh marigolds, fingerlings and egrets." Kumin declares that as Oliver "stands quite comfortably on the margins of things, on the line between earth and sky, the thin membrane that separates human from what we loosely call animal," she creates poems that move us "deeply." One such poem is "Wild Geese," which calls us simply and eloquently to a more intense and thus satisfying connection with our world.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "Wild Geese," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Potter is a writer of fiction and screenplays. In this essay, Potter shows how the interplay of elements of incantation reveals the theme of Oliver's poem.

Chanting, casting a spell, prophesizing the future *incantation* in poetry and music uses rhythm and repetition to evoke emotion rather than to appeal to one's sense of humor or reason. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, for example, witches recite their recipe in an incantation, summoning forth the spirits. Incantation has its literary roots in the Bible, popular examples are found in the Psalms, when the Hebrew poets call out to God, lamenting their fortune or praising his goodness.

An example of incantation in American poetry lies in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," which twentieth-century poet Allen Ginsberg also played upon in "Howl." These poems exhibit the long, rolling lines set off by shorter lines that are characteristic of incantation. The meter of these lines is not regular like iambic pentameter; rhyme is not regular either. Instead, Whitman and Ginsberg use repeated words and phrases and parallel structure (similar grammar) in their poems to evoke the American spirit of their times.

Whitman's incantation-like repetition is evident in the first few lines of "Song of Myself":

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of
summer grass.

"Loafe" is repeated, and the second line of "Song of Myself" is long, unfurling easily. Both lines are parallel, beginning with "I."

Ginsberg employs a similar tactic in the opening lines of "Howl":

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed
by madness, starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at
dawn looking for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery
of night,

Ginsberg's incantatory lines run even longer than Whitman's. Other ready examples of incantation are the lines spoken by the chorus in Greek drama, Gregorian chant, or the mantras of yogis.

Like the above, Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese" uses repetition and parallel structure in an incantation to the human spirit. Giving her fellow human beings hope when they feel hopeless, she addresses her readers with a poetic meditation.

"Wild Geese" falls into three sections, the first set off by the repetition of "You" three times in the first five lines; the second, by "Meanwhile" three times in the next seven lines. The third section of five lines then states the theme of the poem.

In the first section, Oliver addresses the reader directly, using "you" to open. She alludes to religions that preach goodness; specifically, Judeo- Christian practices of repentance, of Jesus Christ fasting and praying for forty days in the desert. The first two lines are similar in their sentence struc- ture, beginning with "You do not have to." This sets up the third line, for if you do not have to "be good" or "walk on your knees in the desert," what do you have to do? Oliver says in a lush incantatory line, "You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."

But she follows this with a shift: "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine." This shorter line achieves its emphasis for a couple of reasons. She places "yours," referring to the reader, in the middle, and then refers to herself, "I will tell you mine." Using a kind of parallelism called *antithesis*, the two clauses mirror each other and draw Oliver into the dialogue she is having with her reader. Although not marked as a stanza, the first five lines fall together, using repetition, the movement of three lines that roll with greater speed toward the fourth line, and the fifth antithetical line that both summarizes the first four and serves as a transition to the next section.

The second section also uses repetition, as "Meanwhile" begins three of its seven lines, three of Oliver's thoughts on despair. Thus, while "you" and "I" are talking about despair, Oliver writes, "the world goes on," her use of a cliché expressing the emotion of despair. The second instance of "Meanwhile" begins what is a long sentence broken into four lines. The word itself points not only to the movement of time, but in Oliver's poem, space, too, as lines 6-12 take the reader through a panorama of the world: "the clear pebbles of the rain / are moving across the landscapes." Then "Meanwhile" begins the line that introduces the central image of the poem, the wild geese, who are "heading home again," as the reader watches, alone, still despairing. These lines, full of movement, set the stage for the statement of the poem's theme that comes at the beginning of the third and final section.

Oliver stops her reader in lines 13 and 14 with a clear statement: "Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, / the world offers itself to your imagination." This is the poet's answer for loneliness and despair: the imagination. For how can people be lonely if they have the world to observe and the imagination to do their dreaming? Part of being human is feeling lonely from time to time, yet another aspect of human nature is being able to use the imagination to reach beyond oneself.

So the imagination offers hope. Oliver, through her imagination and her poetry, gives the reader a picture of the world and the beauty of nature. Through two curious juxtapositions, the placement of "clear" next to "pebbles" and "deep" next to "trees," the wonder of the natural world is evoked. Perceived imaginatively, rain can look like clear pebbles, and trees can both have deep-reaching roots and be deep green in color. Only the human imagination can comprehend that the world calls "like the wild geese, harsh and exciting," that, yes, "over and over" existence is "harsh and exciting"; and over and

over, one can find his "place in the family of things." But imagery is not the only creation of the imagination, for the body feels rhythm, moves the body, and suddenly Oliver uses it to drive her theme. "Harsh and exciting" establishes a regular rhythm for the first time in the poem. It continues in "over and over announcing your place" and concludes the poet's statement of theme with "in the family of things." The final sentence, made up of the final five lines, brings the reader "home" again, too, through its rhythm and the central image of the geese. Once lonely, Oliver's reader finds not only a place with the geese in the order of the universe but a unique place, too, because, unlike the geese, the reader has an imagination.

With "Wild Geese," Mary Oliver both evokes hope for a hopeless reader and comforts the lonely by placing him among his fellow creatures in the natural world. Like a magician casting a spell, or someone praying aloud, the poet calls to readers of her poem to embrace not institutionalized religion but a different kind of spirituality, the prize of nature, the human imagination. Not through repentance but through love, not through a poem with meter and rhyme, but through the repetition and rhythms of incantation, Mary Oliver summons forth her own gods.

Source: Mary Potter, Critical Essay on "Wild Geese," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

The World Wide Web offers one category match, six web sites, and over four hundred web pages related to Mary Oliver's poetry, as of this writing. Many of the pages contain the full text of "Wild Geese," as well as comments on it.

Topics for Further Study

Write an essay giving your interpretation of the line "the world offers itself to your imagination" from "Wild Geese." Consider why the offer is to "your imagination" instead of "your heart" or "your mind" and explain the difference.

Some people believe that there is such a thing as "writing too much for too long"□that a poet like Mary Oliver who has published more than sixteen books, many of them with a similar theme and subject matter, risks becoming stale. How do you feel about it? When, if ever, is it time for a writer to stop writing?

Loneliness has been linked not only to mental depression in humans, but also to various physical ailments as well. Read some research on the subject and write an essay on one or two theories of overcoming loneliness. Do you have your own theory that differs from the ones researchers suggest?

Rewrite the poem "Wild Geese" so that it begins with the opposite meaning of the real work. That is, your first lines are, "You have to be good / You have to walk on your knees," and so forth. At what point does it get difficult to continue and why? Is the sentiment toward nature the same in your poem as it is in Oliver's? Why or why not?

Compare and Contrast

1980s: In a blow to the previously fervent Women's Movement, the Equal Rights Amendment fails to be ratified. Afterwards, the movement falls into a period of upheaval with many former supporters and members of the National Organization of Women (NOW) abandoning the cause, at least on the political level.

Today: Concerned Women for America (CWA), with members in 50 states, is the largest public policy women's organization in the nation, surpassing NOW. Many American women are more attracted to CWA's discussion of such issues as religious persecution around the world, protecting children from pornography, breast cancer prevention, and morality in America than to NOW's more political agenda, which deals primarily with the empowerment of women.

1980s: Researchers develop the first commercial application of recombinant DNA (or genetic engineering) when they produce human insulin for the treatment of diabetes. To provide insulin in the quantities needed for medical use, they isolate the gene that produces human insulin and transfer it to bacteria. The bacteria multiply, producing the protein insulin as they grow.

Today: An international consortium of genetic researchers, collectively known as the Human Genome Project, announce that they have completely mapped the genetic code of a human chromosome, raising an abundance of medical, legal, and ethical questions.

1980s: The discovery of a hole in the Earth's protective ozone layer spurs an outcry from environmentalists who claim that modern lifestyles and technology are destroying the ecology that all life depends upon. The hole was apparently caused by chlorofluorocarbon refrigerants drifting up into the atmosphere.

Today: Most scientists agree that a recovery of the ozone layer in many regions of the world should be detected within the next fifteen to forty-five years, based on full compliance with the Montreal Protocol. The Protocol is an international agreement aimed at phasing out ozonedepleting chemicals, and most developed countries have adopted it. Many developing nations, however, have not complied for economic reasons.

What Do I Read Next?

Published in 1992, Oliver's *New and Selected Poems* is a great overview of three decades of the poet's work. This collection received the National Book Award for Poetry in 1992.

In 2000, Clare Walker Leslie and Charles E. Roth published a helpful, interesting guide for anyone who enjoys being close to nature and wants to record the experience. *Keeping a Nature Journal* helps readers create ongoing journals for all seasons, describes simple ways to capture the natural world in words and pictures, and inspires readers to make "nature journaling" a part of daily life.

Any reader interested in animal biology and animal habitats will enjoy Bruce Batt's *Snow Geese: Grandeur and Calamity on an Arctic Landscape* (1998). Batt describes the natural history of the snow goose, its migratory paths and stopovers, and how the growing population of these birds is causing long-term degradation on their Arctic breeding grounds. He offers a revealing explanation of how this population growth affects not only snow geese but a number of other Arctic-dwelling animals as well.

A contemporary of Mary Oliver, poet Maxine Kumin often writes of nature and of her home life in the backcountry of Vermont. Like Oliver, she also writes prose, and in her memoir *Always Beginning: Essays on a Life in Poetry* (2000), Kumin offers an intriguing look at modern country life, her experiences as both a mother and an artist, and her eighteen-year friendship with poet Anne Sexton.

Further Study

Daniel, John, ed., *Wild Song: Poems of the Natural World*, University of Georgia Press, 1998.

This recent collection of poems by over a hundred nature poets provides a thorough look at the treatment of the natural world in verse. Although the subject is one of the most common in poetry, this book shows how uniquely it can be presented by different poets.

Oliver, Mary, *The Leaf and the Cloud*, Da Capo Press, 2000.

Oliver's most recent publication, this book-length poem continues on the theme of nature, and contains some of the poet's most striking imagery yet. For example, she depicts vegetables growing in a garden with: "The green pea / climbs the stake / on her sugary muscles," and "The rosy comma of the radish / fattens in the soil."

□, *A Poetry Handbook*, Harcourt Brace and Co., 1994

Oliver has authored two books on the "how to" of poetry writing, and both are wonderfully written and helpful, even for those who do not care much for the subject. In this book, she deals with both traditional and contemporary verse; discusses tone, voice, and imagery; and gives a bit of the history of both American and English poetry.

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

This is Oliver's second "how to" book, but it deals only with metrical verse, as opposed to free verse. In it, she covers everything from breath and line length to rhyme and "image-making." Anything *but* a dry treatise on poetry writing, the book includes chapters titled "Release of Energy along the Lines," "Mutes and Other Sounds," and "The Ohs and the Ahs," to name a few.

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□, *Winter Hours*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999, p. 24.

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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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