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## Mary Oliver in Popular Imagination: an Eco-sensitive Poet of the Masses

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### Abstract

In this paper Mary Oliver shall be studied in the context of the popularity she has gained amongst the masses and what her central ideas are that the masses might be able to imbibe and amass. Through these ideas it shall be seen that how Mary Oliver would be able to instill in people certain values that are environmentally conscious and helpful in making them aware in a better understanding of the natural world and thus in preservation of the environment.

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### Keywords

Ecocriticism, Ecological Literacy, Environment Studies, Green Studies, Green Literature, American Literature.

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Mary Oliver's writings in the contemporary scene are what William Wordsworth's writings were in the Romantic Age as being appealing to the masses in spite of their themes being offbeat from the regular. Oliver was a celebrated poet who lived from September 10, 1935 to January 17, 2019 and wrote in the tradition of the American Transcendentalists and the British Romantics. She is a writer who brings to life the wild and gives it space in the everyday imagination of the masses. She is perhaps one of the most quoted and widely visible writer in social media, be it Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook and other social platforms. Mary Oliver was born and grew up in Maple Hills Heights, a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. She attended Ohio State University and Vassar College, but did not graduate to receive a degree from either institution. She didn't have a very happy childhood as her father had an abusive relationship with her. She found solace in the outdoors and grew to have a strong bond with and affinity for the wilderness. She was formatively influenced by Edna St. Vincent Millay and briefly lived at her house with the poet's sister helping in organising her papers. Oliver's private life is inscrutable as there little she divulges. She had a life long relationship with Mary Malone Cook and both of them lived in Provincetown, Massachusetts most of their lives. The landscape of Provincetown and Cape Cod majorly features in her writings. Oliver has a wide range of writing but she is essentially a poet. Her writing begins with *No Voyage and Other Poems* which was published in 1963. She became widely renowned and recognised when her fifth poetry collection *American Primitive*, won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 1984. Her last work *Devotions* is a collection of poems from her long career curated by the poet herself. Oliver cannot be called a religious poet but she certainly is spiritual in the sense where she is able to view things from a point of view that they have more than an ordinary existence, touching on the mystical.

Oliver's sensibility is that of a mystic who dwells in the forest and has seer like capabilities to immerse oneself in the awareness of the Universe. In the contemporary scene while Oliver is popular with the masses, she seems to be not that popular with the literary critical academia as she doesn't represent an erudition associated with a very elite tradition of writing. She is much in tradition of Wordsworth in

this context as her writing is easily accessible to even those who are not trained in the tradition of literature. Another reason might be her engagement with ideas that are considered traditional and associated with the Dead white men of yore.

While Oliver might not be making a point of an environmentalist, she certainly makes one aware of the vulnerability that nature might face at the hands of humans, she creates a picture which is idyllic but at the same time it is easily threatened by human influence, be it overfishing, inundation of a town by the tourists and so on. Though Oliver is not considered to be a political poet, she is critical of the world that we live in, in her prose poem "Of the Empire" (Red Bird, p. 46). She paints a very harsh picture and shows the reality of an overtly materialistic and opportunist world that we live in. She says, "We will be known as a culture that taught and rewarded the amassing of things...they will say also that our politics was no more than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of the heart, and that the heart, in those days, was small, and hard, and full of meanness." It is a hard hitting poem that shows what materialism and meanness of spirit does to the world. Irrespective of Oliver's desire to be not tagged as an activist and an environmentalist, this poem is a strong assertion of being both. It is an oft quoted poem used against the policies that are destructive to environment, animals or human rights.

Mary Oliver's sensibility is of a poet that observes the intricacy of the wild and relishes in the minutest of details that nature has to offer. She is someone who bridges the gap between the human and natural world by bringing nature to life in every moment of her life. She is not only observant of nature but also observant of other people's experiences and engagement with nature. Her poem *Varanasi* (Oliver, Devotions, 55) talks of an Indian woman's experience of deep synchronisation with the river Ganges as she stands there meditatively and bathes in the holy water, while the woman herself is having a very profound experience, for Oliver too it becomes a divine experience as she is better able to understand the intimacy of a human with nature and her observation becomes such that she would never want to forget that moment even after returning to America.

Oliver is a solitary figure not unlike the other nature writers who spend long hours exploring, observing and contemplating in the wild. One of the greatest influences on her writing by her own acknowledgement is Walt Whitman, who was himself a solitary figure. In "There was a child Went Forth" Whitman recounts his childhood experiences which are not very unlike that of Mary Oliver's, that is what makes them kindred spirits. The poem propagates the idea that a child can learn a lot by observing nature. This is central to what Mary Oliver too asserts in her poetry that observation and witnessing of the wilderness can elevate an individual's understanding of life and his place in the world. Both Whitman and Oliver didn't have a very happy childhood. Oliver recounts that she did not have a very happy childhood and to escape it she found the nature and literature. Whitman believed in uniformity in everything in the Universe and the elevated state of consciousness one can experience through one's immersion in it. Witnessing God in everything, in nature is the kind of worshipfulness that both of them possess. She acknowledges this influence in her essay on Whitman, *My Friend Walt Whitman*. She found Whitman most companionable since her childhood. She hardly had any friends and books were closest to her whom she called her friends. Oliver calls Whitman by various names: "my brother, my uncle, my best teacher." She writes most passionately for him which shows her devotion to him. According to her it was through Whitman that she was able to feel that poem was a thing to feel and experience and its intellectuality was secondary. It was through Whitman as a companion that her sojourns into the wild became all the more meaningful.

Oliver can be considered to be in the tradition of William Wordsworth as she too believes in simple verse. She believes in the form and technicality of the art of poetry but in simplified language, which is an echo of what Wordsworth says in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. There is also an echo from Wordsworth's *Prelude* in Oliver, when he says, "What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how; instruct them how the mind of man becomes a thousand times more beautiful than the earth on which he dwells" (Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works*, OUP, 588).

While Oliver might seem to be a simple and straight forward poet at first glance but that is not the case as her poetry deals with some controversial or complex issues where in *American Primitive* poems like “Ghosts” and “Tecumseh” criticise the white imperialist culture that are detrimental to the ecological balances and in *Dream Work* some of the issues that Oliver talks about are father-daughter incest, the holocaust and starving children. In the poem *Rage* from *Dream Work*, Oliver describes a father taking advantage of his little daughter and sexually abusing her and equates the crime to a murder as the innocence as well as the whole basis of the child’s existence is being taken away from her. This poem can be read as autobiographical as Oliver’s father was abusive to her and she had had a terrible childhood, where she often escaped to the woods with her books. In *Shadows* again she represents the dark forces of nature where the negatives exist, though these catastrophes might cause destruction but they are not driven by any sense of hatred or vengefulness. Oliver’s celebration of nature in the poem *The River* is in tradition of Shelley’s *The Cloud*, yet it is unique in the sense where she combines the imagery of the miraculous cycles of nature along with a universality of all living and non-living beings. The river is brought to life like Shelley’s *The Cloud* and then the human experience is equated with it. In *Robert Schumann*, she empathises with the composer who would have had a promising music career for the talent he had but his dreams were squashed as he met with a head injury and eventually he descended into a mental illness and eventually died of pneumonia. Though there are around sixteen poems in *American Primitive* that talk about a commonplace act of eating but the act of eating too transforms into an act of mystical communion with nature. But mostly Oliver is out in the wild, detached from the ‘real’ world and can be questioned for her aloofness from the world, but that is exactly what makes her a mystic writer.

Oliver’s understanding of nature and life is beyond the ordinary. She at once relishes in the beauty of nature and life and its ephemeral nature. In *Blackwater Woods* (*American Primitive*, 82) Oliver talks about the need of love and loving with great intensity and at the same

time understanding that the person or animal one is in love with is as ephemeral as us. This is a very spiritual understanding that is representative of detachment and at the same time partaking in the worldly affairs. Oliver celebrates the ephemeral in the poem, *I Know Someone*, where she celebrates the beauty of flowers which they exude in their short lives, yet they give a long lasting pleasure. In "The Ponds" Oliver not only goes on to celebrate the ephemeral ponds that exist for a short while, but she also paints a picture of the changing seasons emphasising, specially on spring, the month April, where she talks about various migrating birds and some permanent residents of the woods. In this depiction is clearly seen that everything in nature changes, there is nothing permanent, though certain things might last longer than the others. Birds are migratory, seasons change, pools also form after the snow melts from winter. The picture that Oliver creates echoes strongly of the poem, "Spring Pools" by Robert Frost, where the poet too celebrates the beauty of the pools and the flowers growing besides them. Frost emphasises in this poem on the temporality of both their existence and yet they recur each year. While there is celebration in the continuity of the temporary, as things appear and bloom in their glory for a while and then they disappear to return again next season but in the present context of an ecocritical perspective this has become erratic where the natural cycle is changing due to various factors, mostly human caused and what was once expected and taken for granted in nature is no more so. Winters are not that harsh one year, next year they may be unbearable, monsoons are dry one year, next year they may cause major damage. Rachel Carson in her book *Silent Spring* brought forward a profound study of pesticides and other chemicals used in warfare on the environment, which was not only damaging to the human beings but contaminated the whole environment and it showed that humans cannot mindlessly indulge in activities that would not only affect the other life forms and earth in general but doing so would actually come back to them and would make their own survival on earth difficult. Her study on the pesticides and other chemicals and their extremely hazardous effects on not only the pests but other insects, animals, plants and also humans showed that humans

must use such chemicals consciously and with awareness. It is man's ambitious desire to control nature thoroughly and tame the wilderness that causes these unnecessary and harmful consequences sprouting out of his own actions.

Oliver also believes in celebrating the variety and differences not only in nature, but also in human nature. She brings in the concept of harmony in the differences that we find in other people around us. She gives the example of her partner and herself, who have very different natures. While she finds exhilaration in observing nature intricately, her partner Mary Malone does not have that kind of patience but finds exhilaration in flying as an amateur pilot, who describes her flying experiences and her observations from the sky of the earth to Oliver. Oliver highlights this that two people having very different experiences, not having much in common, can enrich each others lives by sharing their different perspectives with each other.

Oliver can be classed as a modern day mystic who doesn't identify as one but in all her activities is akin to one. Oliver has a profound understanding not only of life but also of death and the transition in death. Janet McNew compares Whitman and Oliver in this respect. While Whitman is horrified at the excessive dead bodies that are buried under the earth, Oliver seems to celebrate just this as she illustrates the continuity of the dead flesh either returning to earth or changing its state through remaining in the world as one sees an eagle feeding on a carcass of a dead animal. This is comparable to Zoroastrian philosophy where the human dead bodies were left on the towers of silence for the birds of prey to feed on. Similarly the Buddhist philosophy also preaches of this through continuity of the remnants of human body in some form as the sum total of energy remains the same in the universe no matter what. Whitman would also have been horrified at the excessive consumption of sea creatures of each other, big fish consuming the small and so on. Oliver normalises this idea in *Blue Pastures*. In *Winter Hours*, in the essay *Sister Turtle*, Oliver says that she has stopped eating meat since some time but she is able to see that sea creatures are constantly consuming each other, it seems to be an endless cycle. While Oliver has given up eating meat for ethical reasons

there's no way in which the cycle of preying and killing for hunger by the wild animals is questioned. Oliver constantly tries to emphasise on the importance of the roles of all creatures great and small in nature. In *The Turtle* (Dream Work, 57-58) talks about the involvement of a turtle in the world as she lays eggs and procreates. She understands that everything in nature is tied to her. According to Janet McNew, motherhood is often used as the attribute of connectedness to nature, by Oliver. This connectedness is also made visible in how Oliver represented the trees by bringing them to life as she says that they know that she has come for her regular morning walk.

In his essay, *The Earth as God's Body: Incarnation as Communion in the Poetry of Mary Oliver*, Todd Davis argues that "Oliver uses poetry to explore her own faith and her own faith to create a poetry that can only be described as a fusion of Transcendental, Buddhist, and Christian thought grounded firmly in the earth, which Oliver repeatedly avows is "God's body." One of the reasons perhaps that Mary Oliver is not taken seriously by the critics is that, that she deifies nature and this is unfashionable in the post modernist context. In *Blue Pastures*, Oliver says, "I believe everything has a soul" and she says in *Upstream*, "Do you think there is anything not attached by its unbreakable cord to everything else?" Through her observational poetry she shows that the dimension of connectedness beyond the ordinary perception exists. This is mystical in approach and makes everything in the world connected through an invisible thread. This is what the purpose of Mary Oliver's poetry is. It is also steeped in Buddhist philosophy. By this idea the world in general becomes sacred as the idea that an individual doesn't exist in isolation is propagated and he is connected to everything else in the world makes it symbolic of a universal wholesomeness where exploiting anything in nature would eventually be hazardous to oneself. In the poem, *At the River Clarion*, Oliver first says that she can't fathom who God is, then deifies everything in nature be they inanimate objects or the living. She goes on to point out God as variety of things, "If God exists he isn't just churches and mathematics./He's the forest, He's the desert./He's the ice caps, that are dying./He's the ghetto and the Museum of Fine Arts."



This idea is essentially important in preservation of environment where a self-conscious approach makes an individual not mindlessly cause any actions that would be damaging to nature or environment. If this ideology takes root in an individual's mind and at large in the collective consciousness then it would prove to be a boon to conserve the environment. Oliver opens up the natural world similar to the Corpus Christi, of which one shall partake as one does wine and bread, symbolically. It is a kind of a communion that all can partake in irrespective of religion, by being human. She continues in the same poem by opening up the debate that what we usually consider to be bad and evil might also be something in the larger context of God's canvas of the universe. She goes the idea that whatever is given to us shall be taken away and that is the cycle of nature. She asserts this when she says that her dog belonged to God, and so did the tick that led to its death. Both were creatures of God and one cannot reject one and accept the other.

Oliver though doesn't wish to be tagged as an environmentalist but her writing and its popularity certainly makes her stand out in favour of making the masses aware of the beauty and importance of environment inclusive of nature and wilderness. Her writing is not only influential in making people aware of the importance of nature but her writing is also therapeutic, bringing people out of the trauma and the mundane. She is also a poet of the evanescence who celebrates temporality and gives one an understanding that one must come to terms with one's own ephemeral existence and of everything else around us.

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