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Navigating Ancestral Shores: A Study on the Revivalism of the Transcendentalist's Reverential Treatment of Nature in Select Poems of Mary Oliver

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Abstract- Pulitzer Prize winner and American poet, Mary Oliver's poetry is reminiscent of the Transcendentalist spirit of her intellectual ancestors namely Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. Oliver wrote many of her 'nature' poems while residing in New England, the birthing place of her Transcendentalist intellectual predecessors. Her work can be considered as a revivalistic expression of the tenets that the Transcendentalists held dear – the most striking being a poignant connection with Nature. Nature, in her poems is a pulsating life-force that she inherently identifies with, even to the extent of stubbornly seeking out Her mysteries and secrets in an optimistic desire to achieve a fluid oneness. This mysticism and reverence for Nature embodies what the Transcendentalist had set out to herald in a new dawn of intellectual life that would guide the fledgling nation and leave an indelible mark on the history of American literature. This paper will attempt to showcase the reverential tone that Oliver embodies in her 'nature' poems. The aim of the paper is to study some select poems by Oliver, in particular, her thematic preoccupation with Nature, and in doing so, demonstrate that her poems have an instinctual affinity with her poetical ancestors of the Transcendentalist movement and though a contemporary poet, she navigates the intellectual and poetical shores of her predecessors.

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INTRODUCTION

It would not be far-reaching to say that the American poet, Mary Oliver, is a direct intellectual descendent of the New Englander(s) better known as the transcendentalists in the canons of American literature. The sources which have influenced Oliver's treatment of nature in her poems are manifold – from her childhood memories of the suburbia of Ohio to her difficult relationship with her parents while growing up. These memories are recreated in her nature poems and she considers its divinity as a spiritual mediator to negotiate the troubled world of her past and the frenzy of modern living which she disdained just as Thoreau had renounced in *Walden*.

Oliver's encounter with the natural world is one of great reverence and awareness that the sacred

resided in the wilderness. Her poetry is filled with imageries of animals in their natural habitations: 'shore birds, swans, water snakes, the phases of the moon and humpback whales.' Nature is both a teacher and a mirror of the soul, and an engagement with its divinity is where one is able to 'transcend' mundane existence and realise a true purpose just as everything in nature functions purposefully.

This paper will attempt to analyse Oliver's thematic preoccupation with nature and a reverential treatment towards it by studying some of her select poems taken from different collections. This thematic preoccupation found in her poems is a residual inheritance from her predecessors and so in essence, a revivalism of the transcendentalist tenet that the divinity of nature and the natural world is a path to self-realization instead of seeking it through institutionalized beliefs and traditions.

In this paper, the word 'nature' is understood as the natural physical world including plants and animals and landscapes. The term is used in line with the Romantic philosophy that the "natural world was a vast analogue of the spiritual," attributing the quality of the divine, the presence of the Universal Soul in the individual soul, which Emerson put forward in his essay "Nature" (Philominraj 127).

Born in 1935, in the semi-rural suburbs of Cleveland, Oliver acquired a natural affinity with nature being an avid walker and explorer of the woods which surrounded her childhood home. This would continue into her adulthood and fanned the fires of her creative impulse in her observances of nature. It was her collection of poetry *American Primitive* that won her the Pulitzer Prize in 1984. This collection glorified the natural world and reflected a fascination with the ideal of the pastoral life. Many of her poems on nature originated from the walks she would go on, in and around her adopted home of New England where she moved to sometime in the 1960s (www.britannica.com).

That Oliver located herself in New England, the birthing home of the American Romantics, is no coincidence as her poetic influences included Thoreau and Whitman. Like Whitman, she adopted the structure of free verse for many of her poems, this form, allowing her to capture the inner monologues and rhapsodies that nature stirred up in her.

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The poetry of Oliver as mentioned previously ties in closely with the ideas set by the transcendentalists. George Hochfield commented that American transcendentalism was a "... historical influence that still affects the intellectual life of contemporary America." Transcendentalism has undoubtedly left a "lasting impression on the American character" (Introduction ix).

As a movement, the years 1836 to 1846, can be said to be the blossoming of transcendentalism in New England. It exerted a fascination over most of the active literary minds of the country and "flowered brilliantly in the masterpieces of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman" (Introduction ix).

The word 'transcendentalism' was derived from German Romantic philosophy – in the ideas of Kant, Hegel, Fitch and Schelling who espoused a "distrust of the intellect" and exalted "intuition." For them, 'intuition' knew truths which 'transcended' those truths which were accessible to faculties that employed logical arguments and scientific inquiries. These key ideas imported from Europe appealed to the transcendentalists as it provided a metaphysical justification for the ideal of the individual freedom – "if every man could apprehend the truth by direct intuition, then any form of external authority, political or religious was unnecessary." This meant that man had the capacity for "direct spiritual insight." This concept also directly translated into their approach to nature and the natural world – that man could attain spiritual insight by engaging with nature and thereby seeing and accessing the divine in it (Parkes 23).

Emerson, the leading spokesman of the movement, believed that "the human spirit and the natural universe were expressions of God" (Parkes 24). For Whitman, the transcendentalist conception of nature meant that the "material world and all its inhabitants were emanations of divinity, and therefore sacred, and that man could achieve a sense of unity with God" (Parkes 31).

Taking this transcendentalist tenet of the conception of the sacred and divine in nature, the poetry of Oliver also embodies a reverential attitude towards nature. Oliver, like Thoreau who described himself as a "saunterer," loved wandering in the woods and the wetlands and this evoked an image of the zealous worshipper's unwillingness to be estranged from her spiritual church (Parkes, "Thoreau" 109). Many of her nature poems reflect her deep conviction that there is a spiritual sense of revelation when she enters into its microcosmic world; the attention to detail that would ordinarily escape the eyes of others is vividly delivered. The pebbles in a riverbed or the sensuous description of a swan 'transcends' the immediate reality of the physical to find a message or lesson and offers a fresh perspective of objects in the natural world. Maxine

Kumin in the *Women's Review of Books* describes Oliver's poetry as an "indefatigable guide to the natural world, particularly to its lesser-known aspects" (www.poetryfoundation.org).

In her poems "Sleeping in the Forest" and "Morning Poem," the awe and wonderment that accompanies the believer of nature's magnanimity, a virtue that is associated with God(s), is shown to be akin to entering the kingdom of a supreme being.

In "Sleeping in the Forest," Oliver speaks of the earth remembering her and of taking her back in so tenderly (lines 1-2). There is an immediate suggestion here that she believes in a primitive connection with nature – that her soul and nature can recognise each other having the cosmic vein of "original energy" coursing through her. This idea of a primal connection is repeated throughout in Whitman's "Song of Myself" where he wrote on his belief of the universe working in tandem as an "undivided unity" (Philominraj 128).

In the succeeding lines, Oliver writes:

... I slept as never before, a stone
On the riverbed, nothing
Between me and the white fire of the stars
But my thoughts and they floated
Light as moths among the branches
Of the perfect trees. ("Sleeping in the Forest")

This section demonstrates the munificence of nature and its power to heal and restore the human soul. Having "slept as never before," Oliver becomes a part of elemental nature where she is transformed into "a stone on the river bed" having no barrier to stop her communing with the "fire" of the stars above her. Her choice of the word 'perfect' to describe the trees only furthers the idea that nature epitomizes flawlessness and is without defect or corruption, the state of ideality that the human soul can aspire for, considering the deprave materialism that modern-living and its malaise poses.

The concluding lines of the poem announce that:

By morning
I had vanished at least a dozen times
Into something better. ("Sleeping in the Forest")

By vanishing, Oliver is saying that she has attained insight in the act of surrendering the 'self'. And that in her encounter with nature even while "sleeping" which is suggestive of inactivity and rest, by immersing her 'self' and surrendering to nature, it turned her into "something better." Her transformative journey into the "better" self is attained through her 'sleeping in the forest' – "Self-discovery is thus linked with the discovery of fact outside of oneself" (Viegas 241).

In "Morning Poem," the opening lines touch on approaching nature with awe:

Every morning
The world
Is created.
Under the orange
Sticks of the sun

In nature, morning, which is suggestive of new beginnings, give every human and life form the opportunity to start over. Thoreau wrote in *Walden* in the chapter "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" that: "Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself" (Fisher et al 140). In stanza 7 of the poem, Oliver directly addresses her reader that:

... somewhere deep within you
A beast shouting that the earth
Is exactly what it wanted

The phrase "deep within you" and the image of a beast shouting out strikes us as a primal cry from the soul that it desires to be achieve oneness with nature. The benevolence of nature is in the "blazing lilies" of the ponds, if we are willing to stop and observe and acknowledge that the beauty in the details of nature is as Oliver says: "... a prayer heard and answered/ Lavishly/ Every Morning." Just as a benevolent deity, nature is ready to offer her beauty every new day:

Whether or not
You have ever dared to be happy,
Whether or not
You have ever dared to be pray. ("Morning Poem" stanza 9)

Thoreau's transcendentalist approach to nature meant that he saw it as the "symbol of spirit" and Oliver incarnates this attitude (Viegas 238). Beauty, solitude, and peace are not the only offerings of nature but nature in her poems is symbolic of spiritual facts. Physical things and processes are emblems of some further awareness.

Seen in this light Oliver's nature poems are also a critique of human society. She juxtaposes the human world versus the animal world, and uses the contrast to create a guidebook for misguided souls looking for reprieve and redemption from spiritual barrenness.

In "Wild Geese," she juxtaposes the purposeful lives of the wild geese and her own life, and broadly of every individual. While man incarcerates himself within a society of institutionalised forms of religion and beliefs; of a life of 'trying to be good' or living in constant 'repentance,' the wild geese in following its own instincts and purposeful life that nature has charted out for it is able to assimilate itself into the grand design of the universe.

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.

Oliver indicates that man, unlike animals that unquestioningly follow their instincts fails to understand his/her place in the scheme of things. Against our strife to acquire and to accumulate worldly material goods, Oliver points out that we lose out on the treasure of serenity that nature offers.

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 ... (Stanza 2)
... 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. ("Wild Geese" stanza 3)

Oliver gives a gentle reminder that we are an intrinsic part of nature and just as the wild geese 'know' their place in the "family of things," so should we.

In nature, Oliver believes that the animals and elements in it such as the trees, flowers, lichens and seeds all represent answered prayers. In the poem/prose piece "How I Go to the Woods," she announces that she usually ventures into the woods 'alone' which impresses the idea that it is a sacred space for her.

Ordinarily I go to the woods alone,
With not a single friend, for they are all smilers and talkers
and therefore
Unsuitable.

The phrase "smilers and talkers" is a reference to the outside world (the world that is outside of nature, specifically referencing to the human world) and for Oliver they are "unsuitable" companions who cannot accompany her into the holy precincts of the woods. Thoreau who considered the act of going to the woods as a deliberate act of learning the "essential facts of life," perceived nature as a teacher (Fisher et al. 142). Similarly, Oliver writes that:

I don't really want to be witnessed talking to the catbirds
or hugging the old black oak tree. I have my way
of praying, as you no doubt have yours.

For Oliver, going into the woods and talking to the birds and hugging a tree is an intimate act akin to praying in a temple, and she considers this as too intimate to allow the gaze of others into this private world that she has created for herself. Nature is a sanctuary away from the superfluous, from the prison of details and the "... lives of quiet desperation" that we confine ourselves in (Fisher et al. 135, 142). A "sanctity which shames our religions ...," according to Emerson ("Nature" Tilak 132).

The poem continues:

Besides, when I am alone I can become invisible. I can sit
On the top of a dune as motionless as an uprise of
weeds,
Until the foxes run by unconcerned. I can hear the almost
Unhearable sound of the roses singing.

According to Bruce Bennetin, Oliver's poetry "insists on the primacy of the physical" (www.poetryfoundation.org). She explores the intersection between the human and the natural world and the limitations of language in articulating such a meeting. Oliver takes a subjective approach to moulding herself into one with a world of objects, finding it almost natural to blend her consciousness with the physical elements that make up what is nature. The words "invisible," "motionless," and "unconcerned" all suggest a tranquil state that can be achieved living in close quarters with nature – the same serene and tranquil state that the transcendentalists experienced when going into the woods.

Oliver's nature poems as seen in the study above, then, is a clarion call for a return to the 'primal energy' that coursed through the arteries of her poetic predecessors and a prime example of its revivalism in contemporary American poetry. Nature is an overarching thematic concern and manifested brilliantly in her verse. The two-dimensional world around us is transformed into an expression of tactile tangibility. Elaborate details and imageries of nature is weaved into her poems and she paints it with an exuberant colour of awe and reverence which suggests a direct link and draws parallels in Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. In conclusion, it can be said that Mary Oliver's nature poems are ships that navigate the ancestral shores of her transcendentalists' ancestors.

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