

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

4 Dr. Adenuo Shirat Luikham¹, Moatila² and Lideno Ezung³

5 ¹ Don Bosco College

6 *Received: 8 September 2021 Accepted: 4 October 2021 Published: 15 October 2021*

7

8 **Abstract**

9 Pulitzer Prize winner and American poet, Mary Oliver's poetry is reminiscent of the
10 Transcendentalist spirit of her intellectual ancestors namely Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman.
11 Oliver wrote many of her 'nature' poems while residing in New England, the birthing place of
12 her Transcendentalist intellectual predecessors. Her work can be considered as a revivalistic
13 expression of the tenets that the Transcendentalists held dear â???" the most striking being a
14 poignant connection with Nature. Nature, in her poems is a pulsating life-force that she
15 inherently identifies with, even to the extent of stubbornly seeking out Her mysteries and
16 secrets in an optimistic desire to achieve a fluid oneness. This mysticism and reverence for
17 Nature embodies what the Transcendentalist had set out to herald in a new dawn of
18 intellectual life that would guide the fledgling nation and leave an indelible mark on the history
19 of American literature. This paper will attempt to showcase the reverential tone that Oliver
20 embodies in her 'nature' poems.

21

22 **Index terms**— mary oliver, american poetry, contemporary poet, nature, transcendentalism.

23 Abstract-Pulitzer Prize winner and American poet, Mary Oliver's poetry is reminiscent of the Transcendental-
24 ist spirit of her intellectual ancestors namely Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. Oliver wrote many of her 'nature'
25 poems while residing in New England, the birthing place of her Transcendentalist intellectual predecessors. Her
26 work can be considered as a revivalistic expression of the tenets that the Transcendentalists held dear -the
27 most striking being a poignant connection with Nature. Nature, in her poems is a pulsating life-force that she
28 inherently identifies with, even to the extent of stubbornly seeking out Her mysteries and secrets in an optimistic
29 desire to achieve a fluid oneness. This mysticism and reverence for Nature embodies what the Transcendentalist
30 had set out to herald in a new dawn of intellectual life that would guide the fledgling nation and leave an indelible
31 mark on the history of American literature. This paper will attempt to showcase the reverential tone that Oliver
32 embodies in her 'nature' poems. The aim of the paper is to study some select poems by Oliver, in particular,
33 her thematic Introduction t would not be far-reaching to say that the American poet, Mary Oliver, is a direct
34 intellectual descendent of the New Englander(s) better known as the transcendentalists in the canons of American
35 literature. The sources which have influenced Oliver's treatment of nature in her poems are manifold -from her
36 childhood memories of the suburbia of Ohio to her difficult relationship with her parents while growing up. These
37 memories are recreated in her nature poems and she considers its divinity as a spiritual mediator to negotiate the
38 troubled world of her past and the frenzy of modern living which she disdained just as Thoreau had renounced
39 in Walden.

40 Oliver's encounter with the natural world is one of great reverence and awareness that the sacred resided in
41 the wilderness. Her poetry is filled with imageries of animals in their natural habitations: 'shore birds, swans,
42 water snakes, the phases of the moon and humpback whales.' Nature is both a teacher and a mirror of the soul,
43 and an engagement with its divinity is where one is able to 'transcend' mundane existence and realise a true

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

44 purpose just as everything in nature functions purposefully. This paper will attempt to analyse Oliver's thematic
45 preoccupation with nature and a reverential treatment towards it by studying some of her select poems taken
46 from different collections. This thematic preoccupation found in her poems is a residual inheritance from her
47 predecessors and so in essence, a revivalism of the transcendentalist tenet that the divinity of nature and the
48 natural world is a path to selfrealization instead of seeking it through institutionalized beliefs and traditions.

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

53 Born in 1935, in the semi-rural suburbs of Cleveland, Oliver acquired a natural affinity with nature being
54 an avid walker and explorer of the woods which surrounded her childhood home. This would continue into her
55 adulthood and fanned the fires of her creative impulse in her observances of nature. It was her collection of
56 poetry American Primitive that won her the Pulitzer Prize in 1984. This collection glorified the natural world
57 and reflected a fascination with the ideal of the pastoral life. Many of her poems on nature originated from the
58 walks she would go on, in and around her adopted home of New England where she moved to sometime in the
59 1960s (www.britannica.com).

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

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

68 As a movement, the years 1836 to1846, can be said to be the blossoming of transcendentalism in New England.
69 It exerted a fascination over most of the active literary minds of the country and "flowered brilliantly in the
70 masterpieces of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman" (Introduction ix).

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

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

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

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

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

102 In the succeeding lines, Oliver writes: This section demonstrates the munificence of nature and its power to
103 heal and restore the human soul. Having "slept as never before," Oliver becomes a part of elemental nature
104 where she is transformed into "a stone on the river bed" having no barrier to stop her communing with the "fire"
105 of the stars above her. Her choice of the word 'perfect' to describe the trees only furthers the idea that nature

106 epitomizes flawlessness and is without defect or corruption, the state of ideality that the human soul can aspire
107 for, considering the deprave materialism that modern-living and its malaise poses.

108 The concluding lines of the poem announce that: By morning I had vanished at least a dozen times Into
109 something better. ("Sleeping in the Forest") By vanishing, Oliver is saying that she has attained insight in the
110 act of surrendering the 'self'. And that in her encounter with nature even while "sleeping" which is suggestive
111 of inactivity and rest, by immersing her 'self' and surrendering to nature, it turned her into "something better."
112 Her transformative journey into the "better" self is attained through her 'sleeping in the forest' -"Self-discovery
113 is thus linked with the discovery of fact outside of oneself" (Viegas 241).

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

115 **1 Every morning**

116 The world Is created.

117 **2 Under the orange**

118 **3 Sticks of the sun**

119 In nature, morning, which is suggestive of new beginnings, give every human and life form the opportunity to
120 start over. Thoreau wrote in Walden in the chapter "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" that: "Every
121 morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature
122 herself" ??Fisher et al. The phrase "deep within you" and the image of a beast shouting out strikes us as a primal
123 cry from the soul that it desires to be achieve oneness with nature. The benevolence of nature is in the "blazing
124 lilies" of the ponds, if we are willing to stop and observe and acknowledge that the beauty in the details of nature
125 is as Oliver says: "? a prayer heard and answered/ Lavishly/ Every Morning." Just as a benevolent deity, nature
126 is ready to offer her beauty every new day:

127 Whether or not You have ever dared to be happy,

128 **4 Whether or not**

129 You have ever dared to be pray. ("Morning Poem" stanza 9)

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

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

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

140 You do not have to be good.

141 **5 You do not have to walk on your knees**

142 For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting You only have to let the soft animal of your body Love what
143 it loves.

144 Oliver indicates that man, unlike animals that unquestioningly follow their instincts fails to understand his/her
145 place in the scheme of things. Against our strife to acquire and to accumulate worldly material goods, Oliver
146 points out that we lose out on the treasure of serenity that nature offers. Oliver gives a gentle reminder that we
147 are an intrinsic part of nature and just as the wild geese 'know' their place in the "family of things," so should
148 we.

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

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

154 The phrase "smilers and talkers" is a reference to the outside world (the world that is outside of nature,
155 specifically referencing to the human world) and for Oliver they are "unsuitable" companions who cannot
156 accompany her into the holy precincts of the woods. Thoreau who considered the act of going to the woods
157 as a deliberate act of learning the "essential facts of life," perceived nature as a teacher ??Fisher et al. 142).
158 Similarly, Oliver writes that: I don't really want to be witnessed talking to the catbirds or hugging the old black
159 oak tree. I have my way of praying, as you no doubt have yours.

160 For Oliver, going into the woods and talking to the birds and hugging a tree is an intimate act akin to praying
161 in a temple, and she considers this as too intimate to allow the gaze of others into this private world that she has
162 created for herself. Nature is a sanctuary away from the superfluous, from the prison of details and the "? lives of

5 YOU DO NOT HAVE TO WALK ON YOUR KNEES

163 quiet desperation" that we confine ourselves in ??Fisher et al. 135, ??42). A "sanctity which shames our religions
164 ?," according to Emerson ("Nature" Tilak 132). According to Bruce Bennetin, Oliver's poetry "insists on the
165 primacy of the physical" (www.poetryfoundation.org). She explores the intersection between the human and the
166 natural world and the limitations of language in articulating such a meeting. Oliver takes a subjective approach
167 to moulding herself into one with a world of objects, finding it almost natural to blend her consciousness with
168 the physical elements that make up what is nature. The words "invisible," "motionless," and "unconcerned" all
169 suggest a tranquil state that can be achieved living in close quarters with nature -the same serene and tranquil
170 state that the transcendentalists experienced when going into the woods.

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

1

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

Figure 1:

178

179 [Fisher ()] William J Fisher . *American Literature of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology*, 1955. 1996. Eurasia
180 Publishing. (First ed.)

181 [Hochfield ()] George Hochfield . *Selected Writings of the American Transcendentalists. The New American*
182 *Library*, 1966. pp. p. ix.

183 [Mary Oliver, www.britannica.com/biography/mary-oliver (2019)] *Mary Oliver*, www.britannica.com/biography/mary-oliver, Accessed 19 Feb. 2019. (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica)

184 [Oliver (2019)] *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/mary-oliver, Mary Oliver . Accessed 19 Feb.
185 2019.

186 [Parkes et al.] 'Romanticism in America'. Henry Parkes , ; Bamford , Fisher . *American Literature* p. .

187 [Emerson and Waldo ()] 'Selected Essays and Poems'. Ralph Emerson , Waldo . *Nature* Raghukul Tilak (ed.)
188 2000. Educational Publishers. 7 p. 132. (th ed.)

189 [Narasimhaiah, C.D. (ed.) ()] *Student's Handbook of American Literature*, Narasimhaiah, C.D. (ed.) 1979. 2002.
190 Kalyani Publishers.

191 [Philominraj] *The Theme of Universal Love in Whitman's 'Song of Myself*, J Philominraj . p. . (Narasimhaiah,
192 C.D., Student's Handbook)

193 [Viegas] *Thoreau's Walden: A Study of Symbolism in 'The Pond*, M S Viegas . p. . (Narasimhaiah, C.D., Student's
194 Handbook)

195 [Thoreau and David] 'Where I Lived, and What I Lived For'. Henry Thoreau , David . *American Literature*
196 Walden. 1849. Fisher et al. (ed.) p. .

197