



Mary Oliver

Biography Timeline – **September 10, 1935**, born in Maple Heights, Ohio, a suburb Cleveland, daughter of Edward William and Helen M. (Vlasak) Oliver; sexually abused as a little child; **1949**, at the age of 14 begins to write poetry; **1953**, leaves home the day after graduating from high school; attends Ohio State University for a year; at the age of 17 visits Steepletop, the home of poet Edna St. Vincent Millay in Austerlitz, New York; becomes friend with poet's sister Norma and "assists" her in care-taking work related to Millay's poetry and papers; attends Vassar College without attaining degree, focusing on her writing; moves to Greenwich Village, New York; **1958**, on a return trip to Steepletop, meets photographer and gallery owner Molly Malone Cook, ten years her senior, and falls in love; **1963**, publishes first volume of poems, *No Voyage, and Other Poems*; **1964**, moves with Molly into a boathouse in Provincetown, Massachusetts; **1972**, receives National Endowment of the Arts Fellowship; chairs writing department of the Fine Arts Workshop in Provincetown; **1980**, receives Guggenheim Fellowship; **1982**, made the Mather Visiting Professorship at Case Western Reserve University; **1983**, receives American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Achievement Award; **1984**, wins Pulitzer Prize for *American Primitive*; **1986**, poet-in-residence at Bucknell University; travels with Molly to Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, and New Zealand on a cultural tour sponsored by the US Information Agency; **1991**, writer-in-residence at Sweet Briar College, Virginia; **1992**, wins the National Book Award for *New and Selected Poems*; **1995**, named the Catharine Osgood Foster Chair for Distinguished Teaching at Bennington College; **1998**, Lannan Literary Award for poetry; **August 26, 2005**, Molly dies at home in Provincetown; **2014**, moves to Plymouth Harbor, Sarasota, Florida; **January 17, 2019**, dies of lymphoma at her home in Hobe Sound, Florida.

Crossing from the 20th century into the 21st century, Mary Oliver was either the best-selling or second-best-selling American poet for a generation. Throughout her writing career she maintained a fidelity to portraying the natural world – in all of its beauties and wonders – with terse descriptions and breath-taking metaphors. Not that her poems don't contain people; they do. But her attention was not focused on the self-absorption, cynicism, and irony that saturates so much contemporary poetry and hobbles so much public discourse.

Oliver would have rather considered the glories of the world and offer praise. In fact, when she was comfortably past the biblically envisioned “three score and ten years,” she understood herself as a “praise poet.”(1) Enraptured by the earth and its mysteries, she continuously engaged in praise – with an accessible style, riveting images, plain language, and passionate scrutiny – of what her senses took in. *“If I have any lasting worth,”* she said, *“it will be because I have tried to make people remember what the Earth is meant to look like.”*(2)

Author of more than two dozen books of poems and prose, Oliver was at first a devoted resident of Provincetown, Massachusetts. Her specific appreciations of Provincetown knew no bounds: *“... my woods, my ponds, my sun-filled harbor, no more than a blue comma on the map of the world but, to me, the emblem of everything.”*(3)

Oliver’s ascendancy among the ranks of great poets in America revealed what diligence and honed focusing can do for a writer. With neither patrician patrimony nor even one earned degree from an institution of higher education, she managed to achieve the heights of esteem in her vocation. How? Two reasons. By virtue of her undying love of writing and the deep pleasures she took in the writing task itself. And from her earliest beginnings she discovered sustaining comfort along wooded paths, by the edges of water, and in the pulsing life of the creaturely world. When reading her poetry, it’s almost as if she had come back from a time-travel adventure during which she sat at Jesus’ feet and witnessed first-hand the Sermon on the Mount: *“Look at the birds of the air... Consider the lilies of the field....”*(4) Surveying her entire writing career, it is obvious she had been continuously growing in her descriptive powers and increasing her grasp of what the world has to offer to those who pay attention.

Oliver's burgeoning growth as a writer was also paralleled by her deepening growth as a human being. In her later years, with the help of a counselor, she experienced healing from early wounds of sexual abuse.(5) And it is noteworthy that, after the death of Molly Malone Cook, her partner of more than 44 years (and literary agent), she grew increasingly comfortable with the overt use of traditional religious language in her poems.

Up to the year 2006, Oliver's quietly beautiful poems about the natural world and the simplicities of daily living were frequently ascribed to her participation in the American transcendental tradition, with special connections with Emerson and Thoreau. With the publication of two of her later poetry collections, *Thirst*(6) and *Evidence*(7), her faith journey became powerfully plain and readily accessible. Not that she hadn't alerted her readers about her spiritual yearnings. A decade prior to *Evidence*, she declared, "*Years ago, I set three 'rules' for myself. Every poem I write, I said, must have a genuine body, it must have sincere energy, and it must have a spiritual purpose.*"(8) In many of the poems she published over 50 years, there are more than mere hints about such purpose. Poet and literature professor Todd Davis assays her spiritual purpose precisely: "*At every turn, Oliver uses poetry to explore her own faith and her own faith to create ...poetry [Her belief in the sacredness of the world] continually carries her out the door and into the sacrament of the world's wild beauty.*"(9)

Praying with Mary Oliver: Suggestions for Use

Day 1 In "*Praying*" (10) Oliver writes:

*It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be*

*weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just pay attention, then patch*

*a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway*

*into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.*

Pray today by focusing on the “doorway” of prayer itself, considering all aspects of life for which you are thankful and then “*patch a few words together.*” Do this for at least 10 minutes. Then sit silently for at least 10 minutes as you listen for “another voice.”

Day 2 In “*When Death Comes*” (11) Oliver urges readers to take hold of amazement as an ultimate strategy for living an authentic life:

*When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

*When it is over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.*

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

Pray today with a focus on your own status (actual/potential) of being “*married to amazement.*” Confess any sighing, fright, argumentativeness that may have hindered your journey. Verbalize your requests to God as to how your life can be “*something particular, and real.*”

Day 3 In her poem “*What I Said at Her Service,*” (12) presumably part of a eulogizing remembrance of her partner Molly Malone Cook, Oliver says:

*When we pray to love God perfectly
surely we do not mean only.*

(Lord, see how well I have done.)

Pray today that God may see how well you have done loving God by loving others.

Day 4 In "Little Summer Poem Touching the Subject of Faith" (13), Oliver uses the image of corn fields to learn something new about faith:

*Every summer
I listen and look
under the sun's brass and even
in the moonlight, but I can't hear

anything, I can't see anything --
not the pale roots digging down, nor the green stalks muscling up,...

nor the tassels making,
nor the shucks, nor the cobs....

... I fail as a witness, seeing nothing -

... all of it
happening
beyond any seeable proof, or hearable hum....*

What should I fear?

*One morning
in the leafy green ocean
the honeycomb of the corn's beautiful body
is sure to be there.*

Pray today by trusting God to bring more fruition than you can ever see or hear or know.

Day 5 In "Musical Notation: 2" (14) Oliver juxtaposes God's possession of all that is with a consideration of her own home and the world outside her doors.

*Everything is His.
The door, the door jamb.
The wood stacked near the door.
The leaves blown upon the path
that leads to the door.
The trees that are dropping their leaves
the wind that is tripping them this way and that way,
the clouds that are high above them,
the stars that are sleeping now beyond the clouds*

and simply said, all the rest.

When I open the door I am so sure so sure

all this will be there, and it is.

I look around.

I fill my arms with the firewood.

I turn and enter His house, and close His door.

Pray today for a sense of the everywhere-ness of God and not only that but for the pure possession of your life by God so that where you live might also be called “*His house.*”

Day 6 In the poem “*More Beautiful than the Honey Locust Tree Are the Words of the Lord*”(15) Oliver prays with deep gratitude for a graced day.

... oh Lord, let me be something

useful and unpretentious.

Even the chimney swift sings.

Even the cobblestones have a task to do, and do it well.

Lord, let me be a flower, even a tare; or a sparrow.

Or the smallest bright stone in a ring worn by someone

brave and kind, whose name I will never know.

Lord, when I sleep I feel you near.

When I wake, and you are already wiping the stars away,

I rise quickly, hoping to be like your wild child

the rose, the honey-maker the honey-vine;

a bird shouting its joy as it floats

through the gift you have given us: another day.

Pray today that you will be open to receive the gifts that God yearns to give you on this “*another day.*” Pray also today that whatever you do will be a “*useful and unpretentious*” gift for the benefit of others in the world, for the blessing of the wide embrace of nature, and for the increase of God’s purposes in the community where you live.

Day 7 In “*Thirst,*” (16) the poem that closes out her book by the same title, Oliver says:

Another morning and I wake with thirst

for the goodness I do not have. I walk

out to the pond and all the way God has given such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord, I was never a quick scholar, but sulked and hunched over my books past the hour and the bell; grant me, in your mercy, a little more time. Love for the earth and love for you are having such a long conversation in my heart. Who knows what will finally happen or where I will be sent, yet already I have given a great many things away, expecting to be told to pack nothing, except the prayers which, with this thirst, I am slowly learning.

Pray today with a sense of gratitude for “such beautiful lessons” that God has granted to you. Pray for “a little more time” so that the conversation that is going on in your heart – between your connection with utmost ideals and your connection with God – can reach fulfillment.

NOTES

- (1) Maria Shriver, “Maria Shriver Interviews the Famously Private Poet Mary Oliver,” *O, The Oprah Magazine*, March 9, 2011 (<http://www.oprah.com/entertainment/Maria-Shriver-Interviews-Poet-Mary-Oliver/3>)
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Quoted in Mary Duenwald, “The Land and Words of Mary Oliver, the Bard of Provincetown,” *The New York Times*, July 1, 2009.
- (4) Matthew 6:26, 28.
- (5) See “Maria Shriver Interviews the Famously Private Poet Mary Oliver.”
- (6) Mary Oliver, *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006)
- (7) Mary Oliver, *Evidence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009)
- (8) Mary Oliver, *Winter Hours: Prose, Prose Poems, and Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), p. 24.
- (9) Todd Davis, “The Earth as God’s Body: Incarnation as Communion in the Poetry of Mary Oliver,” *Christianity and Literature*, Vol. 58, no. 4 (2009): 605. (See http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb049/is_4_58/ai_n35620750/)
- (10) Oliver, *Thirst*, p. 37.
- (11) Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 10-11.
- (12) Oliver, *Thirst*, p. 19.
- (13) Mary Oliver, *West Wind: Poems and Prose Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), pp. 36-37.
- (14) Oliver, *Thirst*, p. 38.
- (15) Ibid., p. 34.
- (16) Ibid., p. 69.

FOR FURTHER READING, STUDY, & REFLECTION

- Mary Oliver, *No Voyage, and Other Poems* (1963, 1st ed.; 1965, expanded ed.)
Mary Oliver, *American Primitive* (1983)
Mary Oliver, *House of Light* (1990)
Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems* (1992)
Mary Oliver, *Winter Hours: Prose, Prose Poems, and Poems* (1999)
Mary Oliver, *Why I Wake Early: New Poems* (2004)
Mary Oliver, *Blue Iris: Poems and Essays* (2004)
Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems, Volume Two* (2005)
Mary Oliver, *At Blackwater Pond: Mary Oliver Reads Mary Oliver* (2006, audio cd)
Mary Oliver, *Thirst* (2006)
Mary Oliver and Molly Malone Cook, *Our World* (2007)
Mary Oliver, *Red Bird* (2008)
Mary Oliver, *Evidence* (2009)
Mary Oliver, *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems* (2010)
Mary Oliver, *A Thousand Mornings* (2012)
Mary Oliver, *Dog Songs* (2013)
Mary Oliver, *Blue Horses* (2014)
Mary Oliver, *Felicity* (2015)