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In a 2015 interview, Mary Oliver discusses her childhood, and her earliest experiences with Christianity and spirituality. To her, these experiences were emphasized by the ways in which she differed from her peers, saying, “I was sent to Sunday school as many kids are, and then I had trouble with the resurrection, so I would not join the church. But I was still probably more interested than many of the kids who did enter the church” (Listening 02:15-02:31). By posing her introduction to organized religion in this way, it elucidates the contrast between her and her childhood community. It distinguishes her mindset and her attachments from those of her peers, and plants the seeds of her perspective that would grow over time. As such, the relationship between the Christian American culture in which she was raised, and her own beliefs, is pointedly distinct. Throughout her life, she used her poetry to both show these distinctions and demonstrate the difficulty in changing a person’s mindset from the culture which has shaped it. In her catalogue of short form poetry, these topics reach a head in the collection *Felicity*, where she uses the poems “Roses,” “Leaves and Blossoms Along the Way,” and “Storage,” to present contradictions between beliefs found in American culture, religion, and the natural world which connects the two.

A consistent theme through Oliver’s early life is a desire to escape. She has discussed the issues present in her childhood home growing up in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. The solution which she came up with was simply to retreat into the woods around her (Poetry Foundation). She would walk and write in her notebooks, and it was in this self-imposed isolation that she

began her love of poetry. In the same 2015 interview, she says “The only record I ever broke in school was truancy. I went to the woods a lot” (Listening 5:41-5:47). It seems fitting that her life and her worldview would be influenced by the disconnection with her family, her peers, and her community as a whole. As such, two of the most common themes in her writings, spirituality and nature, are written about with the sincerity of a scientist but with an air of loneliness. Later in her career, her topics of focus would shift, creating space for the internal world to be discussed, and allowing her poems to be indications of her own introspection (Poetry Foundation). But throughout her life and her career, that separateness would never entirely dissipate, and it would create rifts in her writing which would provide stark contrast between the words on the page and the culture at large.

Literary reviewers of Oliver have much to say regarding the themes of nature and religion in her work, but discussion on her position in the dialogue of American culture is largely superficial. Given Oliver’s use of nature as an escape, her early work demonstrates a disgust for the expansionary, industrial culture of America which is willing to destroy the natural world for its own gains (McNew 67). Within that context, McNew posits that Oliver’s work enables the reader to look beyond cultural constructs that lead to feelings of isolation (75). Compounding on this, it can be easy to look at the act of writing as a further escape for the author from those same feelings of isolation. From that viewpoint, her work becomes descriptive of a shared existence; A community that all mankind partakes in (Gregory). Yet that community would include the individuals who would be responsible for the industrial encroachment on nature which she abhors. Finally, some literary reviewers look at Oliver’s work as superficial in itself due to the relatively simple vocabulary that her work employs, as well as the universality of the subject matter of many of her poems. This perspective shows her work as being the product of a culture

built on consumption; Fulfilling more of a concept of a mythic American poet, and creating something which can appeal to the broadest audience (Cook). Although her appeal cannot be understated, it is important for readers to come to their own conclusions regarding the simplicity of her word choices and the grandiosity of her themes.

Oliver's poem "Roses" begins as a metaphilosophical exercise in looking at the kinds of existential questions people ask themselves. The three questions outlined in the poem are: Where did we all come from? Does God Exist? And, what happens when we die? The narrator outlines these questions in a very casual, matter-of-fact style, saying "Everyone now and again wonders about / those questions that have no ready / answers: first cause, God's existence, what happens when the curtains go down and nothing stops it" (lines 1-5). As it pertains to the culture in which the author was raised, the speaker details some uniquely American symbols as being unable to "stop the curtains closing", saying, "not kissing, / not going to the mall, not the Super / Bowl" (lines 5-7). The speaker is making a comparison by the sudden harsh tonal shift, saying that the existential questions can neither be asked nor answered by the existence of these symbols. By using examples that are uniquely American, the author is presenting an idea that she and many of her readers would find inescapable; to either question the foundation of these hallmarks of culture, or to accept their superficiality. It is by denying that these symbols can touch the answers that she forces the readers to consider this. Simply put, not all cultures express love through kissing, the mall is not the height of commerce that it once was, and American football is called American because its importance is limited to Americans. She concludes the poem by asking the wild roses if they can answer her questions, to which they respond, "we are / just now entirely busy being roses" (lines 13-14). With such a conclusion, the activities of the roses are contrasted with the symbols she presented. In other words, by being preoccupied with kissing, going to the

mall, and watching the Superbowl, Americans cannot answer those same questions because they are entirely too busy being Americans.

Oliver's poem "Storage" is both a critique of objects and their place in our lives, as well as a commentary on the things people carry as they go through life. The speaker details their story, about how they've accumulated more and more things as they've moved homes and have had to put many of the items in storage. Metaphorically, it is easy to see how this pertains to baggage that people have acquired and continue to hold onto. Looking at the poem more literally, it can be viewed as an indictment on the simple acquisition of 'more things', and instead an appeal to live more simply. The speaker goes on: "As I grew older the things I cared / about grew fewer, but were more / important. So one day I undid the lock / and called the trash man. He took / everything" (lines 8-12). It is, literally speaking, a denial of superficiality. This is Oliver speaking clearly, and disagreeing with the importance of acquisition.

The poem "Leaves and Blossoms Along the Way" is exemplary of how Oliver's weighted importance of the natural world contradicts the quintessential American mindset. It begins with a quick exercise in looking for the right place for oneself, saying, "If you're John Muir you want trees to / live among. If you're Emily, a garden / will do" (lines 1-3). The Emily to which the speaker is referring is likely to be Emily Dickinson, and she and John Muir are both famous for being writers and naturalists alike. As for finding a place for oneself, it is a uniquely challenging ordeal as it is simultaneously important yet self-important. For some, like the naturalists which the narrator describes, it is a matter of slotting into a position in the world. For others, it is a matter of carving out that slot. The latter mindset is one that is fiercely American; Staking a claim, taking what is yours, and manifesting one's destiny. But after discussing images of loneliness, the speaker recontextualizes the premise halfway through the poem by saying, "Some

words will never leave God's mouth, / no matter how hard you listen" (lines 14-15). This is the speaker connecting this individualistic world to one that is potentially referential of Christianity, but could also be referring to a concept of unquestioned truth. Differences in culture are differences in norms. In other words, a person's culture is composed of the aspects of them that are simply normal; Integral to the point of being unquestioned. This passage is Oliver's way of asking: If God spoke, would He sound like an American? Given the examples of John Muir and Emily Dickinson, individuals who became one with their environment and valued the natural whole, it seems that Oliver thinks not.

In her poems "Roses", "Leaves and Blossoms Along the Way", and "Storage", Mary Oliver uses symbols and imagery to express her disagreement with the American cultural way of thinking. Through a background in feeling separated from her peers and her community, she established her ability to think outside them from a young age. Later in life, her work would begin to show how attempts to compromise American cultural beliefs with other forms of belief would be unsuccessful. But by doing so, she presents readers with a clear method to question themselves. As in "Roses", the speaker says, "Do you have the answers? And if you do, / would you tell me?" (lines 9-10). For questions of culture, it is often less important to know the answer to a question than to know to ask it. This is what Oliver leaves her readers with; The confidence to seek new knowledge, and ask the right questions.

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