
Spirituality in Mary Oliver’s Poetry**Haitham Kamil Al-Zubidi, PHD**haithamkamel@coart.uobaghdad.edu.iq**Noor Hassan Radhi**nanous.5h86@gmail.com**University of Baghdad- College of Arts****DOI: [10.31973/aj.v2i137.1626](https://doi.org/10.31973/aj.v2i137.1626)****ABSTRACT:**

Mary Oliver is an American poet who has been so much fascinated by the natural world since her childhood. Natural world occupies a very large space in her poetry, if not her entire poetic work. She was born in Ohio 1935, and she spent her childhood there surrounded by Nature. She graduated from high school and went to Vassar college and Ohio State University, yet she could not get a degree. She moved to New York where she met the sister of Edna St. Vincent Millay, the famous American poet and playwright. She got a closer look to Edna’s works by organizing her papers for almost seven years. As for career, she held the position at Bennington College by being the Catherine Osgood Foster Chair for Distinguished Teaching. Later on she settled in Provincetown, Massachusetts for almost forty years inspired by the natural scenes there which are conveyed in her collections.

Concerning her life as a poet, she started writing poetry when she was only fourteen. Throughout her life, she published more than fifteen collections and most of them were appreciated by critics. She speaks of the reason behind her choice to write poetry saying that: “I decided very early that I wanted to write,” and “It was the most exciting thing, the most powerful thing, the most wonderful thing to do with my life” (Oliver in Ratiner, 861). She believes that play and work are combined in writing and this is one of the reasons why she chooses to write. She did not like going to school, instead she prefers to wander in the woods reading her favorite poet, Walt Whitman who was “my friend: my brother, my uncle, my best teacher” (Oliver, BP, 14).

She believes that she is blessed by two things: “the natural world, and the world of writing: literature” (Oliver, BP, 64) as a means to overcome her difficult circumstances. Therefore, she focused on developing her writing skills by writing children plays for the *Unicorn Theatre* in London instead of finishing school and getting a

degree. *No Voyage and Other Poems* was published in 1963 to be her first published volume which is definitely deals with nature (Ullyatt, 2).

She published more than twenty books in the 1960s with a diversity of themes which are almost entirely connected, in one way or another, with the natural world. She has a special method of writing poetry by presenting important questions which are left open without answers, because there is no simple correct answer for them, leaving it to the reader to figure it out. Diane S Bonds, one of the critics, talks about the ability of Oliver to move from the figurative to the literal in the same line and the reason lies in her use of the rhetorical strategies. Her aim seems to engage the reader in the process and offer him many possibilities and perspectives to consider one topic (Bonds, 11-13).

Oliver is not a religious poet, in spite of her religious language and her several references to the Holy Spirit, prayers, baptism, Christ and other religious elements. Oliver believes that natural world is equal to the human one, simply because everything in nature has a soul:

I believe in the soul – in mine, and yours and the blue jays, and the pilot whales. I believe each goldfish flying away over the coarse ragweed has a soul, and the ragweed too, plant by plant, and the grains of earth as well. Not romantically do I believe this, nor poetically, nor emotionally, nor metaphorically ...but steadily, lumpishly, absolutely (WH, 84).

in her volume titled *Why I Wake Early* Oliver argues in a short poem called “I wake Close to Morning” (2004) that the natural world, which is available to all humans, is an absolute proof that God exists. She wonders why people keep asking to see God in ID papers. Therefore, she presents proofs derived from nature that God exists:

Why do people keep asking to see
 God’s identity papers
 when the darkness opening into morning
 is more than enough?
 Certainly any god might turn away in disgust. (WIW 1-5)

Oliver employs a Biblical episode mentioned in the Old Testament –and mentioned in the Holy Quran as well- which is the story of Sheba and king Solomon. Sheba recognizes Solomon’s kingdom without any doubts, as it was perfectly clear, so is the natural world which indicates the existence of Mighty God:

Think of Sheba approaching
the kingdom of Solomon.
Do you think she had to ask,
“Is this the place?” (WIW 6-9).

As long as nature is there to look at, one would keep thinking of God, because it is something axiomatic as Oliver says in “Drifting” (2004) from *Blue Iris* volume, meditating on all these natural elements around leading humans spontaneously to think of God. She was walking around under the rain when she started to feel the roots of the earth. She had no intention to think about God, it just happened.

She says that holiness is visible, even though God is not. She believes that it is something wonderful that drifting could make you search for an answer even if you have no intention to search. She compares this to the movement of the clouds which may seem drifting, yet it is essential:

Like clouds that only seem weightless.
but of course are not.
Are really important.
I mean, terribly important.
Not decoration by any means. (BI 13-17)

She ends the poem wondering what would the blooming violets inspire her to think about next week, as the rain makes her contemplate on God and divinity. This means that each time she is in nature she is inspired and motivated to learn something deep and spiritual

One of the most spiritual and religious poems is “Gethsemane” from Oliver’s *Thirst* (2006). The title indicates a religious allusion for Christians because Gethsemane is a Biblical reference to the garden where Jesus prayed before the crucifixion. Oliver combines this Biblical reference with nature in a way that insinuate a spiritual elevation. She retells the story of Jesus which is familiar in the Bible, with new insights by employing nature for a certain purpose as we shall see. She begins the poem with a statement that nature never sleeps, whether roses, the grass or the lilies, which is a powerful statement for a start, but the next lines reveal the mystery behind the first line. She mentions the famous story as it is told in the church. The story of Jesus telling his disciples to stay awake while he is praying in the Gethsemane, but they fell asleep:

The grass never sleeps.
 Or the roses.
 Nor does the lily have a secret eye that shuts until morning.
 Jesus said, wait with me. But the disciples slept. (T 1-4)

Natural creatures such as the crickets were awake with Jesus and they were singing and did not sleep. Only heaven knows if crickets ever sleep. But Oliver gives evidences that nature did not leave Jesus, because the singing of the cricket was heard. Then she emphasizes that Jesus wanted it to wait with him, but the only one who did not let him down is nature with all its elements:

Jesus said, wait with me. And maybe the stars did, maybe the
 wind wound itself into a silver tree, and didn't move, maybe
 the lake far away, where once he walked as on a
 blue pavement,
 lay still and waited, wild awake. (T 8-12)

She talks about the possibility that the stars, the wind, the trees, and the lake were awake with Jesus and did not fall asleep like his disciples. Oliver uses this story as an indication that in time of need nature will not let one down, even if other humans do. She portrays nature as a caring figure to rely on in difficult times and hardships. This spiritual relief Oliver presents through nature has a huge impact upon humans. To know that there is always a shelter and an open door to turn to in times when everybody else would abandon you and let you down. These novel insights Oliver brings to the story help readers to consider nature in a different way, thus they would feel different spiritually, knowing it will be always wide awake. At the end of the poem she says that “knowing this too/must be a part of the story” (F 16-17), so there will always be glimpses of hope that will transform humans’ lives spiritually.

The same spiritual atmosphere continues to appear in “Six Recognitions of the Lord” from *Thirst* (2006) where Oliver declares her thoughts and beliefs explicitly. In this poem religious mood is evident from the title, yet the tone and diction are simple, because communicating with God does not require exquisite words. She begins the first stanza with these lines: “I know a lot of fancy words. /I tear them from my heart and my tongue. /Then I pray” (T,1-3).

In the second stanza she reveals her hopelessness and depression pleading for God’s mercy and tenderness. She immediately thinks of nature where there is free beauty, so she rushes to the fields waiting for God’s tenderness and voice, because she believes that God can be found in the lap on nature as she has found him once before

when she was laying down on the grass. She recalls those days when she found God in nature and how her life was brightened and was full of peace. But now she is in darkness and she is so weak spiritually speaking, full of pain and sadness, therefore she turns to nature, to God, to restore what once she was, because nature can heal her and transform her to a better condition:

Lord God, mercy is in your hands, pour
me a little. And tenderness too. My
need is great. Beauty walks so freely
and with such gentleness. Impatience puts
a halter on my face and I run away over
the green fields wanting your voice, your
tenderness, but having to do with only
the sweet grasses of the fields against
my body. When I first found you I was
filled with light, now the darkness grows
and it is filled with crooked things, bitter
and weak, each one bearing my name. (T 1-12)

In the third stanza she explains what she exactly does to reach another spiritual state. She says that it is so simple as she lies back on the grass and feels it with all her senses and goes deep as if she were inside the cloud above her, which is very high. This is an indication that once she merges with nature, she transcends to a higher level. Reaching this level means she is in a place where there is no thinking, wanting or even remembering, and only the singing of the blue jay can make her return for just a while, because she goes back again as the door of nature is still open. This coming and going back will last for some time, then she rises rubbing her face as if she was asleep, but she was not. She insists that this was not a dream and she was actually on a cloud which means that the spiritual regeneration is fulfilled because she feels different. She is no longer in darkness or in despair and this is evident when she sees the white lilies floating on the water. The symbol of the lilies indicates spirituality and beauty. The transformation is seen in the last lines of the stanza and that renewal is caused by nature:

Then I go back to town,
to my own house, my own life, which has
now become brighter and simpler, somewhere
I have never been before. (T 15-18)

Her beliefs continue to flourish throughout the lines of the forth stanza enhancing the idea that nature is the place where she finds God. She addresses God saying that she has always felt that she can find Him in nature. She knows he is present in the clouds, in the oak which she loves the most and in the wings of the birds, but above all He is present in our bodies deep within. He listens to our bodies and teaches them how to live. She believes humans have been living with this touch of heaven and this touch changes humans' lives not only physically but also spiritually. It is normal for humans to change physically, but the spiritual change cannot be achieved unless humans understand the world of nature. The first step of this process is to understand the natural world, then the response and the appreciation will occur slowly, leading to astonishment, and at the end we find ourselves in a dialogue concerning our lives which is beyond our understanding and conclusion. "It is mystery/ It is love of God. It is obedience" (T 17/18).

The description of the natural scenes is carried on in the fifth stanza as she says the Holy Spirit has created the fields with fragrances and the oceans with freshness. She asks the Holy Spirit to feed her with these natural fragrances and freshness. Moreover, she asks God to help her hearing the words of Jesus saying "Follow me" (T 7), because they are very wonderful and inspiring for her. Oliver combines the Biblical reference, that is Jesus and his words, with the natural world, and this mixture can change any human's life. Nature and religion are necessary to form two powerful elements for the spiritual transformation.

The last stanza is full of bright natural images reflecting the new condition of the speaker. Oliver chooses summer as the season of this stanza, the season of productivity and change as all the lilies rise and flourish to cover the black water. This image implies that the darkness is replaced by the white beautiful lilies, which means that the spiritual state of the speaker has changed to a better one. Oliver describes the lily as a human who rises, the action implies elevation to a higher level spiritually. She expresses her gratitude to God, yet she believes she cannot thank him enough, because what she has obtained is beyond words of thanks:

Everywhere I go I am
treated like royalty, which I am not. I thirst and
am given water. My eyes thirst and I am given
the white lilies on the black water. My heart
sings but the apparatus of singing doesn't convey
half what it feels and means. (T 8-13)

In nature, she is treated like a queen, even though she is not really one. She is provided with water when she is thirsty. When her eyes yearn for beauty, she sees the beautiful lilies, and no matter how her heart sings and speaks of all the blessings she has, it cannot be enough. What she has cannot be expressed by words no matter how hard she tries, and this indicates the unlimited positive sources nature provides. It is not something that can be said, it can only be felt, thus she wants humans to recognize how lucky they are to obtain such a treasure.

Then she talks about the changing of seasons and how spring means hope and life, and fall means delicate, yet necessary fading and falling. In winter everything falls asleep including humans, but then comes summer to bring life to the world as a gift. All these represent God's hospitality and she tries to enjoy it while she is rolling her mortal body through the lilies. She emphasizes the idea of mortality of humans and that they should enjoy God's gifts while they still can. She uses the changing of seasons as an indication to what humans experience in life, ups and downs. No matter how dark it might be, there is always a glimpse of hope that everything will change and nothing stays the same just like seasons. What needs to be done is to recognize what we have and appreciate it. She emphasizes the natural world as a necessary and an important element to fulfil the process of spirituality. The answer is simple if you want to worship the creator, all you have to do is to love the creation:

In spring there's hope,
 in fall the exquisite, necessary diminishing, in
 winter I am as sleepy as any beast in its
 leafy cave, but in summer there is
 everywhere the luminous sprawl of gifts,
 the hospitality of the Lord and my
 inadequate answers as I row my beautiful, temporary body
 through this water-lily world. (T 13-20)

Relating to God and spirituality, the concept of prayers is found in "Morning" (2010) which presents the belief that in nature everything is a prayer. In the first lines Oliver says that the world is created every morning as the sun rises and covers the world with its orange sticks turning everything alive again after the darkness of the night. The sun which is part of nature has the ability to change the ashes into leaves, as it is a means of transformation and creation. She talks about the impact of being in nature especially on our imagination and emotions:

If it is your nature
 to be happy
 you will swim away along the soft trails
 for hours, your imagination
 alighting everywhere. (S 14-18)

Therefore, nature is a means for spiritual guidance, and according to Bidget Keegan Oliver encourages the reader to dwell in nature imaginatively and her poetry “recalls us more fully to our own humanity and to a recognition of the divinity in all creation” (148). She declares that the natural aspects are prayers as every morning these prayers are portrayed whether we are happy or not, or whether we pray or not. The prayers will last as long as nature exists:

each pond with its blazing lilies
 is a prayer heard and answered
 lavishly,
 every morning,
 whether or not
 you have ever dared to be happy,
 whether or not
 you have ever dared to pray. (S 29-36)

Nature is Oliver’s religious place, her sanctuary, where she keeps in touch with God. She would like to be alone because it is suitable for contemplating and reaching a spiritual level. This ritual is revealed in her poem “How I Go to the Woods” (2010) from *Swan* collection, as she says:

Ordinarily, I go to the woods alone, with not a single friend, for they are all smilers and talkers and therefore unsuitable (S 1-3)

She goes to the woods alone where she prays by talking to natural creatures, like the trees and the catbirds. She wants some privacy concerning this matter because she has her own way of prayer that is different from others. In addition, it is the only way for her to be invisible and to loose herself to nature to the extent that the foxes would move freely around her as she becomes part of nature. She even can hear the singing of the roses which would be impossible if she did not transform to one of the natural elements:

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 (S 7-10).

“In Your Hands” (2010), from *Swan*, is a poem that deals with the soul. In the first lines of the poem Oliver talks about animals and how they know they are alive which is something beyond question. But as years go by, she is now wondering about the inanimate things whether they are alive like the animals or not:

But now, after years of consideration,
I am getting beyond that.

What about the sunflowers? What about
the tulips, and the pines? (S 4-7)

At the end she says that everything in nature has a soul even the stones, the mountains and the flowers are alive as much as any living creature. It may take years to realize this fact, but all what you need to do is to listen carefully and you would be able to hear the heartbeat of the little stones, despite of being hidden within, in other words, once you become one with nature, you would be able to feel and hear it:

Listen, all you have to do is start and
there'll be no stopping.

What about mountains? What about water
slipping over the rocks?

And, speaking of stones, what about
the little ones you can

hold in your hands, their heartbeats
so secret, so hidden it may take years

before, finally, you hear them (S 8-16).

In her poem “Whistling Swans”, published in *Felicity* (2015), some important religious inspiration and spiritual guidance are introduced. From the first lines Oliver argues that there is no particular form of a prayer, because looking at the sky can be a prayer too, and God understand the language of them all, even the noise of the flying swans. On that notion, Knott observes that Oliver tries to “subvert the language of Christianity than to adapt to it” by substituting “paying attention for prayer” and through rejecting “notions of sin and penance” (196).

She is against the statement that there is no proof of the soul. And she gives evidences to prove the opposite, and the evidences are all from nature. She argues that in spring everything comes alive as a resurrection including our hearts. That means that the impact is physical and spiritual as well, and it presents a good evidence that the

soul does exist. She is aware that God himself is silent and that is not the issue, yet there are many voices in the world that speaks for his existence:

Yes, I know, God’s silence never breaks, but is
that really a problem?

There are thousands of voices, after all. (F 12-14)

Nature represents God in thousands images and voices, and what all humans have to do is to listen and watch because swans that represent the natural world, know as much as we know about the soul, and they are the source of knowledge. The strategy of critical imagination is obvious in those lines, as she promotes the readers to imagine and go beyond what they assume they know. She says:

And furthermore, don’t you imagine (I just suggest it)
that the swans know about as much as we do about
the whole business?

So listen to them and watch them, singing as they fly.

Take from it what you can (F 15-19).

There is always an open door to turn to find ourselves and restore the positivity and the spiritual balance we seek in our lives. Every natural part holds a spiritual message to guide humans through hardships and moments of doubt. Each part of nature provides us with a hint or a lesson of spirituality, and this this evident in Oliver’s poem which have a beating heart touching many lives. Every now and then the balance needs to be restored. To be reborn spiritually in the middle of the materialistic and scientific world. To feed the soul in order to cope with the tension of the current life, to come back stronger than before. Her work will live on to lighten the darkness and to be a spiritual guidance through the mystery of life.

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