

College Guild
PO Box 6448 Brunswick, Maine 04011

Poetry Club

~ The Poems of Mary Oliver ~

Unit 3 of 8

Mary Oliver is a modern day poet from Massachusetts. She is a well-known writer with many books to her credit. She is a winner of the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. The poems "I Am the One", "Percy (Nine)", and "Ocean" are from the book *House of Light*. "Wild Geese" is from *Dream Work*.

AFTER READING LUCRETIUS, I GO TO THE POND*

*The slippery green frog
that went to his death
in the heron's pink throat
was my small brother,*

*and the heron
with the white plumes
like a crown on his head
who is washing now his great sword-beak
in the shining pond
is my tall thin brother.*

*My heart dresses in black
and dances.*

[*Lucretius was a Roman poet and philosopher who wrote *On the Nature of Things*.]

1. How can the frog and the heron be the poet's brothers?
2. What is the last line in the poem about?
3. Write a poem about something in nature that feels like family to you.

OCEAN

*I am in love with Ocean
 lifting her thousands of white hats
 in the chop of the storm,
 or lying smooth and blue, the
 loveliest bed in the world.
 In the personal life, there is
 always grief more than enough,
 a heart-load for each of us
 on the dusty road. I suppose
 there is a reason for this, so I will be
 patient, acquiescent. But I will live
 nowhere except here, by Ocean, trusting
 equally in all the blast and welcome
 of her sorrowless, salt self.*

4. Oliver describes the ocean as “lifting her thousands of white hats.” What does she mean by this?
5. This poem seems to break in two pieces. In the first she writes about the ocean and in the other about her own life. How are the two connected?

PERCY (NINE)

*Your friend is coming I say
 To Percy, and name a name*

*And he runs to the door, his
 Wide mouth in its laugh-shape,*

*And waves, since he has one, his tail.
 Emerson, I am trying to live,*

*As you said we must, the examined life.
 But there are days I wish*

*There was less in my head to examine,
 Not to speak of the busy heart. How*

*Would it be to be Percy, I wonder, not
 Thinking, not weighing anything, just running forward.*

6. In the title Oliver has used the word “nine” in parentheses. Why do you think she has done that? How would it add to the impact and meaning of the poem?
7. Write a poem about an animal, bird, plant, insect or mineral that triggers you to think about your life.

Franz Marc was a German painter working in Expressionism, Cubism and Modern Art techniques. One of his works shows a group of horses painted a stunningly beautiful blue.

FRANZ MARC'S BLUE HORSES

*I step into the painting of the four blue horses.
I am not even surprised that I can do this.
One of the horses walks toward me.
His blue nose noses me lightly. I put my arm
over his blue mane, not holding on, just
commingling.
He allows me my pleasure.
Franz Marc died a young man, shrapnel in his brain.
I would rather die than explain to the blue horses
what war is.
They would either faint in horror, or simply
find it impossible to believe.
I do not know how to thank you, Franz Marc.
Maybe our world will grow kinder eventually.
Maybe the desire to make something beautiful
is the piece of God that is inside each of us.
Now all four horses have come closer,
are bending their faces toward me
as if they have secrets to tell.
I don't expect them to speak, and they don't.
If being so beautiful isn't enough, what
could they possibly say?*

8. What is the poem's main message?
9. Oliver writes, "Maybe the desire to make something beautiful/is the piece of God that is inside each of us." Do you agree with her? Why or why not?
10. Write a poem about stepping into a painting, photograph, favorite novel, even a comic book. What sensations are you aware of? What does the journey make you think about?

WILD GEESE

*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.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
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.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clear blue air,*

*are heading home again.
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.*

11. Oliver uses the metaphor of “clear pebbles” to describe rain. Select two other images or metaphors from *Wild Geese*. Why are they effective in moving her readers or conveying her message?
12. What do *Wild Geese* and *After Reading Lucretius...* have in common? Do Oliver’s other poems in this unit have a similar message?

THE FOURTH SIGN OF THE ZODIAC

*Why should I have been surprised?
Hunters walk the forest
without a sound.
The hunter, strapped to his rifle,
the fox on his feet of silk,
the serpent on his empire of muscles—
all move in a stillness,
hungry, careful, intent.
Just as the cancer
entered the forest of my body,
without a sound.*

13. “Cancer”, the crab, is the fourth sign of the zodiac. Do you think the title works well or does it take away from the sad surprise ending? Explain.

Oliver characterize the fox as having “feet of silk”, and the serpent with “his empire of muscles”, both wonderfully vivid images.

14. Think of another way to describe a hunter, fox, serpent and cancer.
15. Write an original poem, one created specifically for this course, on the subject of your choosing.
16. What have you learned from these poems or this poet that you might want to apply to your own work?
17. Which poem is your favorite and why?

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