

Mary oliver –
representation of the
american indians
essay



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Mary Oliver's poetry constructs and represents the American Indians as a group disenfranchised and dispossessed of their land, culture and language by the authoritative and dominant discourses fabricated in Western society. Her representation of the American Indian cultural identity in her two poems, Learning About the Indians and Tecumseh, is one of lament, but also of celebration. On one level Oliver pays tribute to the culture of the American Indians as they had the ability to see themselves as part of the natural world. As in her view we as humans are interdependent and communal creatures with no greater claim to superiority or right to dominate than the next being. In contrast, Mary Oliver laments the way the culture of the Western World dominates other ideologies with its almost obsessive recognition of status, through material resources.

She thus critiques the way in which Western Civilisation disempowers and suppresses other groups such as the Indians who have traditionally given little cultural value to personal possessions. Mary Oliver's poem Learning About the Indians uses persona and alliteration to highlight how the Indian culture has been subjugated and reduced by Western notions of superiority. Her poem mourns the loss and oppression of the American Indian cultural identity that in many ways parallels her own ideologies and perspectives towards the natural world. The persona of the poem Learning about the Indians is highly critical of the ways in which the anthropocentric cultural practises of the Western world have become dominant and therefore internalised by so many.

This is illustrated when Oliver describes how Mr White, a man of Indian decent, performs an Indian cultural act to school children. This was once a
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sacred ritual, which now has become an act to be further degraded and demeaned by Western society. ‘ Our teachers called it Extracurricular/ We called it fun’. Oliver’s persona in these lines emphasises how the American Indians’ culture has been devalued and constructed as inferior by Western ideologies.

No longer is his culture viewed as an identity, but rather represented as a bit of ‘ fun’ and ‘ extra’ education. Even Mr White, a man with American Indian heritage, feels his Indian culture is subordinate and inferior to that of the Western world. ‘ And as for Mr White,/ changed back to a shabby salesman’s suit, he called it/ Nothing at all as he packed up his drums, and drove,’. The persona once again depicts Mr White as a man ashamed of his history and culture. He packs away his drum, symbolic of his cultural background being hidden away and once again adopts his fabricated Western way of life ‘ changed back to a shabby salesman suit’.

The alliteration of the words ‘ shabby salesman suit’ draws the readers’ attention to these words, which construct images of a cheap, doggy and somewhat fake identity. Throughout Mary Oliver’s poem she represents the American Indian cultural identity as one that as suffered great dispossession and oppression through history. The persona and alliteration used in Learning About the Indians foregrounds her critique of the Western notion of superiority and how it has led to the commonplace belief that all non – Western cultures are peripheral and subservient to those of the Western world. Mary Oliver employs imagery and persona in her poem Tecumseh, to represent the Native American Indian cultural identity as one predisposed to oppression and disempowerment in a materialistic and consumerist driven <https://assignbuster.com/mary-oliver-representation-of-the-american-indians-essay/>

Western world. Oliver's poetry is a celebration of life, with the natural world being presented as a place of redemption and transcendence, an ideology echoed strongly through native American Indians land, language and culture. In Tecumseh, she critiques the way in which humans in the Western world have legitimised their superiority and dominance over Nature and those who show respect for the natural world, by creating hierarchies and characterising nature merely as a resource to exploit and destroy.

The persona and imagery used in the poem captures this destructive nature of the modern industrial world - describing how the wounds of the past hang on ' like the litter that snags among the yellow branches,/ newspapers and plastic bags, after the rains. The persona employed by Oliver highlights this idea of litter - newspaper and plastic bags as representative of a consumeristic world. Therefore this action described would appear metaphorically representative of Oliver's philosophy of how the Western world has become so caught up in want for material success they have forgotten that we are all connected to a vast ecosystem. Here we are just one of the many creatures needing to live communally, with no greater claim to superiority.

Oliver proposes that our subjugation of the natural world and tendency to be ecologically destructive has led to the tainting and taining of the environment that was once perhaps sacred and equal. Tecumseh also explores the ways in which the American Indian cultural identity was suppressed and dispossessed by other more dominant cultures, attributing much of this to their unwillingness to exploit and destruct nature. She

mourns the loss of this cultural identity, representing them as a group that
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discarded the idea of the individual and saw all creatures in the world as part of one large interconnected ecosystem. This notion is once again depicted by the imagery created in the line ' I knelt and drank from that crumpled flow' The ' crumpled' flow once a sacred river to the Indian people creates an image for the reader, of a something crushed, destroyed and half of its original state. This once again highlights the notion of the destructive and intrusive nature of the Western world. It represents the American Indian identity as one that has oppressed and dispossessed due to their emphasis on the idea that nature is a harmonious place of enlightenment and redemption.

Mary Oliver's construction of persona and imagery in the poem Tecumseh challenges the Western hierarchies and critiques their subjugation of cultures which value other non materialistic concepts. The use of rhetorical questions and persona throughout Mary Oliver's poem Tecumseh addresses the American Indians plight of injustice and inequity where this has been forgotten by the modern world. Her poem calls attention to the past repression and cruelty administered to the Indians and represents them as being stripped of their land, language and culture by white settlement in America. The non -Indian persona in Tecumseh positions the reader to feel the inequity and unjustness behind the treatment of the indigenous population, by reminding them that ' there's a sickness/worse than the risk of death and that's forgetting that we should never forget'. Oliver's poem attempts to ' redress' the forgetting that has taken place, by drawing attention to the past and emphasizing the need to recall and retell the terrors of our history. She explores the idea that the past should not be

forgotten or explained away but rather acknowledged and accepted to ensure it never happens again.

In the second stanza the use of rhetorical questions shows her irritation at the plight of the Indian people: ' Where are the Shawnee now? / Do you know? Or would you have to/ write to Washington, and even then, /what ever they said,/would you believe it? ' Oliver's use of rhetorical questions laments this disenfranchised group and engages the reader to recognise the injustice that has been done to this Indian culture through white settlement. It also critiques the duplicity of governments in dealing with and addressing cultural dispossession. Mary Oliver's poem represents the oppression of the American Indian culture to be a event that has been suppressed and forgotten over the last two centuries. Through the use of rhetorical questions and persona in the poem Tecumseh, she recalls and retells the injustices subjected to the American Indian culture with a hope to rectify some justice by bringing a greater awareness to the modern world of their dispossessed cultural identity.

Mary Oliver's poetry represents the American Indians as a group disenfranchised and dispossessed of their land, culture and language by the dominant Western ideologies and cultural practices. Through persona, imagery and alliteration Oliver highlights the way that the American Indians have been subjugated and subjected to injustice and inequality. The spread of Western culture sought to dominate the land as a resource. Both her poems Learning About the Indians and Tecumseh lament the loss and oppression of this culture, which is represented to be respectful of the natural world and to only take the basic resources needed for survival. It is <https://assignbuster.com/mary-oliver-representation-of-the-american-indians-essay/>

evident that many of the ideologies that inform the American Indian cultural identity run parallel with Mary Oliver's ecocritical theories in life.

She is highly critical of Western society which is represented as having disempowered and dispossessed the American Indians of their cultural identity through their unending requirement for material success. It is this materialistic and consumeristic culture which is represented in Oliver's poems as tainting and pillaging the environment, this once being sacred and seen as a place of enlightenment by the American Indian culture. Mary Oliver's representation of the American Indian cultural identity is one of celebration but also of lament as she mourns the disempowerment and oppression that plagues their culture through the ecologically destructive nature of the Western world.