

Heritage: symbolism in the black walnut tree



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The poem "The Black Walnut Tree" by Mary Oliver poignantly dramatizes the conflict a mother and daughter face between sentiment and money. The conflict arises over the choice of whether or not to cut down the eponymous walnut tree to "pay off the mortgage" (5). However, it is revealed throughout the poem how much sentiment the mother and daughter have for the tree. As the mother and daughter debate and talk over the pros and cons of keeping the tree, their conversation shifts from the practical to the sentimental. Mary Oliver conveys the relationship between the tree and the family largely through figurative language and visual imagery aided by transitions and personification.

The title of the poem itself has abundant figurative meaning and symbolism. For example, trees represent life, growth and hope, all of which are contrasted by the dark connotations of "black." Walnuts symbolize toughness and masculinity with their hard outer shells, which will be important as to why the mother and daughter feel such sentiment for the tree. The poem begins with the mother and daughter debating whether or not to sell "the black walnut tree / to the lumberman" (3-4). The temptation of being able to pay off the mortgage on the house is similar to making a deal with the devil. In a very off-handed tone, the mother and daughter try to justify cutting down the tree, emphasized by the diction, "Likely some storm anyway" (6). The hesitation to make a decision by the mother and daughter can be observed by comparing the connotations of "debate" and "talk" (1, 8). "Debate" has a more serious and heavy connotation as compared to the lighter connotation of "talk."

At this point in their conversation, the arguments made by the mother and daughter for keeping or cutting the tree take on a more figurative meaning. This is highlighted by the daughter's assertion there are "roots in the cellar drains" (11). While the figurative language engenders imagery of actual roots in the cellar, it also creates the sentimental feeling held by the daughter. The implication is the tree has deep connections with the house and is as much part of the family as the mother or daughter. The mother then contends "that the leaves are getting heavier / every year, and the fruit / harder to gather away" (13-15). Here, the conflict of sentiment versus money becomes fully established; the tree is simultaneously a part of the family and a burden that must be carried year to year.

The transitional and emphatic "But" not only serves to move the conversation along, it also marks a shift to very imagistic and figurative language (16). The mother and daughter begin to feel hope for something better that cannot be ignored. Similar to the proverb, "blood runs thicker than water," the mother and daughter begin to realize that money is arbitrary compared to their heritage. Another transition, "so," marks the shift in the mother and daughter's hesitation (20). At this point, they have wordlessly made their decision. The daughter's dream gives further insight into why the two are so attached to the walnut tree; it is a piece of their heritage cultivated by generations of the family. The pluralization of "fathers" accentuates the sentiment and the heritage personified within the tree; it is the result of the hard work of generations and generations of the daughter's forefathers. Additionally, the symbolism of walnuts emphasizes the masculinity and toughness of the fathers who worked the land. Such

powerful cementing of the tree's sentimental value to the mother and daughter clinches their decision; the mother and daughter know that by cutting down the tree they will also be cutting down something of great meaning to their heritage.

The final transition, " So," marks the shift to after the mother and daughter make up their minds; sentiment won out over the practicality of paying off the mortgage. Additionally, the connotation of " swings" implies the family barely gets by that year and underscores the sacrifice made to keep the tree. Furthermore, the personification of nature and the description of the bountiful harvest, the " sun and leaping winds" and the " leaves and bounding fruit," are heavily contrasted by the " whip- / crack of the mortgage" (32-35). This contrast underlines the sacrifice made by the mother and daughter in deciding to keep the tree.

Despite the oppressive tone of the final lines, the tree remains unaffected by the mother and daughter's hardships, as does their family heritage. In its quiet, continuing strength, the walnut tree persists as a reminder that heritage is a stronger anchor than money.