

Depiction of nature in sleeping in the forest and the fish by mary oliver

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For my poems, I selected two of my favorite works by Mary Oliver. As a poet who centers on nature, it is evident through much of her writing how she intends to draw upon those natural inspirations. Literal interpretations aside, Oliver uses images, structure, and sounds quite frequently to convey a sense of immersion in our world's environment. "Sleeping in the Forest" and "The Fish" are two very different pieces, each with their own unique strengths and characteristics that help define the very essence of the poems themselves.

Imagery is a very prevalent feature in both of the works, but in slightly different ways. "The Fish" focuses more on the subject of the fish and the actions it takes, so that the predominant aspect of the poem's imagery is how the fish appears in your mind. Oliver's greatest efforts go towards making the reader see the motion of the fish, whom she personifies to add a certain depth to its actions. The verbs used by Oliver are quite vivid, indicating a specific image or motion in the reader's mind, with "threading", "climbs", and "whips". This fish is an elegant, magnificent creature of beauty and a sort of natural ferocity that cannot be tamed; although personified, she is still a wild creature. By contrast, "Sleeping in the Forest" has imagery that refers to the scenery and the experiences associated with being deep in the woods at night. A metaphor for death, the earth taking back the narrator's body by "arranging her dark skirts, her pockets full of lichens and seeds". This gives way to the image of the narrator being buried within the earth, but I also see an old, wise woman dressed in the deep browns and greens of the earth, tucking another one of her children into the folds of her vastness. Where the fish was fierce and determined, the earth is tender and kind. Yet beauty is the underlying connection between the two,

specifically the beauty found in nature. Light is a predominant feature in both of the pieces, from the glistening “ razzle-dazzle” of fresh water on the rocks of the riverbed to the “ white fire of the stars”. Nature is life, hope, and beauty, and the same characteristics can also be attributed to light. In Greek mythology, when the gods appeared in their natural form they would shine so bright that humans would die instantly upon seeing them, unable to handle the divine beauty of a higher being. This same divinity blazes across the earth, running through its very veins and shining its light upon all it encompasses.

One of my favorite things about Mary Oliver as a poet is her ability to incorporate sound in a meaningful way into her poems. “ The Fish” is filled to the brim with all sorts of sounds, from “ blazes the black rocks” to “ razzle-dazzle of sweet water”. Oliver has a way of pairing sounds in ways I would not consider, and that aren’t so apparent to the naked eye. It isn’t until the poem is read aloud that you can hear the force of will behind how the fish “ whips awake”, with the strong ‘ w’ sound conjoining the two words. “ The Fish” almost has a sing-song aspect to it, with “ stairways of stone” segueing to less obvious rhythms such as “ white logs — and knows beyond”, where the long ‘ o’ sound needs to be read aloud to truly be heard. I interpret the sound scheme of the piece to be a metaphor for the swift movement of the fish itself. As the fish whips around the water, so does the poem sling rhymes and assonance towards the reader, swiftly transitioning from one movement to the next. Each sound is selected for a reason, because depending on the harshness or softness of it the flow will be impacted. “ Sleeping in the Forest” does not possess the same abundance of paired sounds, but instead

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hints at similar parts being repeated, often hidden in the middle of a line. The words “remembered me” resemble a coupling of the ‘me’ sound, but in the middle of the next line the word “tenderly” references the ‘er’ sound found in “remembered”. The words “dark skirts” uses the harsh ‘k’ sound along with a more guttural use of the vowels, so even though the letters are placed differently within each word, as well as the fact that ‘a’ and ‘i’ are the central vowels, the dark tone is still conveyed. Some of the assonance in the poem is not so easily recognizable, such as “never” and “riverbed”, or “thoughts” and “moths”. The words are not found on the same line in either case, so instead of the instant gratification of rapid sound repetition, the second word appears later in the passage. This causes you, as the reader, to reconnect the lines and draw greater meaning from both instances in the stanza.

The structure of “The Fish” is what first caught my eye about the poem, because it is so unique and inherently related to the content of the poem. The lines are grouped by four, and each line after the first has an increased indentation, forming a diagonal pattern that resets itself every fourth line. When looked at altogether, these indentations resemble the rippling of waves, or in the context of this poem, a torrential river that the fish is struggling to travel against. As I read through this poem I can see the fish thrusting its body forward through the harrowing current, before pausing momentarily and drifting back down the river, only to arc forward in and out of the tide once more. Additionally, the structure of the poem made me think of how a river will rise and dip in certain spots depending on the rock underneath it. In order to read “The Fish”, your eyes must dart around the

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page, eagerly seeking the next line with an intensity akin to a mother fish racing upstream to lay her eggs. "Sleeping in the Forest" has a completely different structure, with all of the lines centered and clumped together. The shortest lines are three or four words, but even those are long enough to maintain the illusion of a tree trunk, broad in its girth and standing tall. Where the previous poem spoke of the water, "Sleeping in the Forest" talks about becoming one with the dense, welcoming earth. Were these lines to be separated or indented on an individual basis, the poem would not maintain the same sense of cohesion befitting the work itself. This poem is also comforting, and just as we humans will huddle with each other for warmth, these lines are grouping with a cohesiveness that still allows for the individual expression of each line while creating this sense of wholesomeness.

I don't know if this is stereotypical or not, but for me some of the best poems have their aha moments lying at the very end. It's rare that I will read a line that will make me continue reading, but in a different perspective or with another drastic change. It is more common for me to find great meaning in the last line or two, depending on how the author is writing. This pattern has not changed in the context of these two poems. With the final lines of each causing a great emotion to well up within me and lead to a greater understanding of the poem as a whole. In "Sleeping in the Forest", the entire poem is filled with beautiful imagery and melodious lines woven together in a tapestry of earth. However, the true meaning of the poem was revealed to me when Oliver wrote, "By morning I had vanished at least a dozen times into something better". It is not difficult to see that the poem is

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an allusion to death, but it also talks about the many beauties and wonders of the forest. The last line connects these two ideas, for as the narrator's body is consumed by the earth, its life energy and physical mass are both repurposed as they become one with the world to the fullest extent. Mary Oliver idolizes nature, so to become a part of it is undoubtedly one of the holiest experiences she could create. This is not a sad tale of death; instead it follows a path of wondrous renewal that brings a warm smile of comfort and peace upon reading that 'aha moment'. The last line of "The Fish" is rather long, and while the first half of it creates some beautiful imagery that definitely evoked something within me, it is the second portion that made the lightbulb in my head turn on. As she reaches her destination, the fish is "caught as mortality drives triumphantly toward immortality, the shaken bones like cages of fire". Upon first glance I did not understand much of this line at all. Now I see that "mortality driv[ing] triumphantly toward immortality" is a metaphor for the cycle of life and rebirth, immortal in the sense that we create a continuum of life. In a sense, that is man's greatest conquests: to become immortal, something we fulfill through the birth and growth of our children. Yet I am still puzzled by "the shaken bones like cages of fire". I've thought about it a lot, and while I could probably provide you with some kind of analysis, it would not have my wholehearted support and belief behind it. However, the great thing about poetry is that I don't need to understand those words in order to feel the passion behind them. Shaken bones becoming cages of fire has such a powerful, almost wrathful connotation to it. There is strength behind these words, possibly derived of the weakness of shaken bones, whatever they may represent. Although I do

not understand it, this is the line that makes me close my eyes, tilt my head back, and just breath to take it all in.

SLEEPING IN THE FOREST

I thought the earth

remembered me, she

took me back so tenderly, arranging

her dark skirts, her pockets

full of lichens and seeds. I slept

as never before, a stone

on the riverbed, nothing

between me and the white fire of the stars

but my thoughts, and they floated

light as moths among the branches

of the perfect trees. All night

I heard the small kingdoms breathing

around me, the insects, and the birds

who do their work in the darkness. All night

I rose and fell, as if in water, grappling

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with a luminous doom. By morning

I had vanished at least a dozen times

into something better.

THE FISH

She climbs from the sea; moonlight

blazes the black rocks,

the surface razzle-dazzle

of sweet water

threading out of the tide. She

moves upstream, the flow

pressing against her;

she feels it, lets the hot

blade of her body pause,

drifts backward, whips awake. She

moves upstream; she is heavy;

deep in her belly

life that is to be

stirs like a million planets; she
moves upstream; when the waters
divide she follows
the fragrance spilling
from her old birth pond; she
sees the waterfalls — gleaming
stairways of stone,
water ripped and boiling
like white logs — and knows beyond
lies the green pond
rich with the shadows
of last year's swimmers where she
will nest her eggs and the fierce prince
quickens them; she flies
upstream — she arcs
in the long gown of her body, she leaps
into the walls of water,

she falls through the torn

silvery half-drowned body

of any woman come to term, caught

as mortality drives triumphantly toward

immortality, the shaken bones like

cages of fire.