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## Nature's Moral Voice as Eco-Ethics: Reading Mary Oliver's *A Thousand Mornings*Kusum Ghimire

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the eco-ethical dimensions in Mary Oliver's poetry collection A Thousand Mornings. It analyzes Oliver's portrayal of nature as a moral and spiritual guide through close readings of selected poems. The research draws framework from environmental ethics, particularly eco-ethics. And, the study examines how Oliver challenges anthropocentric perspectives and advocates for a reverent, interconnected relationship between humans and the natural world. By weaving spiritual contemplation with vivid imagery and minimalist language, Oliver redefines the act of poetic observation as a form of ecological awareness and moral engagement. Her verse becomes a medium through which the reader is invited to reflect on their ethical responsibility toward the environment, proposing that attention, gratitude, and humility are essential virtues in this relationship. The analysis positions Oliver as a Neo-Transcendentalist, whose work continues the lineage of Emersonian thought which contributes in the discourse on ecopoetry and environmental ethics.

**Keywords:** Eco-ethics, connectedness, Oliver, poetry

#### Introduction

Mary Oliver (1935–2019) stands as a widely read American poet of the 20th and 21st centuries. Her poetry is marked by a profound connection to the natural world that blends simplicity with deep philosophical and spiritual reflection. Oliver explores themes of nature, solitude, mortality, and the human relationship to the divine. Her poetic voice comes with clarity, accessibility, and a deep reverence for the world around her. Her poetry resonates with readers across generations, often serving as a guide to mindfulness, gratitude, and the contemplative life. In this paper, I have undertaken a task to analyze ecoethical themes in *A Thousand Mornings* (2012) by exploring Oliver's perspective on human-nature relationships. The result of this analysis leads to the re-examination of human being's ethical responsibility toward nature.

The poems, as a whole, in *A Thousand Mornings* demonstrate Oliver's enduring belief in the power of attention and presence, offering a deeply meditative and lifeaffirming reading experience. The primary theme of her poetry is reverence for the natural world where she finds beauty even in the mundane world. Oliver's poetry "seeks to understand how and where the natural world takes root within us" (Burton-Christie 82) so that nature and humans can communicate. This deep reverence is expressed in "the vatic voice, the loving limning of nature, the sense of the poem as a vision or a gift to be received" (Johnson 81).

There is no disagreement that Oliver is a romantic poet. Moreover, her poetic vision brings into question of ethical behavior toward nature. Thus, in "Oliver's poetic" as Kristin Hotelling Zona evaluates, creates "the distance between a poet and world, but also the gap too often contrived between self-actualization and abandon, ethical valence and astonishment" (137). Thus, her poetry readers find a critique of the "ingrained assumptions" and thoughts such "assumptions tend to privilege" (138). Consequently, her poetic vision offers a renewed way of looking into nature, nature's self, and its relationship with human beings. In the same vein, Marwan Hasan argues that Oliver's poetry talks about the responsible and ethical ways to engage with nature, which means respecting nature as an organism in its own rather than an entity to be utilized for human beings. Hasan explains:

The poet addresses the responsibility humans have toward the natural world in her poetry by fostering a deep sense of interconnectedness and emphasizing the ethical dimensions of our relationship with the environment. Through her evocative language and contemplative reflections, Oliver invites readers to consider their role as stewards of the Earth and to recognize the moral imperative of caring for the natural world. (263)

Hasan argues that humans have to act with responsibility towards the natural world and it is achieved by fostering an interconnectedness. Such interconnection are attained through ethical behavior and poetic expression. The research explores the question that why does the speaker in different poems stand as a moral voice guiding human beings towards ethical treatment of nature? In Oliver's *A Thousand Mornings*, speaker's urge to forge an

ethical bond with nature comes as a motif to live a responsible life: human being not as a distant observer of nature nor a privileged consumer it but a participant in the sacred company of the environment.

## Methodology

This study employs an analytical framework grounded in the principles of environmental ethics, with a specific focus on eco-ethics—a concept that affirms the moral standing of all elements within nature. Drawing on Andrew Brennan's seminal work, *The Moral Standing of Natural Objects*, the analysis explores how Mary Oliver's poems, as collected in *A Thousand Mornings*, contribute to shaping ecological consciousness through poetic expression. Additionally, the framework is informed by Mary Mellor's insights in *Feminism and Environmental Ethics*, which address key questions of environmental justice and ethics. Mellor's approach emphasizes understanding the material relationships between humanity and nature as "a means of advancing ecological awareness and ethical responsibility" (108). Together, these perspectives provide the theoretical basis for analyzing the interplay between poetic imagination and environmental ethics in Oliver's work. The research analyzes key texts from the anthology to establish the link between nature and ethical treatment to it.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

Mary Oliver's poetry, notably in *A Thousand Mornings*, evokes nature as a moral and spiritual guide. The natural objects and events function as spiritual guides for human beings, especially in the face of industrialization and the devastating effects of anthropocentrism. Her poems contain numerous examples of spiritual reflection rooted in nature.

Oliver expresses her deep reverence for nature in *A Thousand Mornings* through the use of images and language. The poems often begin with close observations of specific natural scenes or creatures, expanding into reflections on broader themes such as love, loss, and the search for meaning. The poems' interplay between the particular and the universal demonstrates how the natural world can illuminate the complexities of human life. Oliver's approach to nature is intimate and philosophical, engaging with it as an integral part of her own being. Her vivid, sensory-rich imagery draws readers into a shared experience of the natural world, articulating a sense of unity and interconnectedness. The morning, a recurring motif in the collection, symbolizes new beginnings and the promise of each day. In poems like "I Happened to Be Standing", Oliver captures moments of tranquility and reflection, where the act of standing in the presence of nature becomes a form of prayer, connecting her to something greater than herself. This theme of presence and mindfulness emphasizes the importance of being fully present to appreciate the wonders of the natural world.

Oliver's poetry conveys a sense of gratitude and reverence for nature, acknowledging the lessons it imparts—patience, resilience, and the transient nature of life. Her contemplative tone invites readers to slow down and observe the world around them,

finding joy and beauty in each and every moment of life. A *Thousand Mornings* celebrates the beauty and wisdom found in nature, encouraging readers to find solace, inspiration, and understanding in their own lives.

Mary Oliver's poetic position and significance is marked by her relation to former writers. Most of them belonging to the Romantic and Transcendentalist tradition of North American nature writing. Taking into consideration both Oliver's overt references to Emerson's writings and philosophies. Mary Oliver is understood as a Neo-Transcendentalist poet echoing Emerson's notion of his Over-Soul to Oliver's embodiment of the three-fold notion of God-Man-Nature in her own poetry. Finally, in order to substantiate a less restrictive categorization, I view Oliver's format of the prayer poem as an expression of her individual spirituality on the grounds of her status as a Neo-Transcendentalist poet.

Similarly, Oliver's poetry calls attention to "our larger self," as noted by critic Lard Christensen, and "embodies her continuous engagement with the force that resides beyond a singular, human self" (Christensen 140). This idea of soul is nature and Oliver's speaker acknowledges it as a divine one. The connection of the speakers and the divine is inextricably linked to the act of seeking and visibility. Thus, her search for divine is colored by humility and patience. It presents less of an ambitious search for intrinsic truth than the recognition of its nebulous presence that is felt but never concretely expressed: in myriad shapes and forms. This surety of a divine presence, and the speaker's humility in the face of it, mark Mary Oliver as an Idealist and Romantic. For example, in "Hum Hum" the speaker narrates the beauty of nature and her joy at being in the company:

One summer afternoon I heard

a looming, mysterious hum

high in the ari; then came something

Like a small planet flying past—

something

Not all interesting in me but on its

way somewhere, all anointed with excitement:

bees swarming,

not to be held back

Nothing could hold them back. (lines 1-10)

For a romantic idealist Mary Oliver, there is no need for empirical research in the observation of Nature and its expression of the Sublime or the presence of a higher being. At the root of her poetry lies the simple recognition of limited perspective and the arising confidence and peace that such a reassurance brings forth. Accordingly, the speaker admits that she does not "know what God is / I don't know what death is. / But I believe they have between them / some fervent and necessary arrangement" (Oliver 104). What Oliver here terms a "necessary arrangement" can be found in Emersonian terms recalling "that unity; that Over-Soul" which binds Man, Nature, and God (Emerson 3). More specifically, he likens it to "that common heart of which all sincere conversation is the worship" (3). Here,

Emerson introduces the key aspect of worship and praise – all of which originate in the recognition of a glorious source and presence within all things. In "This Morning," Oliver depicts "a simple / neighborhood event" in the frame of miracles (Oliver 4). The daily and common event of eggs hatching – emblematic of birth and the natural cycle – is worthy enough of worship and perceived and framed as a miraculous.

The most powerful manifestation comes in the last poem "Varanasi" where a woman finds her soul's union with the rivers: "inner satisfaction between her own life and the rivers" (line 8). The poem further presents:

Early in the morning we crossed the ghat, where fires were still smoldering, and gazed, with our Western minds, into the Ganges. A woman was standing in the river up to her waist; she was lifting handfuls of water and spilling it over her body, slowly and many times, as if until there came some moment of inner satisfaction between her own life and the river's. (lines 1-8)

The imagery and actions described can be interpreted as a reflection on environmental

ethics, particularly in the way they highlight the intimate and respectful relationship between human and nature.

Similarly, the woman's ritualistic actions in the river, lifting and spilling water over her body, illustrate a deep, personal interaction with the natural world. Her repeated, mindful movements suggest a profound respect and acknowledgment of the river's importance to her well-being. This can be interpreted as an embodiment of environmental ethics, where the human relationship with nature is based on reverence, care, and a sense of interconnectedness with nature which is the River Ganga here:

Then she dipped a vessel she had brought with her and carried it filled with water back across the ghat, no doubt to refresh some shrine near where she lives. for this is the holy city of Shiva, maker of the world, and this is his river. (lines 9-12)

The speaker articulates a moment of inner satisfaction that comes from the interaction between the woman and the river. This suggests that harmony with the environment is not just a physical state but also a spiritual and emotional one. It implies that environmental ethics involves finding balance and contentment through a respectful and interdependent relationship with nature.

The unification of the women with the river is a powerful image that sums up the necessity to forge a connection between human and nature. Oliver rejects the old "relic of the past . . . [which] has been constructed in the framework of exclusion, denial and denigration of the feminine sphere" (Plumwood 23). In this sense, the concept of putting or painting nature as background is an erroneous treatment.

Oliver's acts of noticing and acute attention to the natural world, along with her minute observations, mirror her personal belief that spiritualism and poetry command similar effects. Thus her poems "resemble or in some cases is identical to prayer" (Eggemeier 59-60). This poem as prayer – and observation as a spiritual exercise no less – culminates in a respectful treatment of nature. In a poem, "I Happened to be Standing" Oliver brings spiritual and logical aspects side by side:

I don't know where prayers go, Or what they do. Do cats pray, while they sleep Half-asleep in the sun? Does the sunflower? The old black oak Growing older every year? (lines 1-6)

The spiritual aspect is intrinsically linked to Oliver's insistence on observation and meditative journeys in nature the speaker implores the reader to "sit now / very quietly / in some lovely wild place, and listen / to the silence. / And I say that this, too, / is a poem" (Oliver 74). At any point, her engagement with the world transpires at once through her "attitude of noticing" and her direction towards the divine within that observable field. All of these deeply "spiritual engagements are formulated in sacramental terms, resembling prayer in its essence and resulting in a poem in its final lyrical form" (Eggemeier 65). After having described the purpose of her poems as the attempt to fully engage with the natural world through observation and meditation, an enlightened and attentive reading of her best poems would, ideally, be "able to reach beyond ourselves" (Zona 130) into the nature or in the forms of nature.

Finally, in her verse, Oliver blends the lines and defining limitations of prayer and poetry: with the direct plea towards "Lord God, mercy is in your hands" the speaker speaks to their God in six parts (Oliver 125). This particular notion and formation of a (one-sided) conversation is remarked upon within the poem itself in such lines as "And we enter the dialogue / of our lives that is beyond all under / standing or conclusion" (126-27). There is also, with respect to the essence of prayer, the focus on attention: As in Oliver's "Praying" (131), "The Summer Day" equals attention to an act of worship or prayer: "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. / I do know how to pay attention" (316). The 'other,' in this case, constitutes both her natural surroundings and the desired and felt presence of God. Here, again, Buell's exploration of American relinquishment emerges, which in itself appears as an experience and notion that "bears a close resemblance to the experience of mystical union with God in the Christian tradition" (Eggemeier 61). In decidedly spiritual terms, Oliver suggests that "maybe such devotion, in which one holds the world in the clasp of attention, isn't the perfect prayer, but it must be close" (61) to a prayer.

Oliver's work stresses the importance of natural surrounding and she is famous for her defined view on the natural world around her. Her works gave a stage to geese flying south for the winter, the changing of the seasons, the stillness of a morning. No matter the

poem, Oliver dedicates a sense of wonder to every aspect of nature. For instance, the poem "I Looked Up" Oliver visualizes a rich diversity in the surrounding:

I looked up and there it was among the green branches of the pitch pines—thick bird a ruffle of fire trailing over the shoulders and down the back—color of copper, iron, bronze—

Lighting up the dark branches of the pine.

What misery to be afraid of death.

What wretchedness, to believe only in what can be proven.

When I made a little sound it looked at me, then it looked past me.

Then it rose, the wings enormous and opulent,

And, as I said, wreathed in fire.

I was stopped in my tracks. (lines 1-10)

The images of nature as a colossal entity that has an overpowering effect comes from her romantic tradition. Moreover, the images can be interpreted as the coexistence of human and nature. However, the nature is vast and all encompassing.

Oliver does not speak over the words of nature. By elevating simplicity in her work, Mary Oliver clears the way for nature to speak for itself. *I'm beautiful*, says the bird. *I'm worth it*, says the earth. Or, as Oliver says it best in her poem "Praying":

It doesn't have to be the blue iris, it could be weeds in a vacant lot, or a few small stones; just pay attention, then patch a few words together and don't try to make them elaborate, this isn't a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak. (lines 1-9)

The environmental appreciation is not limited to the traditionally beautiful or majestic elements of nature. It implies that all aspects of the natural world, even the most humble or overlooked, hold value and deserve attention and respect. This aligns with an environmental ethic that sees intrinsic worth in all parts of the ecosystem, not just the most spectacular or economically valuable. In other words, in creating space for both the reader and the subject, Mary Oliver opens the path for connection, a renewed relation between human being and nature, between the being of man and being of the river, bird, mountain and every other living organism show the human nature relationship.

In the title poem, "A Thousand Mornings" Oliver creates an image of a speaker whose deliverance occurs because of nature:

All night my heart makes its way however it can over the rough ground of uncertainties, but only until night meets and then is overwhelmed by morning, the light deepening, the wind easing and just waiting, as I do wait (when have I ever been disappointed?) for redbird to sing. (lines 1-4).

This poem carries similar sensibilities from the previous poem "I Happened to be Standing," where the poet happens to be in a kind of thoughtful mood, and she finds herself at the point where birds start singing. And, the experience becomes such a joyful moment that she "just listened, [while] my pen suspended in the air" (line 29). The right approach to nature can yield into memorable experiences, while a political and interested approach will end into dualist thought that will pose nature and men into opposite poles. However, Oliver's poetry points to the fact that human and nature enjoy a respectful and ethical relation.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, in A Thousand Mornings, Oliver crafts a poetic landscape where nature is not merely observed but deeply honored and spiritually engaged with. Her work bridges the personal and the universal by drawing on Romantic and Transcendentalist traditions of the West. At the same time, her poetry advances a distinctly modern eco-ethical consciousness and practices. Through her attention to ordinary details and her meditative tone, Oliver invites readers into a relationship with nature that is based on mutual respect, emotional depth, and spiritual awakening. Her poems demonstrate that environmental ethics need not rely solely on scientific rationale or activism but can also be expressed through art, spirituality, and everyday mindfulness. To sum up, Oliver's poetry invites a reconsideration of the human place within the natural world—not as conquerors or distant observers, but as humble participants in a shared, sacred existence.

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