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Elijah Cardenas

Mississippi College

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Abstract

Throughout Mary Oliver's extensive poetry collection, the subject of birds and their symbolism is perhaps one of the most common of her recurring images. While some of the research delves into specific animals (Bridget Keegan), most of the research addresses birds sporadically, only exploring the references that are useful in addressing the topic the researcher wishes to pursue (D.S. Bond). My research seeks to examine birds holistically throughout Oliver's poetry to discover how Oliver typically uses the birds in her poems and identify any common trends therein. In answering the question of how bird references function in the poetry of Mary Oliver, a critical discourse analysis was applied to the 76 poems in Oliver's "Devotions" collection that contained bird references. This analysis included a set of three initial codes. These codes included analysis of environment, adjectival descriptors, actions, and overall thematic elements and the resulting data showed what birds were most commonly referred to in the poetry, how they were described, and how their inclusion served to connect them to a variety of themes. My research details how each of the most commonly trending bird references is used by Oliver to discuss themes like death, appreciation of nature, beauty and other topics within her writing. Oliver's discussion of these individual topics within her poems builds towards an overall message concerning humanity's connection to nature and how humanity ought to live in light of said connection to nature. Building on the preexisting conversation on Oliver's nature poetry helps to further the academic conversation on her poetry.

Keywords: poetry, nature, Mary Oliver, birds, imagery

Introduction

Of all the categories of literature and creative writing, the genre of poetry holds the monopoly on retaining the ability to say much with very little. The poetic genre leans on metaphors, similes, allusions, and descriptions in general to present an intended message – often an emotion or idea the author wishes to share with the reader. These emotions or ideas are the thematic elements that make poetry unique among the literary genres and the extent to which an author can impart those themes to their audience in such a short space is telling of the skill of poets.

Mary Oliver is one such skilled poet and her work in the field of nature poetry identified itself as unique and powerful throughout her career and continues to do so in the years following her unfortunate passing in 2019. Nature poetry is a subgenre of poetry that focuses intently on descriptions of nature and while Oliver's poetry holistically cannot be boxed into a single category, the majority of her work can be categorized as nature poetry. Oliver herself wrote throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and her work was published across numerous collections and won her a plethora of awards throughout her lifetime.

The secondary research surrounding Oliver's poetry talks extensively about the themes contained within her poetry, of which there are many. Some of those themes include death, appreciation of nature, the soul, the afterlife, God, religion, and man's connection to and place in the natural world. That said, while the research community pays close attention to the thematic elements at play in Oliver's poetry, little direct attention is paid to the topic of animals. Animals play a vital role in Oliver's numerous descriptions of the natural world and one would suspect that they would play a similarly vital role in secondary research conversations on the themes in Oliver's poetry. Instead, animals are often treated as a side dialogue or as sub-points in a larger discussion.

Of the little research that directly addresses animals in Mary Oliver's poetry, very little of it focuses directly on the animals as the subject of research. My research seeks to fill this research gap by making animals, specifically birds, my main research focus. By cataloging the bird references in Oliver's poetry and examining the ways in which they are described and the actions they perform, I seek to understand the function that bird references, both individually and holistically, are meant to perform in the nature poetry of Mary Oliver. My findings yielded detailed results on the type of birds referenced in Oliver's poetry, as well as the themes discussed by means of said birds. The process of answering my research questions ("how does Oliver use bird references symbolically, and what does this symbolism reflect about her artistic message?") will help to expand existing research on Oliver, as well as deepen my understanding of Oliver's poetry and, by extension, my audience's understanding as well.

Literature Review

Definitions

In order to understand the connection between birds, as animals, and Mary Oliver's nature poetry, a definition of "animals" must be obtained in order to fully grasp the question my research proposes. Biologically, animals can be defined as "any of the eukaryotic multicellular organisms that comprise the biological kingdom of Animalia" (Biology Online, 2021). However, such a narrow, dry definition will not do for Mary Oliver, nor for the countless

poets before her who took on the burden of wrestling with the complicated relationship between mankind and the rest of the animal kingdom. Theology begins to take a much larger role in the definition of animals the further one delves into poetry, largely due to the Judeo-Christian concept of "human superiority", which echoes the statements in the Biblical book of Genesis that the earth was made for mankind to rule over (Genesis 1:26-28). Modern science pushes heavily back against this concept, leaning on the theory of evolution and natural science to argue that humans are "neither better (because of our moral nature) nor better off (because of our higher capacities) than the other animals" (Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*, 2018). The philosopher Santayana concurred, claiming on the subject of human superiority, "perhaps the only true dignity of man is his capacity to despise himself" (Introduction to the Ethics of Spinoza, 1910).

Thus, arriving at modern poetic times, we find a culture dominated by science seemingly in conflict with a culture of theologically-driven definitions over mankind's supposed superiority to the rest of the animal kingdom. However, the driving truth behind this debate remains: humanity is different from the rest of the animal kingdom in ways that we have yet to fully grasp. For Oliver, it seems that this distinction between humanity and animals, although passionately denied by modern biological science, remains a factor in her poetry. Oliver's work expresses an exploration into how humanity, in its unquantifiable difference from the animal kingdom, might "imagine otherness as continuity and contiguity, not as alienation" (Keegan, 2009).

Religion and Death

Nearly every major topic incorporated in Oliver's poetry is intricately connected to her discussion of nature, which dominates the landscape of her poetry. This extends to her discussions of religion and religious topics as well. Oliver uses the attitudes and terminology of Christian worship and prayer in her poems to convey the spirituality of nature while simultaneously never focusing her attitude of worship intently on a God or gods, instead praising the divinity she sees within nature itself (Murphy, 2020). This common reading of Oliver projects the lens of panentheism onto her work: that is to say, a lens that "considers God and the world to be inter-related with the world being in God and God being in the world" (Culp, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2020). This view of Oliver's religious approach to her poetry extends to her views of the soul, where Oliver's writing seeks to "ground" the soul of man and have her readers view nature by "[seeking] instead to understand how and where the natural world takes root within us, how we are challenged and even transformed in the process of wakening to nature's soulful presence" (Burton-Christie, 1996).

However, panentheism is by no means the only religious reading of Oliver's work. Oliver's work abounds with images of the soul and religious rhetoric, all of which is left intentionally vague in order to "[sidestep] any theological debate about the orthodoxy of such an assertion or the negotiated differences between pantheism and pan-en-theism" (Davis, 2009) -- the assertion being that "the glory of God is every creature fully alive and, therefore, we live to give God glory by loving the world and everything in it" (McFague, *Life Abundant*, 2001). The most immediate religious reading, like Murphy's analysis of Oliver's imitation of Christian prayer rhetoric suggests, is a Judeo-Christian one, which, even in its Judeo-Christian roots, cannot help but push back traditional Bible scholars and Greek philosophers who might

point to the world as evil and full of sin. Instead, Oliver's poetry inspires in readers "a love of the earth and existence so overflowing that it implied, or included, or even absolutely demanded, God" (Buchanan, 2013). Alternatively, an Eastern view of God can also be applied to Oliver's Western religious rhetoric, a view that compares Oliver's innocent approach to nature to the Buddhist principle of the "beginner's mind" (Ullyatt, 2011), an attitude of openness, eagerness, and lack of preconceptions when studying a subject, just as a beginner would. These readings, while varied in their emphasis, all speak to Oliver's deep and extensive writing on the state of mankind's soul and its relationship to the natural world.

Death is a common topic in discussions of religion and the soul and Mary Oliver's poetry naturally touches on the subject of death and how mankind should view it. Like her treatment of many other topics, Oliver's thoughts on death come mostly in the form of asking questions of the universe; "She notices not only the brute fact of death--much of her poetry is given over to an unflinching examination of the power of death in the natural world--but also asks what value do we give it in our experience? Is death a final, irrevocable darkness? Or does life somehow endure?" (Burton-Christie, 1996). However, some firm thoughts of Oliver's about death are evident in poems like "White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field", where Oliver "invites us to question hierarchical dualisms, spirit above matter, life above death, male above female, human above nature" (Keegan, 2009) and, like mankind and the animal kingdom, "imagine otherness as continuity and contiguity, not as alienation" (Keegan, 2009).

Man's connection to Nature and Animals

Central to all these topics is Oliver's discussion of mankind and its connection to the natural world. As previously noted, one of Oliver's objectives is to "[seek] instead to understand how and where the natural world takes root within us," (Burton-Christie, 1996); however, to box her questions and observations of the world around her into neat objectives would likely sound distasteful to Oliver, whose methodology in approaching nature included "refraining from idealizing or symbolizing the natural world, letting it stand forth in all its stark otherness" (Burton-Christie, 1996). It is this parameter of Oliver's unguided wanderings through the woods and beaches around her Provincetown home, which in turn prompt her poetic campaigns to express "a connection between our bodies and all other forms of physical life" (Davis, 2009). The loss of connection with the rest of the natural world is a tragedy grieved over in Oliver's poetry; "Picking Blueberries, Austerlitz, New York, 1957" is a prime example of this, wherein Oliver's chance encounter with a deer as a young girl ends with "a sense of elegy not just for the deer but for a former self, lost when she somehow lost contact with the creaturely" (Burnside, 2012). Oliver's poetry, while sometimes stopping to grieve the loss of the connection with nature, mostly serves to rekindle for herself that lost connection via "journeys into the elemental beginning of day" and the "kind of communion" she has with nature as a result of them (Davis, 2009).

Research Connection and Gap

While the research community seems to, by and large, agree on the prevalence of Oliver's discussion of humanity's relationship to the natural world, they seem to have very little to say directly on the topic of animals, and more specifically birds, in Oliver's poetry. While research has indeed touched on the topic of birds in Oliver's poetry -- the "lost connection with

the creaturely" (Burnside, 2009) and "the wisdom of owls" in representing "gender, nature and spirituality" (Keegan, 2009) -- no research has intently dwelt on birds holistically in Oliver's poetry. It is my intent to bridge this gap by examining the functions of birds holistically in Oliver's poetry as opposed to examination on a case-by-case basis as they relate to other topics of potential interest. My research will answer the question "How do bird references function in the poetry of Mary Oliver?" via a critical discourse analysis of the vocabulary descriptions of the birds themselves, their environmental surroundings, and thoughts/ideas accompanying bird references in Oliver's poetry. Such a project will hopefully provide a basis for further research into Oliver's poetry and a reference point for future researchers searching for data on their individual topics within Oliver's vast animal catalog.

Methodology

My research focuses on poems out of Mary Oliver's "Devotions" collection of over 200 poems. I chose this selection specifically because the poems in it were hand-selected by Mary Oliver herself before her passing. In addition, Oliver chose a few poems from each of her major published collections prior to "Devotions", making this an almost definitive collection. As a few of her collections specifically reference animals and many of the others include animals within their pages, "Devotions" is an efficient source from which a large number of Oliver's animal-centric references can be pulled with minimal hunting for sources.
The following questions are the codes reflected in my data set:

- Vocabulary Descriptions
    - What birds are referenced?
    - What adjectives, if any, are used to describe the birds?
- Environmental Surroundings
    - What are the birds doing, if anything?
- Thoughts and Ideas
    - What explicitly stated thoughts or ideas accompany the birds in the poems?
        - Philosophical themes (morality, etc.)
        - Social themes (environmentalism, etc.)
        - Religious themes (God, spirituality, the soul, etc.)

Results

Vocabulary Codes

Code 1A

Code 1A sought to answer the question "what birds are referenced in Oliver's poetry?". To this end, code 1A is a quantitative collection of the birds referred to throughout the 76 poems in Oliver's "Devotions" collection. While searching for these references, I noticed an emerging code of whether birds were specifically named or not, as well as if the same reference was repeated in a single poem. To that end, I divided the type of references along two different parameters: firstly, whether the animal reference specifically named the animal in question or simply alluded to it via descriptions or the title of the poem; secondly, whether the same animal was repeated multiple times in the same poem. This first parameter is referred to as the "named" factor, where "named" references are those that specifically refer to the animal by name and "unnamed" references allude to the animal by either description or in the title of the

poem. The second parameter is referred to as the “individual” factor, where “individual” references include repeats and references without the “individual” notifier do not account for repeat references.

There were a total of 128 Named references (with no repeats), 188 Individual Named references (with repeats), 6 Unnamed references (with no repeats), and 7 Individual Unnamed references (with repeats). Of these, the Named references contained the most diverse spread of representation. The following graphs show the spread of the representation of specific species within the bird category. Note that the references to “bird” refer to a general bird reference.

Figure A

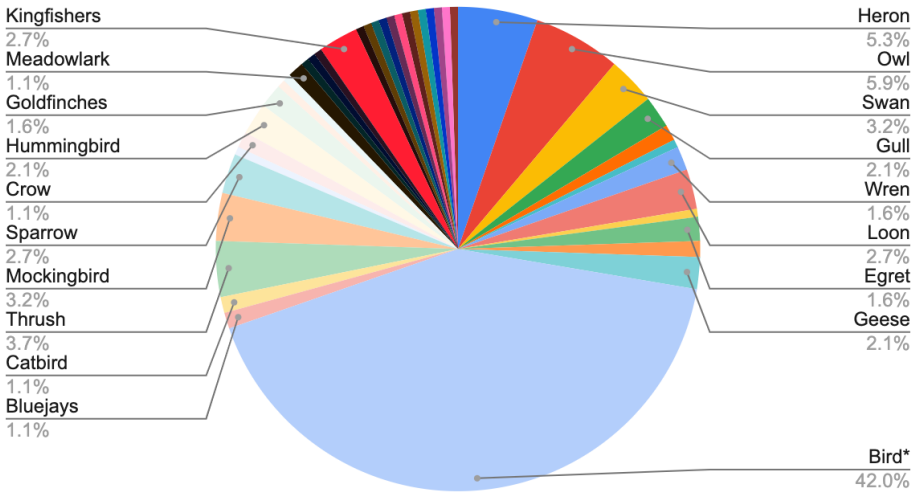
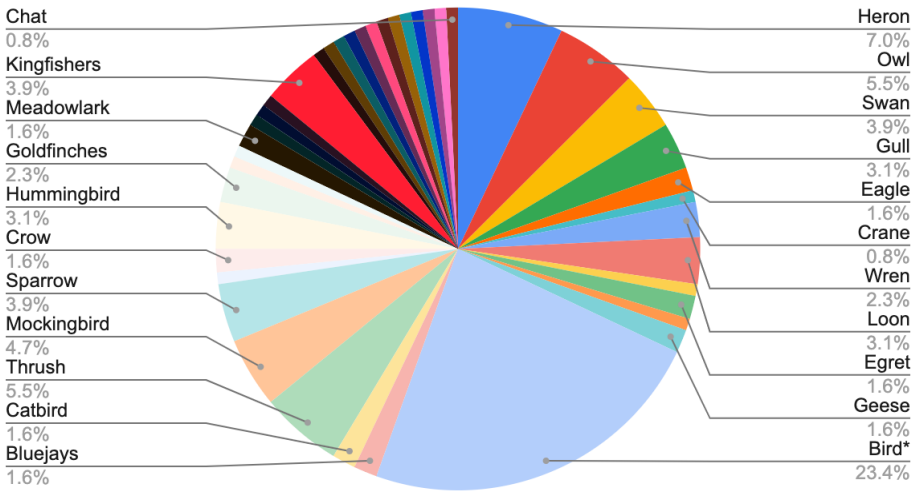


Figure B



The figures above correspond with the weighted averages of the different species of birds. Figure A represents the individual named bird references; Figure B represents the named bird references without repeats.

Code 1B

Code 1B sought to answer the question "what vocabulary is used to describe the bird references in Oliver's poetry?". To that end, code 1B identifies and records every adjectival description of each of the 42 unique bird references and the poem each adjectival description comes from. A majority of the birds have at least a few adjectival descriptions; however, the animals that identify themselves as requiring further analysis are those that have many descriptions, descriptions that are particularly rich with meaning, descriptions that are spread over a variety of poems, or a combination of all three. Out of the full list of birds, the ones that meet the above criteria the most are general bird references, owls, herons, thrushes, mockingbirds, swans, loons, geese, kingfishers, meadowlarks, and wrens. Other birds could potentially fit these criteria; however, these birds stand out among the rest, especially when held in conjunction with other aspects of the coding results. The full adjectival list of all the birds is in the spreadsheet hyperlink below:
Findings - 1B

Note that the numbers following each adjectival description matches a numbered poem within the data set. The numbered list is provided in the spreadsheet as well and is used in several other codes.

Code 2A

Code 2A sought to answer the question "what are the birds doing?". To that end, code 2A identifies the verbs and actions associated with the bird references in Oliver's poetry. Note that this code refers to the actions being performed by the bird and excludes any actions performed on the bird by a third party. The verbs vary wildly depending on the bird and the context of the poem they are referenced in, but in general, there are a small number of verbs used by each subcategory or group of subcategories. For example, verbs associated with hunting are often used when referring to predatory birds. The full list of verbs can be found in the spreadsheet hyperlink below:
Findings - 2A

Note that the verb entries correspond with the row of the poem they were pulled from within the data set. The numbered list of poems is ordered identically to those lists provided in spreadsheets for other codes.

Code 3A

Code 3A seeks to answer the question "what thoughts or ideas accompany the birds in the poems?". To this end, code 3A examines the overall ideas and thematic elements within the poem a bird is referenced in. Of all the codes in my data analysis, code 3A intersected most into the area of what would later become my analysis and discussions of the birds. This is due mostly to the complicated presentation of ideas in poetry. Poetry presents arguments on ideas and themes in a veiled format compared to prose and other forms of writing, forcing an initial layer of analysis in order to understand the intended message of the poem with any accuracy. A few of the more popular poems within the data set have results in code 3A that can be corroborated with secondary research in the research community surrounding Oliver's works; however, most of the works have little to no secondary research directly addressing them. To this end, I encourage future research to examine my readings of the ideas and thematic

elements within code 3A and use my research to either substantiate or refute any future research done on some of the more obscure of Oliver's poems that I cover in my data set. The full list of thoughts and ideas accompanying the animal references can be found in the spreadsheet hyperlink below:
Findings - 3A

Note that the thoughts and ideas accompanying the animal references correspond with the row of the poem they were pulled from within the data set. The numbered list of poems is ordered identically to those lists provided in spreadsheets for other codes.

Discussion

My discussions of the above findings seek to examine specifically information from codes 1A, 1B, 2A, and 3A, as well as contextual background from the reference poems directly, in order to determine some of the fundamental functions of bird references within their set poems. The structure of my discussion identifies some of the more prevalent birds within code 1A and discusses their function within their most significant reference poems. In this discussion, I elaborate on nine of the 42 distinct types of birds mentioned across 76 poems containing bird references. Determining the role of a bird reference within a single poem and cross-referencing that singular reference with other references of the same or similar birds across the entirety of Oliver's collection will help to create a holistic image of how the references are functioning together.

General Birds

A majority of the bird references in Oliver's poetry are merely nominal, that is, the reference specifically states "bird" as opposed to a specific species of bird. These general references tend to be less focused on particular thematic elements through the birds and in many of the cases, the "bird" is a part of a large spread of animals that give context and flush out the otherwise barren environment of Oliver's poems. However, the unspecific nature of the "bird" references lend themselves well to cultivating an overall appreciation of nature, a topic of crucial importance for Oliver. In "On Winter's Margin", for example, birds sing "like children" in "gardens famous for their charity" and, in combination with a handful of other animals in the garden, are "what saves the world", according to Oliver (*Devotions*). This brief divergence into environmentalism on Oliver's part speaks to the importance of animals, not only to the environment but because of the beauty and awe they inspire within us. This awestruck approach to nature is echoed in one specific bird reference in "The Dipper". In the poem, the author listens intently to the dipper and his "tone, cadence, sweetness, and briskness of his affirmative report", stating that "though not by words, it was a more than satisfactory way to the bridge of understanding" (*Devotions*). The note of importance here is that "the world is full of leaves and feathers, and comfort, and instruction", and that, by observing nature with proper awe and wonder, we can glean understanding about both nature and, introspectively, about ourselves.

General bird references aside, there is a fair amount of complexity within the overall umbrella category of "bird references". Oliver often identifies specific types of birds within her poetry: 42 different species, to be precise. Out of all 188 individual named bird references, 79 of them are just a general "bird" reference and decline to name a specific species. However, of

the named species of birds, the five birds most individually referred to in Oliver's poetry are as follows: the owl, with 5.9% of the bird references; the heron, with 5.3% of the references; the thrush, with 3.7% of the references; and the mockingbird and the swan, both with 3.2% of the references. The inclusion of these top five is not without purpose: each of these birds carries with it deep thematic significance and acts as a tool for Mary Oliver. Some act as vehicles for Oliver to depict her admiration of nature, some reflect more thematic elements and seek to restate the unanswered questions that Oliver so routinely circled around.

Owls

There are a total of 10 individual named references to the owl in Oliver's poetry. These references are spread across four of Oliver's poems: "At Round Pond", "Little Owl Who Lives in the Orchard", "Hearing of Your Illness" (one of the three poems in her miniature collection: "Three Poems for James Wright"), and "White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field". Of these three poems, "Hearing of Your Illness" refers to the owl in passing, mitigating its overall impact on the poem. By comparison, the other three poems dwell on the owl quite substantially and overlap in their descriptions of the owls, their appearances, and what they are generally meant to convey.

Oliver focuses intently on using adjectives and descriptions that center around light and darkness when describing the owl. The word "dark" is used substantially in "Little Owl Who Lives in the Orchard", where the owl is described as a "dark bird of gloom" with a "dark dapple of plush" and a "blouse like a dark, feathery lace" (*Devotions*). In contrast to this, "White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field" chooses to describe the owl with bright descriptive words, calling the owl a "little lighthouse" and claiming it to be "like an angel of light" (*Devotions*). Part of her reasoning behind these descriptions could be more practically directed: the owl is the only bird among her animal references that is mostly nocturnal (with the exception of the pygmy owl), which would invite more light and dark centered descriptions to distinguish them from the descriptions of her other birds. However, light and dark are also frequently used to describe moral issues due to their polar opposite nature. Additionally, death is frequently referred to with dark language, and the conversation around death and the afterlife typically includes these types of lighting descriptions, a point which Oliver also addresses with her owls.

As Bridget Keegan astutely noted in her article "The wisdom of the owls: gender, nature, and spirituality in the poetry of Mary Oliver", owls are used in Oliver's poetry as a "vehicle for attempting to understand and imagine how death and life are linked" (Keegan 153). The specific poems in question that use deathly descriptors when referring to owls are "At Round Pond" and "White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field". In "White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field" specifically, the overlap between the conversation on the afterlife and the prior light descriptors appears in Oliver's description of the titular white owl as "like an angel of light or a Buddha with wings" (*Devotions*). Both angels and Buddha are clearly religious references and both divine entities are associated in some capacity with the process of death and the afterlife in their respective religions. This leads to a slight contrast in how death is meant to be conveyed through the owls in Oliver's poetry. In "At Round Pond", the owl is "a reminder of death" and looks forward to death, but not beyond. In this poem, death is something to be feared still, something that "can't be stopped" from affecting us. This theme is echoed in Oliver's use of birds in "I Looked Up'', where the fiery-looking bird inspires thoughts of a phoenix rising from the ashes in reincarnation and prompts Oliver to grieve "What misery to be

afraid of death. What wretchedness, to believe only in what can be proven" (*Devotions*). This veiled argument on behalf of an afterlife is somewhat expanded on in "White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field", where Oliver views death within the larger lens of the process of death and movement into the afterlife, comparing the process of dying to an owl carrying off its prey. Here, Oliver also contrasts with her association of death and darkness in her descriptions of owls in "At Round Pond" by claiming that "maybe death isn't darkness, after all, but so much light wrapping itself around us -- as soft as feathers…" (*Devotions*). Here, the allusion to the previously mentioned owl's feathers turns the owl itself into a mode for Oliver to present a contrasting view of death as a light that wraps and carries us into whatever lies beyond the veil.

Herons

Compared to the descriptions Oliver sketches out about owls, the descriptions Oliver paints on herons are far more colorful. These colorful descriptions include the "pink throats" and "white plumes like a crown" in "After Reading Lucretius, I Go to the Pond", the blue herons in "Life Story", "Rain", and "Some Herons", the white herons in "Summer Poem" and "White Heron Rises Over Blackwater", the "white gown of [heron's] wings" in "Some Herons", the "robes of black" in "Percy (One)", and the "yellow eyes" in "White Heron Rises over Blackwater", Oliver's herons are vibrant and vivid in the images they evoke. Out of all of her poems, eight mention herons; of those eight, seven contain some sort of color descriptor. The rainbow of color that dominates Oliver's descriptions of herons serves to both convey her appreciation for the animals by lovingly detailing their descriptions in color and to enhance her discussion of the art of poetry.

Oliver's conversations on the art of poetry, when they appear in her poetry, frequently occur in areas where a description of a heron is already taking place. For example, in "Some Herons'', one of the titular herons is described as "an old Chinese poet" whose "eyes flared, just as a poet's eyes are said to when the poet is awakened from the forest of meditation" (*Devotions*). Similarly, in "Summer Poem", the white heron is "writing her own softfooted poem through the still waters" (*Devotions*) with each step she takes. In both poems, Oliver is using the heron as a mode through which to talk about the actions a poet takes in their creative process, a process that takes place in nature in both instances. At the same time, the heron is the poem itself in "White Heron Rises Over Blackwater'', "exactly the poem [Oliver] wanted to write" (*Devotions*). Oliver seems to use her descriptions of herons to make a statement about poets like herself who write about poetry and even those that do not: that despite their intellectual prowess, a poet is a part of nature and cannot lose track of that. Additionally, describing herons as poets is a reminder from Oliver that poets are not the only artists in nature and that the steps of a heron through a pond have as much beauty in them as any well-crafted verse.

Thrushes

Oliver's descriptions of the thrush seem to mirror the language in which she describes many of her birdsongs. According to Oliver in "The Poet with His Face in His Hands", the thrush's role in nature seems to be to simply "sing of the perfect, stone-hard beauty of everything" (*Devotions*). This common task of simply singing is a common trend where a thrush appears in her poetry, repeating itself in "North Country" and "You Are Standing At the Edge of the Woods". This job seems to be one that is restricted to the poet, who is ordered by Oliver in

"The Poet with His Face in His Hands" to hide behind a waterfall to "drip with despair all afternoon" so that "nothing will be disturbed" (*Devotions*).

The thrush also acts as a vehicle for Oliver to speak about the human soul and the effects that nature can have on it. In "North Country", Oliver talks about the thrush's song to her audience: "It is okay to know only one song if it is this one. Hear it rise and fall; the very elements of your soul shiver nicely" (*Devotions*). Oliver is communicating a common theme throughout her work through the thrush's song: the connection between the natural world and the human soul. Here, the connection is realized in the "shiver" of the soul caused by a realization of the beauty in the thrush's song. The thrush's song also seems to act in an almost religious way in the poem by prompting the reader to think about their own moral state: "You listen and you know you could live a better life than you do, be softer, kinder. And maybe this year you will be able to do it" (*Devotions*). Under normal circumstances, this statement by Oliver would bear no distinct religious implications, merely moral ones; however, Oliver's later line builds off of the audience's introspective analysis by stating that "there is no way to be sufficiently grateful for the gifts we are given, no way to speak the Lord's name often enough, though we do try" (*Devotions*). The previous introspection is framed here in a religious light and frames the thrush's song in a new light as well. The thrush's song is now more than just a pretty song, it is a sort of hymn of worship to the Lord in response to the "gifts we are given". This act of worship is an act which we humans are welcomed and encouraged to participate in or "try" to, unlike in "The Poet with His Face in His Hands" previously where the desire to imitate the thrush in song was off limits to humanity.

Other descriptions of the thrush contrast with Oliver's religious descriptions of the thrush's song and role in nature. In "You Are Standing At the Edge of the Woods", Oliver places the thrush solidly within the brutal and unforgiving circle of life with the following passage:

> "[The thrush] pitches itself / forward, it flails and scabs / all the surrounding space with such authority / you can't tell / whether it is crying out on the / scarp of victory, with its hooked foot / dabbed into some creature that now / with snapped spine / lies on the earth -- or whether / it is such a struck body itself".
>
> -Mary Oliver, "You Are Standing At the Edge of the Woods" (*Devotions*)

The implications of this passage when paired with the previous religious descriptions of the thrush's melodious song and even mentions of the "sweetness" of the thrush's song in "You Are Standing At the Edge of the Woods" intentionally blur the lines between the divine and the natural world in a way that Oliver dearly loves to do. Oliver removes the arbitrary separation between the divine and the natural world by means of her descriptions of the thrush, who is both a divine arbiter of the gentle reminder of our perpetual need to worship God and solidly a member of a natural order that is ruled by grittiness, pain, and death. By pushing this cognitive dissonance onto her audience, Oliver hopes to help her audiences understand both nature and themselves in a more nuanced way.

Mockingbirds

When compared to the previous bird mentions, the mockingbird and the swan are both touched on much more briefly. However, Oliver still uses the two birds as descriptors to touch on various other topics. The mockingbird, throughout most of its mentions, is not dwelt on with any lasting attention. The one mention of the mockingbird that does bear some weight comes

from “Daisies”, where Oliver personifies the titular daisies by talking about their hearts. Amidst her discussion on the daisies, Oliver describes the mockingbird as “one who either knows enough already or knows enough to be perfectly content not knowing” (*Devotions*). This description implies a sort of secret knowledge of nature and the inner workings of the world on the mockingbird’s behalf that humanity is not privy to, namely either knowing enough or being content with not knowing. Human ambition drives us as humans towards a need to know and our rational outlook on the world begs an explanation of everything in nature. Through the mockingbird, Oliver chooses to challenge a reckless application of the scientific method by arguing instead that there is a limit to the things that can be understood and known. In showing the simple mockingbird’s understanding of this truth, Oliver reveals our human tendency towards arrogance in believing that we can understand and apply reason to everything and reminds us that there is a peace to be found in being content with what we do not know.

Swans

The swan, like the mockingbird, is mentioned more frequently than many of the other birds, but the substance of these appearances is lacking in most cases. However, in the poem “Swan”, the titular swan is able to take the limelight and is used by Oliver to explore the topic of beauty. Indeed, the swan’s description in “Swan” is beautiful: it is “an armful of white blossoms, a perfect commotion of silk and linen”, “a snowbank, a bank of lilies” (*Devotions*). Oliver’s masterful description of the swan is every bit as graceful as the animal she is striving to portray and imparts a sense of elegance with every word. Oliver is clearly in awe of the bird’s beauty and that beauty is conveyed to the audience, who is then asked by Oliver “did you feel it in your heart, how it pertained to everything? And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?” (*Devotions*). These phrases impart a responsibility onto the audience to, if they haven’t already, find out what the beauty, particularly the swan’s beauty, is for. Oliver answers her own question in the next line, when she asks the audience “have you changed your life?” (*Devotions*). This question, when paired with the need to find out what beauty is for, implies that beauty is for beauty’s sake, to be admired and inspired by beauty to change one’s own life to become more beautiful.

The “change” Oliver references is also an allusion to another of her poems, “Invitation”, where she quotes the last line of “Archaic Torso of Apollo” by Rainer Maria Rilke, where the poet says that “You must change your life”. This reference to Rilke’s poem about the beauty of art prompting change in us elaborates on the previously mentioned theme of allowing beauty to affect us by weaving in the theme of *carpe diem*, seizing the day. By alluding to Rilke, Oliver adds a sense of urgency and necessity to her questions, pressuring the reader to continue the change inspired by the beauty around them into the rest of their lives.

Loons

The loon, similar to the swan before it, is described with grace and dignity. In “Lead”, Oliver describes the loon as simultaneously “elegant” and “dead on the shore”, a dichotomy that is meant to break the audience’s heart “that it might break open and never close again to the rest of the world” (*Devotions*). This final line is perhaps one of Oliver’s most hard-hitting lines and directly conveys one of her most common intended goals in her poetry: to use her

descriptions of animals and nature to soften her audience's heart toward freely feeling the emotions that their encounters with the world around them lead them to.

Oliver repeats a similar expression in "Life Story" and again in "The Loon at Oak-Head Pond", with different variations. Both are expressed in terms of escapism; in "Life Story", Oliver is faced with "her happiness brimming" in a dream where she becomes various parts of nature, from a heron's feather to a pond lily and the footsteps that follow the sea (*Devotions*). When faced with these feelings, Oliver states that "no, there's no escaping, nor would I want to escape this outgo, this foot-loosening, this solution to gravity, and single shape" (*Devotions*). These are references not only to her various dream forms but the inevitable wave of happiness she greets with open expectation. In "The Loon at Oak-Head Pond", the loon cries out in the gray mist and the reader is placed directly into the poem as the observer. The loon is meant to be symbolic of something other than itself here; Oliver frames the loon in a hypothetical relationship to the audience "as though it were your own twilight. as though it were your own vanishing song" (*Devotions*). The cries of the elegant loon are compared to the end of the reader's life, expressing Oliver's quiet contemplation of the concept of her own demise that she inserts the audience into, giving them the same experience of introspective reflection directly.

Kingfishers

Oliver's conversations on the kingfisher are much more challenging to the reader than the affirming messages in her discussions of geese. Oliver checks the audience's perceived privilege and her own in "Singapore", where the kingfisher reference is meant to juxtapose the squalid conditions of a woman Oliver observes scrubbing toilets in a Singapore airport. According to Oliver, "A poem should always have birds in it. Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings … A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem" (*Devotions*). Oliver is calling out her audience's tendency to use her beautiful nature poems as a form of escapism from the harsh, unpleasant realities of the world that we so often have trouble seeing the beauty in. In the second half of the poem, Oliver differs from many other poets who would simply stop at a bitter call out of the perceived ill behavior and offers a gentle solution to her audience's escapist tendencies by pointing out the beauty inherent in the woman, in all her squalor – "Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem. But first, we must watch her as she stares down at her labor … She does not work slowly, nor quickly, but like a river. Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird" (*Devotions*). In comparing the woman to the previous gaudy wings of the bird and the previous rivers, which she described as "pleasant", Oliver expands her audience's definition of what is beautiful and helps them to see the beauty in what they might normally shy away from.

The other mentions of the kingfisher build on the concept of beauty by questioning the purpose of the kingfisher specifically. In "The Kingfisher", Oliver describes the kingfisher splendidly as "like a blue flower" and that "there are more fish than there are leaves on a thousand trees, and anyway the kingfisher wasn't born to think about it, or anything else"; instead, "hunger is the only story he has ever heard in his life that he could believe" (*Devotions*). Oliver establishes the purpose of the kingfisher simply here and states that it accomplishes its survival-oriented telos "perfectly" in a way that "[Oliver] couldn't rouse out of [her] thoughtful body if [her] life depended on it" (*Devotions*). In "Stebbin's Gulch", the beauty of the kingfisher's survival-oriented telos is highlighted when Oliver claims that the kingfisher's

"only industry [is] to descend and to be beautiful while it does so" (*Devotions*). Oliver goes on to claim that its beauty begs no further purpose, arguing that "as for purpose, there is none, it is simply one of those gorgeous things that was made to do what it does perfectly and to last, as almost nothing does, almost forever" (*Devotions*). Oliver uses the kingfisher to make the argument that beauty exists for no other purpose than to be beautiful and that, when a thing accomplishes its purpose, there is a beauty in the accomplishment that is in itself its own reward.

Meadowlarks

When discussing the meadowlark, yet another of her bird references, Oliver discusses her appreciation of the bird and uses her appreciation to move the intent of the two major meadowlark references in two different directions. In "Meadowlark Sings And I Greet Him In Return", Oliver begins the poem addressing the meadowlark, stating that "when you sing it's as if you lay your yellow breast upon mine and say hello hello, and are we not of one family, in our delight of life?" (*Devotions*). Oliver connects herself to the meadowlark and identifies herself as a part of nature, similar to "Wild Geese"; however, she also unites herself with the meadowlark against "the terrible debris of progress" which she claims is the reason that everyone has forgotten their role as listeners to the meadowlark's song. This environmentalist message swings her appreciation of nature in a different direction and compels the audience towards action to protect the world they are called to observe and appreciate.

In an alternative direction, "While I am Writing a Poem to Celebrate Summer, The Meadowlark Begins to Sing" offers up a song of thanksgiving to the Lord for the glorious sound of the meadowlark's song. Oliver offers a vivid description of the meadowlark's song when she says that she longs to open "like the little soft sighs under the meadowlark's whistle, its breath-praise, its thrill-song, its anthem, its thanks, its alleluia" (*Devotions*). Her nigh-holy description of the meadowlark's song, accompanied by her explicit alleluia to the Lord immediately afterward, turns her appreciation of nature's beauty into worship to the creator of the nature she so deeply communes with.

Conclusion

While my discussion of the more prominent birds in Oliver's poetry is by no means an exhaustive list, it shows the depth of the bird references Oliver includes in her poetry. As secondary research notes, there are an abundance of thematic elements and intended messages across Oliver's poetry. Each of these themes and intended messages bears with it Oliver's passion for the topic and, while the research community explored the topics thoroughly, their focus was never directed at the animals.

As I discussed each bird, I intentionally focused on the animal's description first and the thematic elements they were used to present second. Oliver uses her animal references as vehicles to carry her intended messages forward, utilizing the vocabulary descriptions, environment, and actions of the animals in order to direct her audience towards the overall message of her poem. Of all the themes in Oliver's poetry, her most common type of theme is one of appreciation and wonder. The theme of appreciation and wonder appears in her descriptions of nearly all her birds and frames her descriptions of all her animals and everything else she sees. As she states in "When Death Comes", Oliver's greatest wish is to be "married to

amazement" all her life, constantly approaching the natural world around her with a sense of wonder and enjoying the beauty in everything around her to the utmost. This approach to the world around her is reflected in her approach to most of the themes in her writing.

Each of Oliver's poems approaches the bird references in her poetry as the primary object of her amazement, from which she marvels at a specific aspect of the animal that is, in turn, expressed as the intended message she presents to her audience. This pattern is one of the central parts of Oliver's writing style and is prevalent throughout her poems. Oliver's wonder at the world around her frames all of these conversations on the themes of her bird poems and each conversation begins with a bird and an expression of her amazement at some aspect of it. This framing is meant to help her audience view the world around them through the same wonder Oliver witnesses the world with; through this lens, Oliver hopes her audience can view their connection to nature in a more inspired light and begin to see themselves as one with the natural world.

Oliver situates her poetry as a response of sorts to the cynicism of the postmodern age, an age where people's disillusionment with institutions has led to increasing skepticism towards a conversation about the human spirit and nature. Oliver's lens of wonder seeks to combat this cynicism without succumbing to naivete. Her more direct arguments in descriptions of birds like the kingfisher and meadowlark show that Oliver is well aware of the problems with humanity; however, rather than focus on humanity with intense critique, Oliver makes the conscious choice to observe and marvel at the beautiful. In so doing, Oliver provides an example to her audience of how one can avoid the harsh cynicism of the current era and live a life "married to amazement".

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