

Salve Regina University

Digital Commons @ Salve Regina

Master's Theses

Salve's Dissertations and Theses

2021

Your One Wild and Precious Life: The Prayer-poems of William Blake & Mary Oliver

Amanda Iacampo

Salve Regina University, amanda.iacampo@salve.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/masters_theses



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Iacampo, Amanda, "Your One Wild and Precious Life: The Prayer-poems of William Blake & Mary Oliver" (2021). *Master's Theses*. 7.

https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/masters_theses/7

Rights Statement



In Copyright - Educational Use Permitted. URI: <http://rightsstatements.org/vocab/InC-EDU/1.0/>

This Item is protected by copyright and/or related rights. You are free to use this Item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. In addition, no permission is required from the rights-holder(s) for educational uses. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s).

Your One Wild and Precious Life:
The Prayer-poems of William Blake & Mary Oliver
Amanda Iacampo
Salve Regina University

Since the beginning of the written word, poetry that speaks to the human condition and speculates on the mysteries of God, or the divine, has captivated readers. According to the *Academy of American Poets*, the poetry of the Romantic Movement of the 18th-19th century forged strong connections between the reader, the natural world, and God. Religion was the focal point of English religious society, and for these pious men and women, poetry became another form of worship (“A Brief Guide to Romanticism”). These “prayer-poems” allowed both the poet and reader to express their utmost devotion to God and praise creation.

William Blake was one such English poet, and illuminated printmaker, known for writing prayer-poems during the Romantic Movement. In his collection of poetry, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Blake romanticizes childhood innocence and its inevitable destruction, by using animals as subjects, and metaphors for the human condition (“William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*”). In this way, Blake examines an animal's place in nature and addresses the mysterious relationships between humanity and God, or the divine.

Today, the poetry of Blake lives on through Oliver's in an unexpected marriage of the old and new world traditions of prayer-poems. Through her work, Oliver, whose withstanding presence as nothing short of a literary pop phenomenon, also brings the relevance of Blake's work into conversation for a modern audience. Her poetry is rich in religious undertones and examines the human condition as a spiritual response to nature. Like Blake, she uses animals as subjects and metaphors for the human condition, and prayer-poems as a way of praising the natural world and exploring the mysterious relationship between humans and God. While Blake's “The Lamb” and its counterpart, “The Tyger,” speculate on the origins of creation,

Oliver's prayer-poems are an update on Blake's for a more secular 21st-century world. Oliver's "Hummingbirds" and "Wild Geese" are relevant to the modern reader in an examination of their humanity and spiritual connections to all of creation.

I. William Blake's "The Lamb"

According to Mustafa Canli, for *Eurasian Journal of English Language and Literature*, Blake modeled his prayer-poems in *Songs of Innocence* after street ballads sung by London's children in the Industrial Revolution of 1789. During this time, children worked for small wages to provide for their families, and street ballads were their prayers of hope as they petitioned their Lord for better days (16). One such prayer-poem, "The Lamb," examines the human condition, with a close look at childhood innocence.

"The Lamb" begins with the speaker asking the lamb whether it knows the origins of its creation, but the "Little Lamb" does not answer ("The Lamb" 1-2). Blake then goes on to describe the lamb's unassuming and gentle appearance, which is said to have been given by God, making a direct connection to his faith in this poem:

Gave thee clothing of delight,
 Softest clothing wooly bright;
 Gave thee such a tender voice,
 Making all the vales rejoice!

The lamb's soft wool and tender voice are similar to the innocence of a child, "making all the vales rejoice" ("The Lamb" 5-8) in a song of praise for their creator.

In the second stanza, Blake emphasizes the lamb as a metaphor for childhood innocence. The lamb's innocence and naivety suggest it is oblivious to the fact that God is its creator,

making the speaker's questions rhetorical, which is characteristic of many of Blake's poems in the collection:

He is called by thy name,
 For he calls himself a Lamb:
 He is meek & he is mild,
 He became a little child:
 I a child & thou a lamb,
 We are called by his name. ("The Lamb" 13-18)

Here, Blake reveals the speaker to be a child, who then explains to the lamb that they are both innocent and pure, like the child Jesus of the Christian faith:

Of course the lamb symbolizes human innocence and Christ, the Lamb of God. Such a symbol has been universal within the Christian tradition from the time of Revelation. The lamb symbolized for Blake not only all that is sacrificial or innocent in nature; it also embodied the quality of divinity which man can attain as well as emulate. (Baine and Baine 566)

In the New Testament of the Bible, the Book of John refers to Jesus as the "Lamb of God," and shepherd who watches over his people, protecting them: "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep . . . I am the good shepherd, and know my [sheep], and am known of mine" (John 10:11-14). Jesus is also called "shepherd" in a book of prayer-poems in the Bible, the Book of Psalms (23:1-6). Blake's deliberate inclusion of biblical imagery in "The Lamb" is a bold statement of spiritualism, which was also characteristic of his poetry, and met with much criticism from his contemporaries:

The *Songs of Innocence* were clearly designed in the dissenting tradition, and even Johnson [Blake's patron from the 1780s to the 1790s] had to suppress the radical views expressed . . . Blake's political and religious dissent must have been all too clear to his contemporaries . . . Blake's version of Michelangelesque spiritualism was commonly taken to be simply Gothic wildness. (Bentley and Nurmi 6)

Blake uses a metaphor for Jesus that comes directly from the Bible; however, many of his contemporaries believed him to be eccentric to the point of ludicrousness, where his reputation as a poet suffered, and he achieved much of his success posthumously. As an artist-engraver, Blake found more success selling the illuminated print of "The Lamb" for the image on the engraved plate, rather than for the actual poem itself. In an article for *The English Journal* in 1962, the late Robert F. Gleckner, literary critic, and Professor at Duke University applauded Blake for his eccentricities but also stated that his unconventional poetry was cryptic and disturbing to the point of shock.

Gleckner went on to explain that Blake claimed his poems were inspired by visions, which were made lucid through the eyes of children, giving further credence to the claims of his contemporaries that he was indeed mad:

The child, for Blake, can elucidate, can imaginatively take in, the vision or the poem, because his inner eye has not yet been clouded over by the pall of convention, but the obstruction of that common sense we all praise so much, by the maturity which seeks often as the fool sees, which accepts present realities as the only real, accepts "fact" as the only truth . . . accepts the world as it is . . . Such blindness the child has not yet

learned. He can still see, and he sees creatively; as Blake said, he sees not *with* the eye but *through* the eye.

He also stated that “The Lamb” is a “kind of sophisticated version of Mary’s little animal of the same name” (538), making it all the more accessible to Blake’s readers.

Blake’s prayer-poem, “The Lamb,” answers the question *Who created you?* while offering praise to the “Lamb of God,” Jesus Christ, as the creator, and forgiving, loving God of the Bible’s New Testament. Awe of nature gives readers insight into their humanity, showing them the beauty of creation through the honest eyes of a child. The subject—a gentle, innocent lamb—as a metaphor for the human condition speaks to the uncorrupt purity in the heart of a child. “The Lamb” sends a clear message to its reader that when they are feeling lost, they can depend on God, or the divine, to lead as their shepherd and guide them home.

II. William Blake’s “The Tyger”

“The Tyger” from *Songs of Experience* addresses an entirely different beast than the lamb. Blake uses the subject as a metaphor for the destruction of innocence that comes with age and experience, as children reach adulthood. Compared to “The Lamb,” “The Tyger” takes on an entirely new tone of introspection that one would only expect from a mature speaker; however, the poem is still at its core, a prayer-poem of praise and wonder. “The Tyger” is a prayer-poem that employs Blake’s awe of nature as he marvels at one of the world’s most dangerous animals, a predator by the same name. In the Bible, another big cat—the lion—lies down with the lamb, but in Blake’s “The Tyger,” the tiger stuns the speaker with its majesty but does not concern itself with its prey.

Similarly to how Blake begins the first stanza in “The Lamb,” the subject is called by name, followed with a description of its physical appearance. “The Tyger” also parallels the first stanza of “The Lamb” with a question about the origin of its creation:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
 in the forests of the night;
 What immortal hand or eye,
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry? (“The Tyger,” 1-4)

Rather than contrasting good and evil, Blake writes “The Tyger” as the counterpart to “The Lamb” to praise the holiness of each animal in its natural state. Paul Miner, who wrote on Blake’s “The Tyger” in the Winter 1962 issue of *Criticism*, states that “The lamb and tiger are symbols of a *psychomachia* [conflict of the soul], ‘Contrary States’ as Blake calls them” (65). This conflict of the soul, which Blake describes, is in its universality, innately human; and the two conflicting states of innocence and experience in these prayer-poems are the quintessential metaphor for the human condition.

The first stanza of “The Tyger” introduces the tiger in all its magnificence and predacious glory, and the speaker cannot begin to fathom how it came to be in existence. The premise of this poem also asks the same question as “The Lamb”: *Who created you?* In the second stanza, the speaker asks the beast where it was created, and by whom, implying that its creator was a daring and divine immortal being:

In what distant deeps or skies
 Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
 On what wings dare he aspire?

What the hand, dare seize the fire? (“The Tiger” 5-8)

Then, in the third stanza, Blake uses the word “dread” for the first time to describe not the tiger alone, but the tiger’s creator as well: the word “dread” in the manuscript is three times applied to the “criminal hero” that frames the beast in the fiery heavens. According to Miner, it takes a tiger-god to create a tiger-beast. It is part of the human condition to fear what cannot be understood or explained, such as the tiger's divine origins, and it is this fear that causes humans to see the tiger as a dangerous “thing of energy devoted to destruction from his mother’s womb” (65-72). However, in Blake's “The Tyger,” good and evil are not the focus, as the speaker praises the tiger's predatory nature as a part of creation.

Compared to a lamb, a biblical symbol for God, Blake’s prayer-poem by the same name sounds most like a psalm, rich in religious undertones. However, Miner explains that in “The Tyger,” there is no mention of the subject in the Bible:

It must not be assumed that Blake opposed the philosophy of the lamb lying down with the tiger . . . What Blake rejects is the moral judgement which refuses to recognize that the tiger is not a “lamb.” . . . to impose the philosophy of one upon the other is ignorance, but to recognize mutually their divine aspects of wisdom . . . More than anything else Blake is affirming the holiness of the tiger. To paraphrase Blake, to make a tiger holy is not to make him more of a lamb for being holy . . . it is a poem on the holiness of creation. (73)

Blake’s tiger is a metaphor for the wisdom that comes with age and experience, and in this way, the prayer-poem seeks to humanize the tiger in the absence of religion. Many critics believe the lines in the fourth stanza to be an allusion to hell and the tiger as evil created by the devil:

What the hammer? what the chain,
 In what furnace was thy brain?
 What the anvil? what dread grasp,
 Dare its deadly terrors clasp! (“The Tyger” 13-16)

Although the reader might associate “furnace” with “hell imagery,” the speaker asks the tiger who created it and with what materials, without any mention of hell. As it is, the tiger has its place in the family of things, but unlike humans, without moral judgment, or need for redemption; and like the tiger is a predator capable of destruction, so is humanity.

While the poem focuses on the tiger and its creation, there is only one mention of the tiger's counterpart, the lamb. In the penultimate stanza, Blake is more direct in asking the tiger if it was created by the same God that created the lamb:

When the stars threw down their spears
 And water'd heaven with their tears:
 Did he smile his work to see?
 Did he who made the Lamb make thee? (“The Tyger” 17-20).

The conflict in the poem is how to reconcile the tiger with its creator when there is no need for reconciliation. Miner also explains that “‘Did he who made the Lamb make thee?’ is not an exclamation of wonder, but a very real question, whose answer Blake was not sure of” (61); and still, Blake praises the tiger and its creator, and the lamb's, just the same.

The imagery of the cosmos in the fifth stanza is, arguably, a rhetorical climax, like the central, rhetorical question of the poem, and Blake hints at there being an answer in the heavens and stars but does not offer one to the reader: “If Blake’s questions are rhetorical his “answer”

must be found in the affirmative implications of his imagery in the fifth stanza . . . the answer is itself part of the very question he asks” (Miner 72). Blake leaves the reader to join in the search for the answer, while the tiger continues to exist, seemingly unbothered. Therefore, the question about the tiger's creation is entirely the speaker's alone, and the tiger is content with not understanding this divine mystery. For the tiger, there is no condition, no existential crisis of seeking to understand, which for the reader, is a revelation in and of itself.

The final stanza concludes with an image of the dawn, repeated from the first stanza, and bringing the poem full-circle in praise of the divine mysteries of creation. Blake makes one minor alteration, changing “could” to “dare,” so that the closing lines of the poem read: “What immortal hand or eye / Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?” (“The Tyger” 23-24). According to Rodney M. Baine and Mary R. Baine, who also took a closer look at Blake’s tiger in the 1975 issue of *Studies in English Literature*, the poem ends with the tiger and its mystery accepted, and without there being any need for an answer:

Symbolizing nature red in tooth and claw, the Tyger poses the question of the origin of evil and the nature of its Creator . . . evil permeates the world of experience, the Tyger is the ultimate terror, just as the Lamb is the final reassurance for the child of Innocence that the universe and its Creator are benign. (576)

A metaphor for the human condition, the tiger is “red in tooth and claw” and does not question its nature, and whether it is good or evil, which the Baines also mention that Blakes states explicitly about the lamb:

Man in his potential innocence is established in *Songs of Innocence* as Christ the Lamb, the Divine Humanity. In the Tyger of *Songs of Experience* we see his opposite, fallen

man, dominated by his spectrous selfhood . . . Man himself chooses to live in his bestial or spectrous state, and like a tiger, to roam, predacious, the benighted forests of his own desires. (578)

The tiger continues to exist in the family of things and does not question its nature or struggle with morality, as humans do, which often leads to crisis.

“The Tyger” has been applauded as one of the greatest poems of the 18th century. However, many critics do not hesitate to analyze it in a way that reveals its purpose is to contrast good and evil, instead of offering the tiger and its creator praise. A prayer-poem of wonder, “The Tyger,” calls readers to marvel at what they cannot begin to understand, look inward for the answers, and find awe in the unpredictability of divine creation.

III. Mary Oliver’s “Hummingbirds”

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?” are two of the most quoted and tattooed lines from any of the poems written by Pulitzer Prize (1984), and National Book Award (1992) winner, Mary Oliver. These two lines from Oliver’s poem, “The Summer Day,” capture the magic that she breathes into the written word. Although Oliver spent most of her life not practicing organized religion, her work is a testament to her having found her church—in the great outdoors. For Oliver, poetry was a form of prayer, and this reflects in the beauty and lyricism of her prayer-poems. During her 83 years of life, Oliver published more than 20 volumes of poetry and prose, all of which, similarly to Blake, center around awe of nature.

Katy Steinmetz, for TIME, writes that Oliver spent most of her young adolescent life playing outside in the woods and ponds of Ohio, before moving to the East Coast, where she lived in Cape Cod, with her partner, Molly Malone Cook, for over four decades. The natural

landscapes of Cape Cod inspired Oliver, and she reflected this in her writing: “She envied the secret lives of animals. She reminded her readers that life is a blessing, that mischief can be healing, that uncertainty isn’t a reason to disbelieve.” In “An Invitation to Wonder,” Debra Dean Murphy's article written for the April 2017 issue of the *Christian Century*, she refers to Oliver as a “mystic of the natural world, not a theologian of the church” (21). *Christian Century* explains that Oliver’s prayer-poems mirror the story of creation in Genesis 1 of the Old Testament in the Bible, where all living things exist in harmony with their creator. Like Blake, Oliver’s poems “are occasions for transfiguring the imagination and a summons to wonder and delight” (19).

In the Spring 2019 issue of *America*, Jason Myers explains that unlike Blake, who practiced organized religion for the duration of his life, Oliver did not begin to attend Church services until her later years, and this was mainly due to her curiosities and search to find relief from loss. It was only after her partner passed away in 2005 that Oliver attended mass at an Episcopal in her own of Provincetown, Massachusetts, and she wrote about these experiences in some of her poems (26). However, she did not set the most powerful of her prayer-poems in a church, but the great outdoors.

One of Oliver’s prayer-poems, “Hummingbirds,” published in the July 1992 volume of *Poetry*, mirrors many of Blake’s poems in *Songs of Innocence*, thematically. Oliver chooses an animal as a subject—a hummingbird—to invite the reader into the realm of mystery, or “otherness.” Oliver delves into this otherness, which Murphy explains is a “way of giving voice to nonhuman subjects is a way of honoring their otherness, not negating or subsuming it” (22), while also looking inward within herself to examine her humanity.

Written in the first person to ironically give readers a “bird’s eye view,” and similarly to how Blake begins “The Lamb,” Oliver opens with a description of the hummingbirds in the first few stanzas: “The female, and two chicks, / each no bigger than my thumb, / scattered, / Shimmering // in their pale-green dresses; / then they rose, tiny fireworks, / into the leaves / and hovered;” Oliver zooms in and focuses the reader’s gaze on a family of hummingbirds; however they are not mentioned in the Bible. According to nature enthusiast and a writer for *World Birds*, Garth C. Clifford:

[hummingbirds] are sometimes considered to be a messenger from Heaven, gently nudging us to move on and release the burden of people or things that have passed and can no longer be a part of our lives. When a loved one has recently passed away, they may be a sign that the loved one has successfully made it to the other side and is doing just fine. Some people also see them as signs from Angels, reminding us to follow what makes us happy and to enjoy the present moment.

Like Blake humanizes the lamb as the embodiment of childhood innocence, Oliver humanizes the hummingbirds, personifying them, and dresses them “in their pale-green dresses,” and then zooming out again, places them in their natural habitat, “into the leaves / and hovered” (“Hummingbirds” 1-8). Oliver establishes herself as the observant speaker and inserts herself into the natural world as a way of becoming more intimately connected with creation than the observed—the subject, hummingbirds—than ever thought to be humanly possible. In her critical essay, “Into the Body of Another,” Vicki Graham explains that Oliver gets as close as possible to the subject of her poems (364) before they notice her physical presence. Then, Oliver reveals

how she humanizes the subject—the hummingbirds—which is the characteristic climax for many of her prayer-poems.

It is at the exact moment that the family of hummingbirds lock eyes with the speaker, and this sets the poem in motion, as the speaker—in this case, Oliver—becomes one with the hummingbirds (“Hummingbirds” 9-12). Oliver does this in many of her prayer-poems, and as the speaker, invites readers to return to wonder. Todd Davis, a writer for *Christianity and Literature*, says that for Oliver, the path of wonder is a gate swinging open to the world and to the God of that world” (613). Similarly, according to Mark Doty, a writer for *Provincetown Arts*, Oliver, in the tradition of Romantic poetry, leaves the reader in awe of nature:

Awe, by nature, arises from the unfamiliar, from encountering what we do not know, and perhaps mostly from encountering what we *cannot* know. The speaker in Oliver’s poems is, most often, a kind of representative person going out in the wilderness in search of otherness. . . . The poet’s role, for Oliver, is to learn to listen to what has no tongue, perhaps to become that tongue, a translator for the lessons of moss and hawk and lily Wonder awakens the moral sense; in the face of the marvelous, we say, *how can I live up to this?* Oliver moves directly from wonder to wondering; seeking instruction, she asks, *how shall I live?* (27)

By transporting the reader’s gaze from speaker to hummingbird, to becoming the hummingbird, leaving them to ask, *What is there to learn here?* For each of Oliver’s prayer-poems, there is a divine message to be revealed. Oliver delves deeply into the human condition through the eyes of “otherness”—animals—who can act morally without any regard for morality. While humans are not able to do this, they can, through the speaker in Oliver’s prayer-poems. By returning to

wonder and awe of nature, the reader enters the realms of Blake's tiger that does not question the morality of its predatory instincts or experience existential crisis. In Blake's menagerie of prayer-poems, his lamb and tiger can exist in nature, without moral judgment. In Oliver's family of things, humans see through the eyes of animals on their quest to escape moral judgment and reach an understanding of themselves.

While Blake opts for rhetorical climaxes, the turning point of Oliver's prayer-poems happens not at the moment when the speaker sees the subject, but when the subject sees the speaker. Murphy examines how Oliver "knows that such a poem may catch her reader off-guard, the speaker quickly, playfully shifts the scene" (22). This occurs as a dramatic shift in "Hummingbirds" in the eighth and ninth stanzas:

they paused in front of me
and, dark-eyed, stared –
as though I were a flower –
and then,

like three tosses of silvery water,
they were gone. (29-34)

The speaker is left alone, and the hummingbirds have vanished after she makes her presence known. In the absence of the hummingbirds, the speaker no longer sits in the tree but is transported to another location entirely. The hummingbirds, in all their divine magic, have transported the speaker to China and Prague, they have died and been born again, found love, and loved, again (37-40). In "Into the Body of Another," Graham also explains that this shift to

the second person in line 40—“I found you, and loved you, again”—“invites us to step outside the boundaries we draw around ourselves and become, not just *another*, but many others” (356). The speaker steps into the body of the hummingbirds, or other humans that the hummingbirds have visited before. Perhaps, the hummingbirds have even taken them on a similar, cosmic journey toward introspection, revealing the mysteries of creation.

This shift in the poem evokes a mood of longing and sorrow. During the final two stanzas, the speaker searches for their lost love in the physical landscape. According to Graham, “for Oliver, becoming another begins with longing, a longing often tinged with sorrow, as though Oliver recognized and accepted the difficulties involved . . . the speaker is caught between two worlds” (356). In “Hummingbirds,” the speaker is caught between physical space, sitting in the tree, and the sacred space of the hummingbirds’ journey to many destinations:

Likely I visited all
 the shimmering, heart-stabbing
 questions without answers
 before I climbed down. (45-48)

The poem ends, not with the speaker returning to this physical space, but climbing down from the moon after their journey has ended.

“Hummingbirds” is a poem of *looking*, and the speaker begins by observing a family of hummingbirds in their natural habitat. The hummingbirds remain seemingly unbothered until the speaker disturbs them by climbing the tree where they are perched. During this transcendental climax, the hummingbirds vanish and take the reader on a journey beyond the physical space. Suddenly, there are so many places to look—Prague, China, and the moon—and so much to be

seen. Oliver compares this soul-finding experience to climbing down from the moon, and at the end of the journey, both speaker and reader have found adventure, returned to wonder, and possibly caught a glimpse of the divine. Compared to Blake's "The Lamb," "Hummingbirds," supersedes as a prayer-poem in the examination of human innocence. "Hummingbirds" does not trouble itself with the question of moral judgment, but instead answers the question, *When innocence is gone, where does it go?*

IV. Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese"

Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese" first appeared in her collection of poems titled *Dream Works*, published in 1986. Oliver uses the subject as a metaphor for the experience that comes with the realization that childhood innocence has disappeared. Compared to Blake's prayer-poem, "the Tyger," "Wild Geese" functions as a prayer-poem that celebrates the natural world, but rather than it being solely a poem of praise, it is a poem that grounds the reader in their humanity. Oliver knows that while humans cannot fully understand the mystery of creation, they can find complacency in self-consciousness and the gift of dreamlike, visionary moments.

Unlike "Hummingbirds," Oliver does not follow Blake by beginning "Wild Geese" with a physical description of the animal as a subject. Instead, she begins in the second person, by addressing the reader directly:

You do not have to be good.
 You do not have to walk on your knees
 for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body
 love what it loves.

Oliver negates humanity's preconceived notions of their moral and religious obligations to "be good" and repent for their sins (1-5). Then, she tells the reader that their only moral obligation is to take care of themselves. However, this does not come from a place of selfishness, and instead, Oliver shows readers that humans, too, are members of the animal kingdom and should not fight their instinct. Humans, like their animal neighbors, should be conscious of their moral obligations, as they are the only animals capable of it, but should not toil over repenting for following their instinct, as though it is a crime. In Michael Plekon's *Uncommon Prayer*, he speaks on the spiritual nature of Oliver's poetry:

It's not virtue nor is it the asceticism we associate with pilgrims and pilgrimages that makes for an inner life. Rather it is affirming your own self, your body importantly, that is mentioned before mind or soul. (72)

In "Wild Geese," a call for introspection comes before the introduction of an animal as the subject, and metaphor for the human condition; and from the start of the poem, the message is plain to see: our mistakes, or what we love, do not define us, but *how* we choose to love.

In the next line, Oliver petitions the reader to bare their soul to her, and in doing so, she promises to do the same. At this moment, Oliver, as the speaker, establishes a close bond with the reader: "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine" ("Wild Geese" 6). Plekon also speaks on what he believes to be Oliver's purpose for writing prayer-poems:

for [Oliver] so seemingly solitary an individual and poet, connection with another seems important, necessary. Your despair first, then I'll tell you mine. The sky of the wild geese, the prairies, woods, the world over which they head home—we exist in terms of these, we have a place in relation to them. (72)

The shift in “Wild Geese” comes in the middle of the poem, when Oliver draws the reader’s attention beyond themselves and to the outside world—the geese, the prairies, woods, the world:

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain

are moving across the landscapes,

over the prairies and the deep trees,

the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,

are heading home again. (“Wild Geese” 7-13)

The focus of “Wild Geese” is the relationships woven into the web of humanity—the relationships humans have with themselves and others, the natural world, and with God.

Like many of Oliver’s other poems, “Wild Geese” is also a poem of looking or seeking. In his book, *Imagining Wild America*, John R. Knott explains that in this way, “Wild Geese” is a prayer-poem because this seeking comes from the secret place where the soul resides:

The seeking that characterizes Oliver’s more recent poetry proceeds from a belief in the soul that encompasses all life . . . and it involves exploring and writing about [in the words of Oliver] “landscapes in which we are reinforced in our sense of the world as a mystery.” Recognizing and honoring a nature understood to be beyond our comprehension . . . takes the place of religious ritual for Oliver. (186-187)

As a prayer-poem that speaks to experience, rather than innocence, “Wild Geese”—similarly to “Hummingbirds”—dances around the question *When innocence is gone, where does it go?*

However, while “Hummingbirds” answers the question by providing the reader with images of

the speaker's dreamlike visions of the hummingbirds' journey, "Wild Geese" calls on the reader to look to the natural world and *look* for the answer in its example.

Compared to Blake's prayer-poems, the invitation to return to wonder and worship in "Wild Geese" is more accessible because it is universal. Oliver makes no mention of God or religion because she does not need to, but instead, returns to using the second person and direct approach in the closing lines of the poem:

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
 the world offers itself to your imagination,
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
 over and over announcing your place
 in the family of things.

The last five lines of "Wild Geese" function almost as an instruction manual on how to pray in the absence of organized religion, without commandments, penance, or the physical walls of the Church. Oliver explains that it is possible, and okay, to forgive oneself and to be "like the wild geese," (14-18) following a migrational pattern that leads to self-acceptance.

For Oliver, the world needs no explanation for what belongs to the "family of things." Contrariwise, Blake attests to the need to explain and offer justification for the destructiveness of innocence, with the inevitable experience that life brings. Many would argue that Oliver's work has not received the critical attention it deserves. However, a handful of critics, like Murphy, have come down hard on Oliver's poetry, saying that she ignores nature's destructive side (25), which Blake addresses in the "Tyger." However, critics like Davis argue that "Oliver does not dismiss science out of hand, but she does spy its limitations and concludes that we must move

through this world with faith, with an incomplete understanding of the world's workings, and with wonder at those workings” (611), making “Wild Geese” a prayer-poem worthy of praise.

As a prayer-poem, “Wild Geese” makes no mention of God, or Church, because Oliver doesn’t need to mention either to show readers how to pray. In “An Invitation to Wonder,” Murphy also explains that Oliver's use of wild geese as a metaphor for humanity's journey through life sends a clear message:

[“Wild Geese”] remains true to what her work has always been about: pointing readers to the gift of presence—reminding us, in poems that are often deceptively simple, of what it means to attend to what is before us in any given moment . . . Oliver’s poems are not religious in a classic sense, but they do have designs on their readers. They are occasions for transfiguring the imagination and a summons to wonder and delight. (25)

While there is no one answer to where innocence goes after an individual loses it, the experience gained in its place is the lasting truth revealed in this prayer-poem. All of humanity has a place in the family of things, the wild world that Oliver describes in “Wild Geese.”

I. The Same Prayer

To conclude, humanity need not explain when there is no need for explanation, because, for Oliver, she allowed herself to return to wonder, in writing, and life. Oliver lived a life fulfilled and embodied spiritual freedom in her poetry. Blake, however, did not live so freely, and his work reflects the society of the Romantic Movement. Blake’s “The Lamb” and “The Tyger” call readers to marvel at the mysteries of creation, while Oliver’s “Hummingbirds” and “Wild Geese” shows them how. Blake gives examples of innocence and its inevitable destruction, with the arrival of life’s experiences with the tiger and the lamb, and Oliver sometimes chooses to

speak in parables. Both Blake's and Oliver's prayer-poems speak to the human condition; however, Oliver does so in a non-restrictive and freeing way. Blake provides the recipe, while Oliver is very much, *Let go, and let God*. She allows readers to arrive at their answers, and in this way, she is the more accessible writer for a modern audience; however, both Blake's and Oliver's prayer-poems are prayer-poems just the same.

Both poets succeed in seeing God in all things, and all things in God, celebrating humanity in its natural state, returning to the wonder of the mystery of creation. However, the beauty of Blake's and Oliver's prayer-poems is not in the answers they provide, but in the act of worship of reading them silently, or speaking them aloud. Two hundred years after Blake wrote the prayer-poem about the tiger he saw at the Tower of London's menagerie, humanity was still looking for answers to its questions. Then, humanity found Oliver walking the beaches of Provincetown, looking for the answers in the wild world she lived in and writing prayer-poems about it. Two hundred years from this day, there might be another poet who some believe rival the prayer-poems of both Blake and Oliver, and they will be writing for their modern audience, but the spirit of the worship will remain the same. They might even quote one of Oliver's most famous lines in an interview: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?"

Works Cited

- Baine, Rodney M., and Baine, Mary R. "Blake's Other Tigers, and 'The Tyger.'" *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1975, pp. 563-578. *JSTOR*. Accessed 28 Aug. 2020.
- Bentley, G.E. and Nurmi, Martin K. "Blake's Reputation and Interpreters." *A Blake Biography: Annotated Lists of Works, Studies, and Blakeana*. NED - New edition ed., University of Minnesota Press, 1964, p. 6. *JSTOR*. Accessed 28 Aug. 2020.
- The Bible: Authorized King James Version*. OUP Oxford, 2008. *EBSCOhost*. Accessed 28 Aug. 2020.
- "A Brief Guide to Romanticism." *Poets.org*, Academy of American Poets, 26 May 2004.
- Canli, Mustafa. "'William Blake's 'Songs of Innocence and Experience' as a Practice and Manifestation of the English Romantic Movement.'" *Eurasian Journal of English Language and Literature*, 2019, p. 16.
- Clifford, Garth C. "Hummingbird Symbolism & Meaning." *World Birds*, 12 May 2020. Accessed 29 Aug. 2020.
- Davis, Todd. "The Earth as God's Body: Incarnation as Communion in the Poetry of Mary Oliver." *Christianity & Literature*, vol. 58, no. 4, Summer 2009, pp. 605-624. *EBSCOhost*. Accessed 22 July 2020.
- Doty, Mark. "Natural Science: In Praise Of Mary Oliver." *Provincetown Arts*, vol. 11, pp. 26-29. *EBSCOhost*. Accessed 22 July 2020.
- Gleckner, Robert F. "'The Lamb' and 'The Tyger'—How Far with Blake?" *The English Journal*, vol. 51, no. 8, 1962, pp. 536-543. *JSTOR*. Accessed 28 Aug. 2020.

Graham, Vicki. "Into the Body of Another": Mary Oliver and the Poetics of Becoming Other."

Papers on Language & Literature, vol. 30, no. 4, Fall 1994, p. 352. *EBSCOhost*.

Accessed 22 July 2020.

Knott, John R. "Mary Oliver's Wild World." *Imagining Wild America*. University of Michigan

Press, Ann Arbor, 2002, pp. 163–188. *JSTOR*. Accessed 22 July 2020.

"Mary Oliver." *Christian Century*, vol. 136, no. 4, Feb. 2019, p. 19. *EBSCOhost*. Accessed 18

July 2020.

Miner, Paul. "The Tyger": Genesis & Evolution in the Poetry of William Blake. *Criticism*,

vol. 4, no. 1, 1962, pp. 59-73. *JSTOR*. Accessed 28 Aug. 2020.

Murphy, Debra Dean. "An Invitation to Wonder." *Christian Century*, vol. 134, no. 9, Apr. 2017,

pp. 20–25. *EBSCOhost*. Accessed 15 Aug. 2020.

Myers, Jason. "Facets of the Maker." *America*, vol. 220, no. 9, Apr. 2019, pp. 26–29.

EBSCOhost. Accessed 15 Aug. 2020.

Oliver, Mary. *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*. Penguin Books, 2017.

Oliver, Mary. *Dream Work*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986.

Oliver, Mary. "Hummingbirds." *Poetry Foundation*, July 1992.

Steinmetz, Katy. "Mary Oliver." *TIME Magazine*, vol. 193, no. 4/5, Feb. 2019, p. 11.

EBSCOhost. Accessed 22 July 2020.

Plekon, Michael. "The Prayer of Poets: Mary Oliver, Christian Wiman, and Mary Karr."

Uncommon Prayer: Prayer in Everyday Experience. University of Notre Dame Press,

Notre Dame, Indiana, 2016, pp. 67–94. *JSTOR*. Accessed 22 July 2020.

"William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*." The British Library, 6 Feb. 2014.