

Mary Oliver

- 1 Mary Oliver, who died in January, 2019, was one of the best-selling poets of our time. Her poetry – which was singular in its plainness of language and overall brevity – focused primarily on nature. In her hands, plants and animals became symbols for the grief and gift of everyday life.
- 2 Some critics snubbed her work for being too commercial, too pandering. Other critics raved about her glowing meditations on nature, comparing her to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman or Robert Frost. Either way, Ms. Oliver was one of the most-read poets of the century. Unlike other poets, who were often considered the scribes of the intellectual elite, she reached a broad audience, from pro-football players to college professors. Celebrities as diverse as Gwyneth Paltrow and Hillary Clinton celebrated her work. Numerous composers set her words to music. Oprah Winfrey created a special poetry issue of O Magazine in order to highlight a rare interview that Ms. Oliver gave to the journalist, Maria Shriver. In an all-too-rare achievement for poets, several of her books made the best-seller lists. Here, at last, was a poet who could speak to the masses – and this ability earned her both praise and rebuke.
- 3 And indeed, Ms. Oliver enjoyed a long and illustrious poetic career. Her first book, “No Voyage and Other Poems,” was published when she was 28 years old, in 1963. In 1984, her fourth book, “American Primitive,” won the Pulitzer prize. In 1992, “New and Selected Poems” won the National Book Award. She was a poet-in-residence at Bucknell University, Sweet Briar College and Bennington College. For the large part of 40 years, though, Ms. Oliver lived in Provincetown, MA, with her partner, the photographer Molly Malone Cook, and several dogs. Most days, even in old age, she could be found walking through the woods, a dog by her side, and a pen and notebook in her hand.
- 4 Her fame never led to an inflated ego, nor did she mind the criticisms of others. Poetry was, for her, not so much a means of self-expression as much as self-exploration, and eventually self-realization: “I did not think of language as the means to self-description. I thought of it as the door – a thousand opening doors! – past myself. I thought of it as the means to notice, to contemplate, to praise, and, thus, to come into power.”

This desire to escape to another world was due, in part, to her upbringing. Born in Maple Heights, Ohio, in 1935, she was the product of an unhappy home. “It was a very dark and broken house that I came from,” she said in a radio interview. “To this day, I don’t care for the enclosure of buildings.” To escape the unhappiness, Ms. Oliver fled for some neighboring woods, where she would walk for hours and observe the sights around her – and thusly scribble down those observations in a notebook. The trees were her cathedral; venturing forth under the shelter of branches and leaves, she would find physical and spiritual renewal. Her home life, she said, made her want to be invisible; she took to the woods to disappear. But a funny thing happened on the way through the forest. Amongst the trees, she appeared to herself. She discovered that she had a voice. “I made a world out of words,” she said to Maria Shriver in her O Magazine interview. “It was my salvation.”

- 6 In the woods, Ms. Oliver also found faith. In the endless life and death cycles of nature, she found spiritual fervor: the birth of a new moon, the death of a snake in the road, were equal sources of inspiration. In her poem, “The Swan,” Ms. Oliver recounts the sight of a swan, drifting on a river and then taking flight, “an armful of white blossoms.” The description concludes with the bird, aloft in the air, “And did you feel it, in your heart” she asks with some urgency, “how it pertained to everything? / And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for? / And have you changed your life?” In the swoop and grace of a single swan, Ms. Oliver found deeper meaning; from her personal pain and confusion, she found a beautiful perspective to share with the world.