“The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver

Mary Oliver

1935–2019

Mary Oliver was born on September 10, 1935, in Maple Heights, Ohio. As a teenager, she lived briefly in the [home of Edna St. Vincent Millay](https://poets.org/academy-american-poets/listing/edna-st-vincent-millays-hometown-camden-me) in Austerlitz, New York, where she helped Millay's family sort through the papers the poet left behind.

In the mid-1950s, Oliver attended both Ohio State University and Vassar College, though she did not receive a degree.

Her first collection of poems, *No Voyage, and Other Poems*, was published in 1963. She went on to publish more than fifteen collections of poetry, including *Blue Horses*(Penguin Press, 2014); *A Thousand Mornings* (Penguin Press, 2012); *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems* (Beacon Press, 2010); *Red Bird* (2008); *Thirst* (2006); *Why I Wake Early* (2004); *Owls and Other Fantasies: Poems and Essays* (2003); *Winter Hours: Prose, Prose Poems, and Poems* (Mariner Books, 1999); *West Wind* (1997); *White Pine* (1994); *New and Selected Poems* (1992), which won the National Book Award;*House of Light* (1990), which won the Christopher Award and the L. L. Winship/PEN New England Award; and *American Primitive* (1983), for which she won the Pulitzer Prize.

\*Taken from https://poets.org/poet/mary-oliver

For more information about Mary Oliver: <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mary-oliver-helped-us-stay-amazed>

Before you read:

What are some universal questions all people ask?

What are some specific things you did today? (i.e. brush your teeth, eat something, drive in a car, what else?)

Next, read the poem: https://wordsfortheyear.com/2015/06/21/the-summer-day-by-mary-oliver/

Answer the following questions about the poem:

1. Oliver asks 6 universal questions in her poem. Highlight all of them. Which one or two strikes you as the most interesting question(s)?
2. Oliver writes a lot about this grasshopper. Why do you think she focus so much attention on the grasshopper after asking such huge questions at the beginning?
3. Notice how Oliver abruptly shifts ideas from “Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away. / I don’t know exactly what a prayer is” what do you think of this abrupt shift in ideas from something so concrete to something so abstract? Why does or doesn’t the shift work in this poem?
4. Oliver specifies what she knows how to do. Underline that list. What are some things like this in life where you find meaning or where you feel most alive?
5. She asks a rhetorical question, “what else should I have done?” Is this effective for speaking directly to the reader? How might you answer this question if pressed?
6. Think a little about the last rhetorical question she asks: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?” Jot down a few of your goals / dreams / aspirations.

Possible poem writing prompts:

1. Brainstorm some universal questions you often ask yourself. What questions do you come back to again and again? Consider starting a poem with one question or a couple of questions and attempt to wrestle with it/ them by wrestling with what’s directly in front of you or by just paying close attention to your life for a few days. How does nature answer these questions?
2. Write about something in nature you really enjoy, could be an experience or a creature. Write about it in a way that readers can see/feel/smell/taste/touch it. Use as many of the senses as you can. Then begin or end the poem with a universal question or something you wrestle with.
3. How do you spend your time? How do you think you should spend your time? Write about the way these align or differ.
4. What is a prayer?
5. What will you do with your wild and precious life?