

Embracing Stillness: A Contemplation of Love and Being in Mary Oliver's "Spring"

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Mary Oliver's "Spring" trails down the page with as many cliffs and ledges as the mountain it depicts. Central to the poem, buried beneath earth and water, is a single question: "how to love this world" (17). The speaker ponders this question through observing a black bear, following its every movement. With vivid imagery, Oliver embeds the answer in the bear's wordlessness, as there is power in accepting one's physical senses without making something of it: there is power that comes with feeling, not thinking. The evolution of the word "love" from a verb to a noun encapsulates the essence of the poem: rather than *performing* love, *be* love through achieving stillness with one's body and mind.

The opening lines convey the very thing that differs the speaker from the bear: her thinking. Oliver begins poem in a bit of ambiguity:

Somewhere
 a black bear
 has just risen from sleep
 and is staring

down the mountain. (1-5)

The ambiguity of "Somewhere" conveys that the subsequent image is imagined; the bear, its actions, and the mountain are all creations of the speaker's mind. The poem's first word establishes an open-endedness that contrasts with the detailed descriptions that follow. Indeed, Oliver enriches the imagery as the poem progresses to characterize the speaker as a deep thinker: she takes one thought and explores it further, delving into her imagination as time proceeds. Furthermore, the short lines and heavy enjambment draw out a slow and uneven pace. It feels as though the speaker is so tied to her thoughts that her mind follows each idea passively, roaming from one direction to the next. The cognitive descent as well as literal structural descent into the speaker's imagination makes the bear appear close and the atmosphere intimate. Oliver adds the

descriptor “just” to establish a temporal proximity between her and the bear. Her mind has established a vivid image, and the present progressive word “staring” further casts full attention on the animal’s movements in the current moment. Furthermore, the strophe break after “staring” forces the eye to look downward in the poem just as the bear does to the mountain, creating a mirroring effect where the reader imitates the bear’s actions like how the speaker’s mind follows the bear.

The next three strophes juxtapose the speaker’s tendency to think deeply with the bear’s objective physical senses. Oliver begins a new sentence with another ambiguous descriptor:

All night
in the brisk and shallow restlessness
of early spring

I think of her. (6-9)

The fact that Oliver does not describe “the mountain” portrays how the bear stares for the sake of staring without needing to make sense of the mountain. No, the focus returns to the speaker’s mental preoccupations. She is awake “All night” thinking, and this affects her perception of the world because she projects “restlessness” onto “spring.” Interestingly, although the period after “mountain” shifts the subject from the bear to the speaker, the similar structure of each strophe and the logical ordering of words makes it possible to read the lines as the bear “staring / down the mountain / all night.” The presence of this reading compounds the bear’s absence of cogitation. This animal “just” woke up from hibernation, empty of food and thoughts, yet it can pour its attention into a similarly blank expanse: the sky. Conversely, the speaker must “think of her” during the night to fill her mind. In a more abstract sense, the period after “mountain” acts as a literal object that divides the bear and the speaker as subjects; Oliver’s usage of grammar as a poet thus differentiates her structured method of thought from the bear’s simple, fluid way of

life. There is a layer of distance between Oliver and the natural world because she is *writing* about it, not feeling it.

However, the speaker is not fully separate from the environment because she intimately ponders the bear's physical movements. She thinks of:

her four black fists
 flicking the gravel,
 her tongue

 like a red fire
 touching the grass,
 the cold water. (10-15)

These six lines epitomize the bear's harmony with the environment. Oliver overwhelms the imagery with the five senses. There is sight: the intense, primary colors; touch: the "fists" against rough gravel and the literal "touching" of grass; taste: the tongue on earth; smell: the smoke of fire and freshness of grass; and sound: the water that likely rushes and the alliteration of "f" that flows through the lines like wind. The enjambment also illustrates a mixing of elements with "fire / touching the grass, / the cold water." The simile ties the bear's body with the fire and consequently the bear's body with the earth and water. Oliver describes the bear in conjunction with her surroundings; the two exist together, not separately. Furthermore, Oliver continues the bear's actions in the present progressive tense to elucidate its present act of *doing* and *being immersed* in its body and setting. The repetition of "her" through the poem stresses the speaker's focus on the bear and "her" surroundings, and the following two lines explain this fixation.

Following a focus on the bear's vivacity, the speaker recognizes: "There is only one question: / how to love this world" (17-18). The question appears near the exact center of the poem. This location reflects how it preoccupies the core of the speaker's consciousness, permeating all aspects of the poem. Furthermore, the question arrives after an intense

concentration on the bear's body—on the senses associated with aliveness. This ordering insinuates that the bear knows “how to love this world,” and the answer likely has to do with its connection to earth. Oliver affirms her attempt to learn how to love by observing the bear through the word “this.” It is not “my” world or “the” world. She wants to love “this” world that she and the bear share: “this” world that the bear's tongue is touching. The brevity of the entire sentence along with the simple diction reflects the ease that the bear radiates. Just by watching the animal, the speaker's thoughts collapse into “only one” thing. The word “only” conveys importance in singularity; the minimalism feels right, as if the question about love matters *because* it is the only one present.

Oliver therefore continues to observe the bear with particular attention on how the bear loves. Her thoughts returns to the bear:

I think of her
 rising
 like a black and leafy ledge

 to sharpen her claws against
 the silence
 of the trees. (18-22).

The polysemous nature of “rising” ties together the motifs of growth and attentiveness to the world. The poem's title makes clear that the bear is “rising,” waking up from its winter hibernation. It re-enters the world “like a black and leafy ledge,” and the simile underlines the bear's connectedness to earth. Not only is line 20 literally a long line that approaches the edge of the poem like a ledge, but the bear *is* the ledge; it is “rising” upon the very earth that it is also “rising” during spring. Indeed, nature is springing upward, and the motif of height connotes wisdom and serenity. As such, the bear's act of waking “to sharpen her claws” must indicate some sagacity. It wakes and takes care of its body, creating power in its claws out of the

“silence” of her surroundings. The bear’s strength thus comes from the silence—the nothingness of the trees.

As the speaker witnesses the physical conjuring of strength, she recognizes the intangibility of her own life. She almost demeans aspects of her existence:

Whatever else
my life is
 with its poems
 and its music
 and its glass cities,

it is also this dazzling darkness
 coming
 down the mountain,
 breathing and tasting; (24-32)

“Whatever else” seems to label “poems,” “music,” and “glass cities” as lesser aspects of life and the “dazzling darkness” as the thing of importance. Poems are built upon impalpable words, music is transient, and glass is fragile and clear. They connote no sign of life. Conversely, the oxymoron “dazzling darkness” charges the darkness with spirit. The bear lowers itself into the busy, physical world of life. Just as height reminds of wisdom and otherworldliness, being on the ground forces one to confront the trials of life; of “breathing and tasting,” hunting, feeling, etc. These actions appear “dazzling.” However, it is difficult to believe that the speaker’s life “is” the bear, as this animal likely does not play as large of a role in Oliver’s life as poems and music. Instead, the “dazzling darkness” also refers to the notion of nothingness. Oliver’s life contains intricate details in its various forms of art, but there “also” exists a large expanse of thoughtlessness that she does not delve into. Poems arrive with thoughts and music sparks emotions, whereas darkness clears away the slate for one to simply exist in a pure state of “breathing and tasting.”

The final strophe epitomizes a focus on the bear's body and lack of thought. Oliver repeats:

all day I think of her—
 her white teeth,
 her perfect wordlessness,
 her perfect love. (33-37)

Oliver transitions “love” from a verb to a noun to portray the speaker's rationalization of “how to love” versus the bear's intrinsic state of *being* love. Love, like “teeth” and “wordlessness,” is a quality of the bear's body. The bear does not need to love anyone else or even the world; she simply harbors it, directed toward everything and nothing, and it radiates out of her body. Notably, “wordlessness” does not equate to “thoughtless”; what it does is take away the need to make something out of the thoughts. It encapsulates a state of settling with oneself, quietly and calmly. This stillness with one's thoughts is what differentiates Oliver from the bear.

As suggested by the title, “Spring” conveys a journey of growth and awakening. Oliver describes the bear's awakening with gentle diction and a slow pace, illustrating how simple life is when one focuses on physical sensations rather than mental preoccupations. Indeed, the poem is full of imagery that draws attention to the body. Love is a state of being—of being in tune with the natural landscape, of letting go of thoughts, and of allowing nothingness to overtake one's mind. By doing so, one realizes the existence of “only one question” but does not need to pursue its answer, as the answer arrives without thought.