BACKGROUND

Mary Oliver (b. 1935) was born in Maple Heights, Ohio. Her first book of poetry, No Voyage and Other Poems, was published in the United Kingdom in 1963, when Oliver was 28. Oliver's life choice may have been influenced by Walt Whitman, but another major early influence was poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. Oliver is a prolific poet and has won numerous honors, including the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award. Her poetry is known for its focus on the natural world and her effort to explore both the beauty and difficulty of nature. Oliver rarely grants interviews, saying she wants people to discover her through her writing.

MY FRIEND WALT WHITMAN

Essay by Mary Oliver

SETTING A PURPOSE

As you read, pay attention to how Oliver develops key ideas in this essay. Who are her friends, why are they important, and what impact have they had on her life?

In Ohio, in the 1950s, I had a few friends who kept me sane, alert, and loyal to my own best and wildest inclinations. My town was no more or less congenial to the fact of poetry than any other small town in America—I make no special case of a solitary childhood. Estrangement from the mainstream of that time and place was an unavoidable precondition, no doubt, to the life I was choosing from among all the lives possible to me.

I never met any of my friends, of course, in a usual way—they were strangers, and lived only in their writings. But if they were only shadow-companions, still they were constant, and powerful, and amazing. That is, they said amazing things, and for me it changed the world.

This hour I tell things in confidence,
I might not tell everybody but I will tell you.¹

¹ All text in italics, including italic text that is not set apart from the main text, is from Walt Whitman's poem "Song of Myself."
Whitman was the brother I did not have. I did have an uncle, whom I loved, but he killed himself one rainy fall day; Whitman remained, perhaps more avuncular\(^2\) for the loss of the other. He was the gypsy boy my sister and I went off with into the far fields beyond the town, with our pony, to gather strawberries. The boy from Romania\(^3\) moved away; Whitman shone on in the twilight of my room, which was growing busy with books, and notebooks, and muddy boots, and my grandfather’s old Underwood typewriter.

*My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach,*
*With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds.*

When the high school I went to experienced a crisis of delinquent student behavior, my response was to start out for school every morning but to turn most mornings into the woods instead, with a knapsack of books. Always Whitman’s was among them. My truancy was extreme, and my parents were warned that I might not graduate. For whatever reason, they let me continue to go my own way. It was an odd blessing, but a blessing all the same. Down by the creek, or in the wide pastures I could still find on the other side of the deep woods, I spent my time with my friend: my brother, my uncle, my best teacher.

*The moth and the fishegs are in their place,*
*The suns I see and the suns I cannot see are in their place,*
*The palpable is in its place and the impalpable is in its place.*

Thus Whitman’s poems stood before me like a model of delivery when I began to write poems myself: I mean the oceanic power and rumble that travels through a Whitman poem—the incantatory\(^4\) syntax, the boundless affirmation. In those years, truth was elusive—as was my own faith that I could recognize and contain it. Whitman kept me from the swamps of a worse uncertainty, and I lived many hours within the lit circle of his certainty, and his bravado. Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs! And there was the passion which he invested in the poems. The metaphysical curiosity! The oracular\(^5\) tenderness with which he viewed the world—its roughness, its differences, the stars, the spider—nothing was outside the range of his interest. I reveled in the specificity of his words. And his faith—that kept my spirit buoyant surely, though his faith was without a name that I ever heard of.

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\(^2\) avuncular: of or having to do with an uncle.

\(^3\) boy from Romania: This phrase refers to the gypsy in the previous sentence. The gypsies, also called Romani, are one of the largest minority groups in Romania.

\(^4\) incantatory: in the manner of a verbal charm or spell.

\(^5\) oracular: resembling or characteristic of an oracle; solemnly prophetic.
Do you guess I have some intricate purpose? Well I have . . . for the April rain has, and the mica on the side of a rock has.

6 But first and foremost, I learned from Whitman that the poem is a temple—or a green field—a place to enter, and in which to feel. Only in a secondary way is it an intellectual thing—an artifact, a moment of seemly and robust wordiness—wonderful as that part of it is. I learned that the poem was made not just to exist, but to speak—to be company. It was everything that was needed, when everything was needed. I remember the delicate, rumpled way into the woods, and the weight of the books in my pack. I remember the rambling, and the loafing—the wonderful days when, with Whitman, I tucked my trousers ends in, my boots and went and had a good time.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Answer these questions before moving on to the Analyze the Text section on the following page.

1 How did Oliver think of Whitman?
   A As her uncle or Romanian cousin
   B As the brother she didn’t have
   C As a somewhat interesting poet
   D As a poet she was forced to read

2 What triggered Oliver’s truancy?
   F Students in her class displayed delinquent behavior.
   G Her parents did not believe in the school.
   H The school stopped teaching writing.
   J She was meeting her friend and goofing off.

3 What does Oliver mean when she writes that “the poem is a temple”?
   A Writing is a religious experience for her.
   B Whitman wrote religious poetry.
   C It allows her to explore her emotions.
   D She prefers traditional forms of poetry.

NOTICE & NOTE

ANALYZE DEVELOPMENT OF KEY IDEAS

Annotate: In paragraph 6, mark what Oliver learned from Whitman.

Analyze: How does this sentence develop a key idea expressed in the thesis statement?