Good-Bye Fox

SUMMARY

The speaker remembers the time she greeted a fox she'd seen before as it lay enjoying the shade of a tree.

The fox returned her greeting and didn't run away, which surprised the speaker.

The fox explained that he'd heard about a conversation the speaker had about foxes (noting that news gets around in the fox community).

The speaker asked the fox what conversation he was referring to.

The fox explained that it was a conversation about fox-hunting; a woman had claimed that hunting is good for the fox, and the speaker had replied that it wasn't good for the fox being hunted.

Now the speaker remembers this conversation, recalling that the woman got huffy about that quick comeback.

The fox went on that, because of her pro-fox answer, the speaker was in his good books.

The speaker replied that foxes don't have books: poets like her have books, and that's the difference between her and the fox.

The fox agreed, adding that the speaker is always trying to understand life through poetry, while foxes just go ahead and *live* life. The speaker surprised by a new thought, just replied, "Oh!"

The fox went on: since no one can ever figure life out totally, foxes don't see any point in trying. While poets chew problems over, foxes just live.

Then the fox got up (rather stiffly, because he was old) and strolled calmly away.

THEMES

THE WISDOM OF NATURE

"Good-Bye Fox" explores what the animal kingdom has to teach humanity about life. The poem's speaker, a writer whom readers can interpret as Oliver herself, has a friendly conversation with a fox she finds lying under a tree. But just because the fox chats with the speaker doesn't mean he particularly respects her way of life: to him, her poetry-writing stands in the way of simply and directly experiencing existence. The instinctive, un-"fuss[y]" lives of animals, the poem suggests, can remind people that torturing themselves with unanswerable questions about the meaning of life might stand in the way of, well, *living*.

Nature, the poem's speaker knows, has a lot to teach her. And she's prepared to see the world from a fox's point of view: when she has a conversation with a woman who argues that "the hunt is good for the fox," she wittily replies, "Which fox?"—suggesting that she can empathize with animals and see them as individuals in their own right. The poem suggests that nature can encourage people to step outside their own limited perspectives.

And it's through empathizing with this fox that the speaker learns an invaluable lesson about life: humanity, the fox suggests, often gets in its own way by trying too hard to understand a life that's there to be lived, not picked apart. As such, when the poem's speaker mentions the "books" of poetry she's written, the fox gives them pretty short shrift: "clever words," he observes, are just a way of "fuss[ing]" with life, "mulling and chewing on its meaning" rather than simply living it as the fox does. All that thinking is futile anyway, the fox continues: the meaning of life is too big and complex to figure out with any "finality," and there's no point in obsessively searching for answers one can never find.

It takes an animal, the poem suggests, to teach a human how to live. The speaker's response to the fox's wisdom—an astonished and delighted "Oh!"—suggests that his ideas are the missing puzzle piece she's been searching for. The fox's way of accepting and "licking up" whatever life brings his way strikes her as a profoundly meaningful way of being, one that accepts and embraces the mystery of life rather than trying to solve it. Life, the poem suggests, isn't a riddle to solve, but an experience to relish.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

POETRY AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

The fox of "Good-Bye Fox" tells the poem's speaker that human beings—and especially poets like the speaker, with their "clever words"—spend far too much time trying to work out the meaning of life, when any animal can tell you that there *is* no such single meaning: life is just there to be lived. But this conversation might lead readers to reflect that they're hearing the fox's anti-poetry wisdom in the form of a poem! In a way, then, this poem suggests that searching for meaning through art might be part of how humanity *learns* to "just live."

When the poem's speaker meets this fox lying under a tree, she seems both surprised and delighted by the fox's advice to stop trying to solve the riddle of life through poetry and simply

embrace living instead. But the very fact that this poem is, well, a *poem* suggests that people sometimes need to use tools like the arts to *learn* to live more simply, instinctively, and naturally. This poem, after all, communicates the very sense of meaning the fox says can't be summed up: one of the poem's central points is that life's meaning doesn't fit neatly into a poem! It's through writing poetry that the speaker can meditate on her experiences in nature and turn them into wisdom she—and her readers—can live by.

Art, this poem thus suggests, might be the fundamental "difference" between humanity and animals: human beings, with their searching, "hunting" minds, might *need* to use art (and art-making) to bring them back to the basics of existence. Animals, the poem observes, can just live their lives without worrying about what they mean—but part of being a *human* animal is going the long way around, using art to discover, absorb, celebrate, and share life's inexpressible richness and complexity.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 12-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

He was lying ...
... not bounding away.

"Good-Bye Fox" begins, not with a goodbye, but with a meeting. The speaker remembers the day that she encountered a fox lounging about under a tree and struck up a conversation with him.

In just one line, the speaker tells readers a lot about both the fox and the world around him. Listen to the alliteration here:

> He was lying under a tree, licking up the shade.

Those long /l/ sounds evoke lazy, languorous delight; the fox is positively luxuriating in the shade. In fact, he's "licking" it right up, a metaphor that suggests he's drinking in the delights of the world around him. The shadows don't just cool him, they nourish him, too, filling him with pleasure. Inside and out, he's satisfied.

And if he's enjoying the shade this much, readers might guess, it must be a sunny day out, perhaps a long summer afternoon. Neither the fox nor the speaker, this bit of scene-setting suggests, has anywhere to get to in a hurry.

This isn't the first time the speaker has met this fox either: she greets him with a familiar "Hello again." But the enjambment in the next lines suggest that there's something different about their encounter today:

> And hello to you too, said Fox, looking up and
> not bounding away.

The line break in the middle of a sentence here evokes the speaker's surprise, stressing the word "not": it's not normal for a wild animal to sit there peacefully while a human is near.

Of course, it's not normal to have a *conversation* with an anthropomorphic fox, either! But that part doesn't seem quite so surprising to the speaker. Setting this poem up as a perfectly ordinary dialogue between herself and an animal, she gives this poem the feeling of a fable, an instructive tale told by animal characters. This fox, readers suspect, might be here to teach the speaker something.

The poem's free verse form, without rhyme or meter, helps to underline its tongue-in-cheek tone, presenting an extraordinary conversation as an everyday chat. Ironically, the naturalistic language only reminds readers that what they're about to hear is a made-up story.

LINES 5-7

You're not running ...
... or not know.

In lines 1-4, the speaker was surprised to find that a fox she's seen many times before—usually, it seems, as he heads briskly in the opposite direction—now wants to hang around and chat. He's "not bounding away" this time, a fact so surprising that the speaker underlines it with a moment of parallelism: "You're not running away?"

The fox explains that he's not frightened of her because of something she's said. A "conversation" she had about foxes has been spreading through the fox community, and "News / travels even among foxes, as you might know or not know." This line adds to the poem's light, comical tone, again anthropomorphizing this fox (and foxes in general): the fox makes it sound as if he and his buddies are all getting together at weekends to trade gossip about the human world.

But it also makes a point about the *difference* between the fox community and the human world. Not every human, the fox suggests, will be up on what's happening among the foxes. The speaker "might know or not know" how foxes behave; she's apparently clued-up enough to have had a fox-related conversation that the foxes approve, but that doesn't mean she understands everything about them.

LINES 8-11

What conversation do ...
... She was huffed.

The speaker draws the fox out further in these lines, asking which of her conversations it was that earned this fox's trust.

The fox explains:

> Some lady said to you, "The hunt is good for the fox."
> And you said, "Which fox?"

The speaker's witty comeback to this haughty-sounding, fox-hunting lady plays on that lady's use of synecdoche. When she says "'The hunt is good for the fox,'" what she means is "hunting is good for foxes in general": she's using individual parts to represent the whole. But the speaker calls her on this. Her rhetorical retort ("Which fox?") makes the point that, in a sense, there's no such thing as "foxes in general": every fox is a distinct individual, with its own life and feelings. Maybe fox hunting might be good for the fox gene pool, in a Darwinian sort of way, but for the fox who's being hunted, it's no "good" at all.

These lines suggest that the speaker has real empathy for animals, something that's also clear in the way she approaches the fox she's talking to. Greeting him with a "[h]ello again" back in line 2—and referring to him as "him," not "it," for that matter—she made it clear that she sees him as a particular character, not just some fox like any other. Perhaps she's even learned this empathy from spending time in nature, looking carefully enough to notice individual foxes and their habits.

There's also something empathetic and even conspiratorial in the speaker's conversation with the fox here. They share the satisfaction of the speaker's speedy comeback and the thought it left the fox-hunting lady "huffed" (that is, affronted or offended). In more ways than one, they seem to be speaking the same language.

LINES 12-14

So you're okay ...
... between us.

Sharing a chuckle with the speaker over how she knocked the wind out of a fox-hunting enthusiast's sails, the fox concludes that the speaker is "okay in my book." Now hitting her stride, the speaker plays the same kind of language trick on the fox that she played on that "lady," taking a figure of speech literally.

In this case, she pretends that the fox means, not a metaphorical book, but a real one, and notes that *she's* the one who writes the books around here. These lines make it clear that the speaker is also the poet—and reminds readers that this whole story is a poem, too!

The "difference" between the fox and the speaker, the speaker concludes, in a tone that might equally be matter-of-fact or a little smug, is that poets like her write books and foxes don't. Even the enjambment she uses here ("the difference / between us") drives home the point that writing (and perhaps all kinds of art-making) are distinctly human activities—perhaps even *the* activity that distinguishes humanity from animals.

These lines also remind readers that the anthropomorphic fox himself is the speaker's poetic *invention* and that she's putting words into his mouth. Perhaps readers already got that feeling from the fox's and the speaker's similarly snappy, casual tone of voice. The "difference between" the pair isn't just that one is an animal and one is a human: it's that one is a figment of the other's imagination, at least to some extent. That idea is about to become important.

LINES 15-18

Yes, I agree. ...
... Oh!

Now, it's the fox's turn to deliver a snappy retort. The speaker has just reminded him that she's a poet, a thing that a fox can never be (and, along the way, reminded the reader that this whole story is a poem). This, she says, is the "difference" between the two of them.

Far from being abashed, the fox is only too eager to agree. The difference between animals and humans (*especially* poets), he replies, is that humans spend their time "fuss[ing] over life," using "clever words" to try to figure out what it all means. Animals, more wisely, don't try to discern the meaning of life: "we just live it."

In other words, in this fox's eyes, being a poet, a person whose art tries to find meaning in the world, just gets in the way of actually *experiencing* life. The metaphor he uses here makes his point especially clear. Humanity, he says, is always "chewing" on the problem of life's meaning—but to chew doesn't mean to swallow!

Compare that image to the metaphor the poem started with, in which the fox lay "licking up the shade." The difference between directly experiencing life versus thinking about it, the fox seems to suggest, is the difference between eating delicious food and gnawing a bare bone.

In a way, the fox seems to be arguing for a kind of communion with the world: eating up experience so that it becomes part of you, without spending too much time trying to figure out what everything *means*. Simply being, to this fox, is meaningful enough.

To this idea, the speaker makes a one-word reply: "Oh!" That cry suggests that she's understanding something for the first time, having a little epiphany. There's both surprise and delight in her voice here. Perhaps the fox's wisdom is, in some sense, this *is* the answer she's been looking for as she chews through the world in her poetry.

LINES 19-21

Could anyone figure ...
... and ambled away.

Encouraged by the speaker's "Oh!" of dawning understanding, the fox elaborates with a rhetorical question: "Could anyone," he asks, figure life out "to a finality?" In other words: *is it even*

possible for anyone to completely settle the question of the meaning of life?

Here, he's developing his earlier point. Not only does banging your head against philosophical questions distract you from living, there's no use in it, he suggests: no one can answer an unanswerable question. And by phrasing this *idea* as a question, the fox cleverly practices what he preaches. He doesn't exactly rule out the possibility that life might have meaning, or meanings; he just makes it clear that the question isn't of any interest to him. He's sticking firmly to a philosophy of not-knowing here: he'd rather *experience* than *figure out*.

He underlines that point with a brisk repetition of language he's used earlier: "You fuss, we live." His parallelism here again draws a distinction between humanity and animals. What separates the two groups—in more ways than one!—is the human habit of standing back and trying to think things out. Perhaps that habit is just another kind of "hunt": a hunt for meaning that kills direct experience.

But again, the reader has to remember that this whole story about learning to experience life directly *is* a poem! There's something more complicated going on here than a simple lesson about putting down your books and getting outside for a change.

There's an obvious irony in a poet writing a poem about a poet who learns that writing poems only gets in the way of living life. And there's something even more ironic about attributing all that natural wisdom to an anthropomorphic talking fox—a fox, by the way, who happens to talk in a casual, witty voice that's a whole lot like the speaker's own. Such a useful, chatty creature can only exist in the world of art.

Perhaps, this poem thus suggests, the real significance of the "difference" between human beings and animals is that humans *need* to take an artistic or philosophical step back from life sometimes *in order* to fully live it. Art can translate a moment of understanding—an "Oh!" experience one has while watching a fox live its life, just for example—into something that can help the artist, and the people who enjoy their art, to do just what the fox says.

The poem thus ends with two paradoxes:

- The fox's idea that life has no one findable meaning, but is there to be lived, *itself* gives the speaker a sense of meaning.
- And it's through writing poetry, stepping back to think about and observe life, that the poet can absorb—and share—the lesson she's learned from observing nature: that life should simply be lived.

When, in the last lines, the poem finally says its "Good-Bye" to the fox, the speaker thus keeps him perfectly in character, using her art to paint a truthful picture of the natural world. He gets slowly to his feet ("he was old now," the speaker observes) and "amble[s] away," as if bored by even this much discussion and ready to get on with living. Meanwhile, readers might imagine, the speaker sits down to write a poem that might help her to get on with living in her own way.

SYMBOLS

THE FOX

The poem's fox symbolizes the wisdom of nature.

Foxes are a familiar old symbol for cleverness and cunning. In this poem, though, the fox isn't merely sharp: he's also a voice for the deep wisdom of the natural world itself. Remarking that the speaker spends too much time "fuss[ing] over life," the fox also observes that animals "just live it"—a thought that makes the speaker cry "Oh!" in a moment of insight. Nature, this fox suggests, can teach humanity to take life as it comes, and perhaps to understand life more deeply by *not* trying to figure everything out.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "He was lying under a tree, licking up the shade. / Hello again, Fox, I said."
- **Lines 15-17:** "Yes, I agree. You fuss over life with your clever / words, mulling and chewing on its meaning, while / we just live it."
- **Lines 19-20:** "Could anyone figure it out, to a finality? So / why spend so much time trying. You fuss, we live."

POETIC DEVICES

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The poem's anthropomorphic fox helps to suggest that there's something a little ironic about the fox's advice to put poetry aside in favor of simply living life.

This poem is all about learning from the natural world, taking a lesson from the way that animals approach life. It might seem a little odd, then, that the fox is in the form of a dialogue: the fox in this poem talks just like a human does. And not only does he chat with the speaker, but he also describes news from the human world moving "among foxes," as if they're all getting together at the coffee shop to gossip.

Of course, this anthropomorphism is part of the poem's point. By putting human words and attitudes into a fox's mouth, the speaker makes it clear that she can't just give up on poetry to live life as simply as a fox does. Poetry is *how* she learns to live like a fox. To unpack that idea a little more:

- In a sense, this anthropomorphic fox is a metaphor, a way in which the speaker translates her *observations* of foxes into *words*.
- That is: watching the way that foxes behave, the speaker feels as if their lives *speak* to her, teaching her how to live more fully.
- And she, in turn, makes that feeling into a talking fox in a poem, turning those insights into art in order to make them part of her life—and to share them with her fellow human beings.

Anthropomorphism thus puts the understanding of life the speaker has gained from watching foxes straight into a fox's mouth.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

METAPHOR

Besides one common idiom, the poem only uses a couple of metaphors, both of them to do with eating. Through these images, the speaker reflects on what it means to really live life.

In the poem's first metaphor, the speaker describes the fox stretched out at his ease under a tree, "licking up the shade." Here, the fox isn't just taking it easy, but truly relishing the shade, as if it were a deliciously cool drink of water. The fox seems to *absorb* the pleasure of the shade here, not merely appreciating it but making it part of himself. He's almost merging with his environment.

That makes it even funnier when the fox begins throwing shade, if you will, at the *speaker's* way of experiencing the world. "You fuss over life with your clever words," he tells her, "mulling and chewing on its meaning." In this metaphor, the speaker seems not to be getting a full mouthful of life: she's just gnawing away at it like a dog with a chew toy. Perhaps that's because she's chewing on the wrong thing! Where the fox "lick[s] up the shade," a physical phenomenon, the speaker only chews on "meaning"—a much more difficult thing to take a bite out of.

The poem's metaphors thus suggest the "difference" between the fox and the speaker. Where the fox relishes life with his whole body, moment by moment, the speaker gets caught up chewing on ideas she can never fully digest.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "licking up the shade"
- **Line 16:** "chewing on its meaning"

REPETITION

Repetitions help to give the poem its alternately tongue-in-cheek and reflective tone. For example, take a look at the parallelism in lines 3-5:

> And hello to you too, said Fox, looking up and
> not bounding away.
> You're not running away? I said.

Repeating this phrasing twice in a row, the speaker helps the reader feel her surprise and pleasure that the fox hangs around—and makes a point about the way that human beings encounter the world through language. First, she's surprised that the fox doesn't bound away; then, she translates that surprise into words, a choice that will lead her into an important and enlightening conversation with the fox. The idea that people, unlike other animals, might sometimes need to use language and thought to experience the world fully will become a major theme.

Later on, diacope helps the speaker to land a cutting comeback:

> Some lady said to you, "The hunt is good for the fox."
> And you said, "Which fox?"

This reply undercuts that lady's synecdoche, which depicts all foxes as one big group. Not so, the speaker's repetition suggests: every fox is a distinct individual.

Only a few lines later, the speaker plays a similar trick on the fox—one that will backfire on her. Listen to the diacope here:

> So you're okay in my book.
> Your book! That was in my book, that's the difference between us.

Here, the speaker takes the fox's metaphorical idiom—"you're okay in my book"—literally, noting that she's the one who writes the books around here. But the fox will reply that maybe she shouldn't be so smug about all those "clever words," and use some repetitions of his own to underline that point. "You fuss over life," he tells her, while animals "just live it"; a few lines later, he tartly repeats, "You fuss, we live." That repetition hammers home his point: humanity thinks it's so clever, but all that cleverness is really just a distracting "fuss" that stands in the way of a direct experience of life.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "not bounding away"
- **Line 5:** "not running away"
- **Line 9:** "fox"
- **Line 10:** "fox"
- **Line 12:** "book"
- **Line 13:** "book," "book"
- **Line 15:** "You fuss"
- **Line 17:** "we just live it"

- **Line 20:** "You fuss, we live."

SYNECDOCHE

A moment of synecdoche sets up one of the poem's central jokes—and one of its central ideas.

Explaining why he isn't running away from the speaker, the fox approvingly describes a conversation the speaker recently had with a rather haughty-sounding "lady":

> Some lady said to you, "The hunt is good for the fox."
> And you said, "Which fox?"

Here, the lady is using both "the hunt" and "the fox" as synecdoches for larger things: "the hunt" means hunting in general, and "the fox" means the fox population in general. But the speaker's reply takes the lady's words literally: *which fox in particular*, her reply asks, *is the hunt good for?*

By calling the lady on her generalizations, the speaker introduces the idea that there's no such thing as foxes in general: every fox is a *particular* fox, unlike any other. Even if one could make some broad argument about, say, the way that fox-hunting could strengthen the fox gene pool, the individual fox that gets hunted is definitely not having a good time.

This joke fits right in to the poem's larger philosophy about how to live life. Perhaps the lady's big ideas about how foxes and hunting work in general might be read as a parallel to the speaker's desperate "mulling and chewing" on the meaning of life: a focus on trying to figure out broad principles rather than enjoying the one-of-a-kind experience right in front of you.

But the poem's overall shape—the fact that the speaker goes ahead and writes a poem about the fox's advice to give up on poetry and enjoy the world instead—also suggests that "the hunt" for meaning might still be a valuable part of living a human life.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** ""The hunt is good for the fox.""

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambments help to build some of the speaker's ideas and emotions right into the poem's shape. The poem's first enjambment provides a good example of this:

> And hello to you too, said Fox, looking up and
> not bounding away.

The line break in the middle of the sentence here creates a little moment of suspense: what will the fox do? The word "not," up in front of line 4, emphasizes the speaker's pleasant surprise that the fox *doesn't* run away from her as a wild animal usually would.

Later on, enjambments mirror the split between humans and animals, and between the speaker and the world around her. In line 13, the speaker remarks:

> Your book! That was in my book, that's the difference
> between us.

The break between "difference" and "between us" here imitates exactly what it describes: the *separation* between the speaker and the fox. And the fox is only too quick to agree. People, he observes, spend too much time trying to figure life out:

> [...] mulling and chewing on its meaning, while
> we just live it.

It's the same trick again: the mid-sentence line break separates what people do from what animals do.

The poem's final enjambment brings the fox's voice to life:

> Could anyone figure it out, to a finality? So
> why spend so much time trying. You fuss, we live.

By leaving the word "So" hanging for a moment at the end of the line, this enjambment also helps to draw the word out, as the fox might if he were trying to lead the speaker to a new idea. It's as if he's saying, *So...* ?—inviting the speaker (and the reader) to come to a conclusion with him.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "and / not"
- **Lines 6-7:** "News / travels"
- **Lines 13-14:** "difference / between"
- **Lines 15-16:** "clever / words"
- **Lines 16-17:** "while / we"
- **Lines 19-20:** "So / why"

ALLITERATION

Occasional pops of alliteration draw attention to some of the poem's important moments and help to conjure up its atmosphere.

Line 1 contains one of only two moments of visual description in the poem, and alliteration helps to bring the scene to life:

> He was lying under a tree, licking up the shade.

That long /l/ sound suggests the fox's languorous, luxurious satisfaction. He's not just cooling down, this line suggests, but reveling in the deliciousness of shade on a hot, bright

afternoon.

Later on, different flavors of alliteration makes the fox sound positively fed up with human folly. When, for instance, he describes the speaker "mulling and chewing on [life's] meaning," the long /m/ makes it sound almost as if he's teasing her, drawing the sounds out to imitate the voice of a tormented, too-serious poet.

And listen to the sounds of this passage:

> Could anyone figure it out, to a finality? So
> why spend so much time trying. You fuss, we live.

The brisk /f/ and clipped /t/ sounds here make it sound less as if the fox is delivering ponderous wisdom, and more as if he's just matter-of-factly stating what to him seems obvious. This idea might be a revelation to the speaker, but to the fox, it's everyday fare.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "lying," "licking"
- **Line 16:** "mulling," "meaning"
- **Lines 16-17:** "while / we"
- **Line 19:** "figure," "finality"
- **Line 20:** "time trying," "fuss"
- **Line 21:** "stood, slowly"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem's two rhetorical questions both make philosophical points about the nature of the world.

The first appears as the speaker's witty retort to a pompous-sounding fox-hunting enthusiast:

> Some lady said to you, "The hunt is good for the fox."
> And you said, "Which fox?"

The speaker means that there's no such thing as "the fox" in the sense the lady means it (as a synecdoche for the whole fox population): there are only individual foxes, each with their own lives and feelings. This line suggests that the speaker is interested in the separate identities of everything in the world, not in generalizations.

And the fox makes a similar point when he says, of the meaning of life: "Could anyone figure it out, to a finality?" This rhetorical question answers itself in two ways. One of the fox's points here is that he's pretty sure nobody can work out any one, singular "meaning" to existence. But he also doesn't just flat-out say "nobody can figure it out"; by phrasing this line as a question, he actually sticks closer to his belief in not knowing!

The rhetorical questions here thus reflect the poem's attitude to the world. In this poem, life isn't something that can be summed up in big, general, sweeping terms: it's an experience that's particular and different for every living thing.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "Which fox?"
- **Line 19:** "Could anyone figure it out, to a finality?"

VOCABULARY

Bounding (Line 4) - Leaping.

Huffed (Line 11) - Offended.

Mulling (Line 16) - Pondering.

To a finality (Line 19) - For good, completely.

Ambled (Line 21) - Strolled calmly.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Good-Bye Fox," like most of Mary Oliver's poetry, is written in free verse, without a meter or a rhyme scheme. That flexibility allows this poem—which is built in the form of a dialogue, a good chat between the speaker and a fox she gets acquainted with—to sound naturalistic. The poem's 14 short, irregular stanzas allow the speaker and the fox to take exactly as much time as they need to say their piece, from the fox's three-line reflection on the unnecessary "fuss" that humans (and especially poets) make about life to the speaker's one-word cry of recognition in line 18: "Oh!"

METER

"Good-Bye Fox" is written in free verse, so it doesn't use any particular meter. That choice allows this poem to sound natural and realistic, as if it really were just a record of a conversation the speaker had with a fox one afternoon. That naturalism enhances the little sparkle of magic and humor here: having a chat with a fox, after all, is not an everyday activity.

RHYME SCHEME

This free verse poem doesn't use a rhyme scheme. Without rhyme (or meter, for that matter), the poem sounds as easy and natural as a real conversation. That naturalism only underlines the poem's central joke: this fox, who advises the speaker to give up on "fuss[ing]" with poetry and simply live, is himself a literary creation. Even the most ordinary conversation with a fox, after all, would be pretty extraordinary in real life!

SPEAKER

Readers can interpret the poem's speaker—a poet with a fondness for animals—as a version of Mary Oliver herself. Much of Oliver's poetry explores the wisdom of the natural world from an autobiographical angle, and this poem fits right into that pattern. But the speaker never says much about herself directly; we're using female pronouns for her in this guide, but readers don't have to interpret the speaker as Oliver to understand the poem.

Whether or not the speaker is Oliver, she's certainly a poet, and certainly a person who's trying her best to learn from the world around her. In her conversation with a dryly witty fox, she realizes that even her affection for nature can't teach her to live with the simplicity of an animal: part of human nature, this poem suggests, is the ironic struggle to *learn* how to just *be*.

SETTING

The poem is set in an unknown landscape, somewhere outdoors. The speaker only gives us one glimpse of the scene, describing the fox "licking up the shade" of a tree—an image that suggests her encounter with this fox might take place on a hot, bright summer afternoon. By *not* saying much about the setting, the speaker allows readers to imagine the poem taking place anywhere in the world, and suggests that the fox's perspective on humanity applies to everyone, everywhere, not just to her.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Mary Oliver (1935-2019) was one of the most beloved and popular of American poets. She became famous as a writer of meditative, autobiographical free verse about the wisdom of nature; "Wild Geese" and "The Summer Day" are some of her best-known works. Her first book of poetry, *No Voyage, and Other Poems*, appeared in 1963, and she went on to publish many more volumes over the course of her long life. "Good-Bye Fox" first appeared in the 2012 collection *A Thousand Mornings*.

Some see Oliver as a descendent of 19th-century English Romantic poets like William Wordsworth, who similarly believed that nature was humanity's best teacher and that poetic language should be plain and approachable. But her style was also shaped by American writers like Walt Whitman, whose one-of-a-kind free verse voice Oliver counted as a major inspiration.

Yet Oliver was also a writer of her time, riding a swell of experimental poetry that began in the 1950s and '60s. Her work doesn't sound much like the poetry of her countercultural Beat contemporaries like Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, and it has very different concerns. But these poets all shared 19th-century influences (including Whitman and Blake) and a visionary perspective that urged readers to look past their everyday anxieties and seek a richer and more vibrant life.

Unlike many poets, Oliver was acknowledged during her lifetime as an important and influential writer. Among many other honors, she won a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Pulitzer Prize, and a National Book Award.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Oliver's love of nature was born from a lifetime's experience. She always found consolation, wisdom, and strength in the outdoors; as a child, she often escaped her troubled, abusive family by taking long walks in the woods, a habit she would keep up all her life.

But Oliver's personal relationship with nature also fit right into the changing world she lived in. When Oliver published her first book of poetry in 1963, a newly-fledged environmentalist movement was just gaining momentum. Green activists in the 1960s and '70s argued that humanity needed to learn to fit into the planet's ecosystem, rather than trying to dominate and exploit it. By the time Oliver died in 2019, a deeper understanding of global climate change had made the early environmentalists' concerns even more plainly urgent.

In this poem as in many others, Oliver suggests that the animal kingdom in particular can teach people not just how to *physically* live in tune with natural rhythms, but how to find emotional and spiritual peace. This poem's wry fox, who observes that people "fuss" while animals "just live," reflects Oliver's deep conviction that people learn best from nature when they simply pay quiet attention to what's around them.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Short Biography — Visit the Poetry Foundation's website to learn more about Mary Oliver's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/mary-oliver)
- Oliver's Obituary — Read Oliver's obituary to learn more about her life. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/feb/15/mary-oliver-obituary)
- An Interview with Oliver — Watch an interview in which Oliver discusses her work and reads some of her poetry aloud. (https://youtu.be/OnKUKmcFVuo)
- Oliver's Legacy — Read an appreciation of Oliver published not long after her death in 2019. (https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mary-oliver-helped-us-stay-amazed)

- A Thousand Mornings — Listen to Oliver discussing A Thousand Mornings, the 2012 collection in which this poem was first published. (https://www.npr.org/2012/10/14/162785079/a-thousand-mornings-with-poet-mary-oliver)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER MARY OLIVER POEMS

- The Black Walnut Tree
- The Journey
- The Summer Day
- Wild Geese

HOW TO CITE

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