The Journey

SUMMARY

Addressing the reader directly, the speaker says that one day you finally understood what it was that you needed to do, and so you set about doing it—even as the people in your life kept yelling unhelpful suggestions at you. You kept going even as your whole world became unsteady—something the speaker metaphorically compares to a house starting to shake—and even as you felt a familiar pull trying to hold you back. The people around you demanded that you fix their lives, but you kept going. You understood what you needed to do now, even as outside forces tried to tear you down—something the speaker compares to the wind desperately prying at the foundations of that metaphorical house—and even though it was really hard for you to see how deeply sad the people asking for your help were. The speaker goes on to compare doing what you had to do to leaving in the middle of a fierce, untamed night, and walking down a road filled with bits of debris in your way. Yet, one step at a time, as you got further and further away from the sound of all those people's voices, the stars started to shine through the cloud cover, and a new voice appeared. You began to understand that you were in fact hearing your own voice, and this kept you from being lonely as you walked with great purpose further into the world, resolved to do the only thing you were actually capable of doing—to take charge of the only life that was actually yours to live.

THEMES

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-RELIANCE

"The Journey" is about someone who is learning to trust themselves and focus on their own well-being. The "journey" of the poem's title refers to the speaker's decision to leave the bad advice and demands of other people behind, and to follow their own instincts instead—that is, to forge their own path in life. The speaker's "journey" thus illustrates the value of self-reliance. Everyone must learn to live their own life, the speaker argues; no one else can do it for them.

The poem makes it clear that other people don't always have the speaker's best interests at heart. For one thing, the advice the speaker receives from these people is "bad"; they don't actually understand what the speaker needs to hear. The fact that this advice is "shout[ed]" at the speaker also makes such seeming attempts at help feel like an unpleasant onslaught.

Apart from wrongly assuming they know what's best for the speaker, these people also make selfish demands on the speaker's time—asking the speaker to somehow "mend," or fix, their own problems. These people aren't really interested in helping the speaker at all, it seems, but rather are trying to saddle the speaker with their *own* needs and desires. Part of the speaker's "journey," then, is learning to leave such negative influences behind—in other words, to stop putting other people's needs before their (the speaker's) own.

It's a choice that the speaker feels guilty about at first, especially upon seeing how miserable these people are. Such guilt suggests that the speaker has felt responsible in the past for meeting other people's needs. But, just as the speaker finally understands that no one else can fix the speaker's problems, the speaker can't fix things for these people; they, too, must learn to help themselves.

None of this is easy, of course, and the poem presents setting off on one's own path as a frightening, destabilizing experience. The speaker compares it to rattling a house to its foundations, suggesting that trusting oneself entails shaking up all the certainties and principles that have guided one so far. The first steps on the road to self-reliance are also hindered by metaphorical debris; the way is unclear, and the night seems "wild," or out of control.

But the poem argues that the more one trusts oneself, the easier it gets to do so. As the speaker leaves the "voice" of others further behind, the darkness and obstacles in the speaker's path give way to the light of stars burning through the clouds. The speaker can finally see their journey clearly; with that other voice finally quiet, the speaker can finally hear and honor their own needs.

The fact that the speaker goes "deeper and deeper / into the world" suggests that the speaker is more fully alive than they have been in the past—that they feel free in a way they hadn't before to make their own decisions and live according to their own values. This again illustrates the value of self-reliance: each person is responsible for "saving" their own life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-36

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

One day you ...
... bad advice —

The opening of "The Journey" lays out the speaker's situation: the speaker is "finally" aware of what they need to do to, even

though all around them are voices "shouting / their bad advice."

The phrase "what you had to do" is vague, but these lines imply that it has something to do with cutting out negative influences. The first five lives clearly pit the speaker's wellbeing against these surrounding voices. In other words, it's clear that in order for the speaker to do whatever it is that they believe needs to be done, they will need to somehow get free of these voices—to stop listening to other people's "bad advice."

The poem's first two lines also indicate that the speaker actually doesn't wait to be free of the voices before beginning their "journey." Upon finally realizing what they need to do, the speaker acts *in spite of* the advice swirling around them. They begin *despite* the difficulty of this journey and lack of support.

The assonance of /oo/ sounds in these first lines ("you knew / what you had to do") feels insistent. it evokes both the echoing shouts of the people around the speaker and the speaker's own determination to do what needs to be done. The enjambment of these opening lines also pulls the reader forward through the poem, pushing them from one line to the next, much like the speaker is pulled forward on this "journey" by their own sense of what's right.

LINES 6-9

though the whole ...
... at your ankles.

The speaker has decided to act on their own intuition rather than listen to the "bad advice" from "the voices around [them]," but this process isn't easy. Right away, the speaker's "house" starts to shake. This is a metaphor; the speaker isn't *literally* saying that there's an earthquake going on! Instead, the house here stands in for the world and relationships the speaker is leaving behind as they set off on their "journey" toward self-reliance.

The fact that this metaphorical house begins to "tremble" suggests the confusion and uncertainty of this journey, which shakes up everything the speaker knows. It also suggests that the house depends on the speaker; even the thought of the speaker going seems likely to bring the house crumbling down.

The speaker also feels "the old tug / at [their] ankles." This illustrates how dependent these people giving this "bad advice" are on the speaker. The speaker feels as though there's a hand trying to hold them back. This image also evokes a chain, something keeping the speaker from being able to live their life. The fact that this tugging sensation is "old" suggests that the speaker has tried to leave this situation before and failed; they are familiar with the resistance that arises when they try to put their own life first.

The alliteration in "whole house" emphasizes how fragile this situation is; it seems there is no part of the speaker's current life that is stable or secure. The consonance of /l/ and /t/ sounds in these lines creates a sense of intensity as well:

> [...] to tremble
> and you felt the old tug

The hard /g/ and /k/ of "tug" and "ankles" adds to this feeling of intensity, these harsh sounds suggesting the force with which the speaker is being held back. In short, doing what must be done isn't easy!

And yet, despite the difficulties, the speaker is still setting out on this "journey." This whole passage begins with the preposition "though" (creating anaphora with the "though" of line 3), meaning that the speaker has begun *despite* everything being described. This again points to a certain resoluteness on the part of the speaker, who perhaps doesn't even know yet how strong they are, how determined—they are simply following their gut, trusting that this is what they have to do.

LINES 10-13

"Mend my life!" ...
... had to do,

The voices surrounding the speaker not only spout off bad advice, but also unreasonably demand that the speaker somehow "mend," or fix, their lives. This adds another layer of negativity to this dysfunctional household. The speaker feels somehow responsible for the happiness and wellbeing of those around them, even while these people don't seem very invested in the happiness or wellbeing of the speaker.

Yet the speaker is becoming aware that they can't take care of themselves while also taking care of everyone around them. At some point they are going to have to choose who to prioritize—and the speaker makes the choice to prioritize themselves by refusing to "stop" the "journey" that will take them away from this unhealthy dynamic.

The repetition of "You knew what you had to do" in line 13 echoes the sentiment expressed in the first two lines of the poem. This repetition underscores the fact that the speaker is confident in their convictions and determined to break free from this stifling situation.

Each of these lines are end-stopped, with lines 10-12 featuring the forceful full stop of a period or exclamation mark. Most of the lines before this moment were enjambed, and the sudden slew of end-stops (which actually starts in line 9, after "ankles") dramatically slows the poem down. The poem's form thus reflects the "tug" at the speaker's ankles, the way that these voices try to prevent the speaker's progress.

LINES 14-18

though the wind ...
... was terrible.

The poem reiterates what the speaker is up against, describing the wind as prying "with its stiff fingers / at the very foundations" of the house (note all the consonance here of

those muffled /f/ sounds, which evoke the stiffness being described).

The wind, like the house itself, isn't literal; it's a metaphorical illustration of how difficult it is for speaker to set off on their own path. The personification of the wind as so forceful that it tears "at the very foundations" of the speaker's house makes it seem like the world itself is desperately trying to hold the speaker back. At the same time, those "stiff fingers" bring images of death or dying to the poem. This underscores the fact that the speaker's current situation is a very unhealthy one, a dead end; if the speaker stays, they risk never being able to experience life to the fullest.

The howling wind also perhaps echoes the voices of the people who cry out after the speaker, and whose "melancholy," or deep sadness, is "terrible" for the speaker to witness. In other words, the speaker feels guilty about refusing to "mend" these people's lives, but must push through such feelings to do what's best for themselves.

The anaphora and parallelism of lines 14 and 17 ("**though** the wind," "**though** their melancholy") once again emphasize the speaker's determination. As in the beginning of the poem, this repetition shows readers that the speaker is set on moving forward despite the many, many obstacles in their way.

LINES 19-22

It was already ...
... branches and stones.

The poem builds on the metaphor of the speaker's "journey" by expanding the poem's setting. Having left the "house" behind, the speaker steps out into the "wild night." It's "already late," implying that the speaker is undertaking this journey already well into their life. In other words, the speaker is no longer young when they finally decide to live life on their own terms—but it's not too late to do so!

The fact that the night is "wild," meanwhile, draws attention to the difficulty and unfamiliarity of the speaker's journey. Relying on oneself can be frightening and dangerous, like stumbling through a dark night, down a road "full of fallen / branches and stones." Writers often use roads to represent paths in life (just think of perhaps the most famous "road" poem of all: "The Road Not Taken," by Robert Frost), and the speaker leans into the symbolism here. The speaker's "journey" down this new "road" is filled with obstacles that could easily trip the speaker up.

The enjambment in line 21 ("and the road full of fallen / branches and stones") subtly emphasizes the dangers of striking out on one's own in this way: by landing line 12 on the word "fallen," the poem suggests that the speaker, too, could find themselves losing their footing, and perhaps even end up disgraced or humiliated by their decision to leave home. Everything about this decision requires the speaker to be courageous in the face of opposition and difficulty.

The sounds of these lines add to their intensity. Note consonance of /l/ sounds and the alliteration of "full of fallen," both of which evoke the tangle of debris on this metaphorical road:

> It was already late
> enough, and a wild night,
> and the road full of fallen

The long /i/ assonance connecting "wild" and "night" turns up the volume on the poem as well, drawing attention to the fact that the speaker is entering uncharted—"wild"—territory, and can't totally see where they're going. This undoubtedly makes for a stressful experience!

LINES 23-26

But little by ...
... sheets of clouds,

All this uncertainty and doubt begins to fade as the speaker leaves all those voices behind "little by little." The diacope here emphasizes the incremental nature of the "journey" the speaker is taking. Though it's being described metaphorically as a single night, the truth is that taking charge of one's life may require a lot of little decisions and happen over a period of time.

Eventually the darkness and uncertainty of the night gets replaced with the light of stars "burn[ing] / through the sheets of clouds." This (again metaphorical) description suggests that the more the speaker learns to trust themselves, the clearer their path becomes. Stars are a common symbol for guidance (given that they can be used for navigation), and the stars poking through the clouds thus suggests the speaker's growing sense of direction.

The alliteration in "**b**egan to **b**urn" also almost mimics the use of diacope in line 23 with "little by little." That is, the repetition of the /b/ sound again suggests an incremental process, something happening in steps rather than all at once. Clarity doesn't just arrive for the speaker, but rather is something that comes to them over the course of their "journey," something that they had to earn by trusting their own instincts.

LINES 27-29

and there was ...
... as your own,

As the speaker leaves the onslaught of negative voices behind, they become aware of "a new voice" that they "slowly recognize" as their own. This underscores the poem's point that people can't properly hear *themselves* if they're too busy listening to others. In prioritizing other people's needs, the speaker essentially turned the volume way down on their own voice.

In the quiet of this journey, however, the speaker can finally hear their own voice once again—that is, they can listen to their

own needs and desires. The fact that this voice feels "new" and takes the speaker a beat to even recognize, in turn, goes to show how completely unsupportive and unhealthy this person's previous situation was. The speaker isn't used to hearing themselves!

The speaker's own needs have long been stifled, the poem reveals, but as they slow down and get used to the silence of this journey, they're able to identify what it is that their life's been missing all this time: themselves.

LINES 30-32

that kept you ...
... into the world,

Whereas the speaker used to be surrounded by other people's bad advice and demands, now their own voice is the one that "keeps [the speaker] company." The speaker is learning to truly listen to themselves—to be honest about who they are and what they want. In other words, the speaker is learning to be self-reliant. And being able to count on yourself, the poem argues, is more useful than being surrounded by a bunch of people who don't have your best interest in mind.

The alliteration in "kept you company" (as well as the /p/ consonance) again evokes the incremental steps the speaker is taking in claiming their life, steps that take them "deeper and deeper / into the world." The diacope of "deeper" here once again echoes the poem's insistence that such a process takes time; learning to trust oneself is a "journey."

The consonance of /d/ sounds in "strode," "and," "deeper," and "world" all contribute to an increasing sense of confidence and direction: the speaker seems to be coming into themselves, gaining momentum, finding their rhythm. The word "strode" itself indicates a sense of purpose and vitality. The speaker isn't limping along, or meandering, or even sedately walking—they're *striding*, taking long, decisive steps "into the world."

LINES 33-36

determined to do ...
... you could save.

The poem ends by emphasizing the speaker's grit and determination. They refused to let obstacles stand in their way so far, and won't let any in the future either.

The language changes a bit here, though. Whereas earlier in the poem the speaker knew what they "had to do," here the speaker is doing "the only thing [they] could do." It's not just that the speaker understands the importance of trusting oneself and prioritizing one's own well-being. The speaker also understands that there are *no other options* when it comes to life; people have to learn to live it for themselves.

Following this logic, the speaker lets go of the sense of guilt related to "mend[ing]" other people's lives. All those voices calling out to the speaker will have to learn the same lesson that the speaker has.

The anaphora of "determined to" emphasizes the speaker's determination, their steadfast belief in the fact that they have done the only thing there is to be done. The speaker has saved themselves from failing to live life to the fullest—but they can't "save" anyone else. They are not responsible for, or even capable of, saving anyone's life but their own.

SYMBOLS

THE HOUSE

In the world of the poem, the house that the speaker leaves behind represents the unhealthy relationships and habits the speaker breaks with in order to live life on their own (the speaker's) terms.

When the speaker realizes "what [they have] to do"—that is, that they need to cut negative influences from their life and forge their own path—the house begins to "tremble," or shake. On the one hand, the shaking of the house suggests that learning to trust oneself is a destabilizing and scary process. Houses and homes often symbolize familiarity and comfort, but the speaker here is rejecting all that in favor of a new, healthier path. The fact that the wind tears at the house's "very foundations" when the speaker starts to walk away further suggests the "old tug" of the world the speaker is leaving behind. The speaker feels guilty for putting their own well-being first, and symbolically experiences this guilt as a kind of violent storm swirling around this house.

But this trembling also seems to point to the idea that this house can't *exist* without the speaker. All it takes is the thought of leaving to potentially bring the house crashing down, suggesting that the relationships that the speaker is leaving behind are tenuous at best. The howling wind that desperately "prie[s]" at the house also reflects the selfishness of those demanding that the speaker "mend" their lives (and in doing so hold the speaker back from finding their own path). The speaker can't live their life while also holding up the weight of this house, though; they have to put that weight down, and walk away.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "though the whole house / began to tremble"
- **Lines 14-16:** "though the wind pried / with its stiff fingers / at the very foundations,"

THE STARS

Stars often symbolize insight or guidance in literature, and that's how they work in this poem.

This stems from the fact that stars are a useful navigation tool (think of how people use the North Star to orient themselves). When the stars begin "to burn / through the sheets of clouds," then, this represents the speaker finding a sense of clarity and direction. The clouds—themselves a symbol of confusion, fogginess, and obscurity—become less powerful as the speaker learns to trust themselves, and the road of life no longer feels quite so dark.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-26:** "the stars began to burn / through the sheets of clouds,"

THE ROAD

The journey in the poem is a metaphorical one, and the "road" the speaker walks down isn't meant to be taken literally. Instead, it represents the speaker's new path in life. Roads often symbolize the journey of life—something readers might recognize from Robert Frost's famous poem "The Road Not Taken." The fact that the road here is at first filled with "fallen / branches and stones" implies that it's a dangerous one, that the speaker might stumble and hurt themselves as they set about this new path.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

Anaphora emphasizes the speaker's sense of determination to prioritize their own life and needs. The first example is in lines 3-7:

> though the voices around you
> kept shouting
> [...]
> though the whole house
> began to tremble

The anaphora of "though the" draws attention to the fact that the speaker makes this decision *in spite of* the obstacles: the bad advice of the voices, the trembling of the house. This happens again in lines 14-18 ("though the wind [...] was terrible."), the word "though" again signaling the difficulties the speaker faces as they begin their solitary journey towards a life more fully lived.

The last four lines of the poem ("determined to do [...] you could save.") also use anaphora, again underling the speaker's sense of determination as they strike off on their own. The repetition of the word "determined" (as well as the words "do" and "save") emphasizes the speaker's steadfast, resolute mindset. This person hasn't just made up their mind to live a more meaningful life, but is actually doing everything they can to act on that desire. Ending on this note gives the poem an inspirational thrust, encouraging the reader to feel they, too, have what it takes to choose what's best for themselves.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "though the voices around you / kept shouting"
- **Lines 6-7:** "though the whole house / began to tremble"
- **Lines 14-15:** "though the wind pried / with its stiff fingers"
- **Lines 17-18:** "though their melancholy / was terrible."
- **Line 33:** "determined to do"
- **Line 35:** "determined to save"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The poem uses the extended metaphor of leaving a house and setting off on a dark, "wild" night to illustrate the "journey" toward self-reliance—the steps entailed in going after the life one truly desires. Everything to do with the poem's setting is in service of this overarching metaphor.

The "house," for example, is a figurative house. It represents the negative influences the speaker must leave behind, the people who place unhealthy demands on the speaker. When the speaker leaves this house, it is as if its "very foundations" are in danger of breaking apart, suggesting that the speaker was bearing too much responsibility for the wellbeing of other people. How, the poem implicitly asks, could anyone have time or energy to live their own life when they're so busy taking care of everyone else?

The poem continues the extended metaphor to illustrate the difficulty of leaving. The speaker sets off into the "wild night," walking down a "road full of fallen / branches and stones." These branches and stones, the road itself, and even the night are all metaphors for the uneasy, unfamiliar path this person has chosen to walk.

These difficulties become less daunting as the speaker finds their stride, however. Eventually the speaker can see the stars shining through the clouds, a metaphor for the fact that things won't remain difficult forever; there is a light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak. The speaker continues on "deeper and deeper / into the world," which is really a metaphor for the fact that the speaker is traveling deeper and deeper into the life they want to live.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "though the whole house / began to tremble"

- **Lines 14-16:** "though the wind pried / with its stiff fingers / at the very foundations,"
- **Lines 19-26:** "It was already late / enough, and a wild night, / and the road full of fallen / branches and stones. / But little by little, / as you left their voice behind, / the stars began to burn / through the sheets of clouds,"
- **Lines 31-32:** "as you strode deeper and deeper / into the world,"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem personifies the wind in lines 14-16 as the speaker is leaving home and setting off into the metaphorical night:

> though the wind pried
> with its stiff fingers
> at the very foundations,

By attributing human characteristics (fingers, the intention to pry apart) to the wind, the poem illustrates the speaker's sense of overcoming obstacles in order to obtain the freedom to live their life according to their own values. The wind isn't just portrayed as a neutral aspect of nature but rather as a person with the intention to destabilize the home the speaker is leaving behind. This emphasizes the speaker's guilt about leaving; they aren't sure what will happen to these people once they are no longer there to hold the house together.

The use of personification here also draws attention to the nature of the speaker's feelings about the place they currently inhabit. The wind isn't described positively—say, as dancing or vital; rather, its fingers are "stiff," as if atrophied or dead. There is no life for the speaker here, only a rigidity or sense of being stuck. There is a sense that if the speaker stays here in this place with these people and their bad advice, they too will find themselves stiff and unhappy, crying out for someone else to save them.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-16:** "though the wind pried / with its stiff fingers / at the very foundations,"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment sets the pace of the poem. Because all the poem's lines are relatively short, and because so many of them are enjambed, readers don't spend much time on any single line. Enjambment creates momentum that carries the reader forward, much like the speaker themselves is propelled forward by their desire to live life on their own terms.

That's not to say there are no end-stopped lines. On the contrary, the less common but still present end-stopped lines help keep the poem feeling somewhat measured. The speaker isn't breathless or frantic, but rather confident, assured. They are putting one foot in front of the other with determination. The careful back and forth of enjambed and end-stopped lines (something particularly clear in the last six lines of the poem, where every other line is enjambed) reflects the deliberateness of the speaker's movement.

The only place in the poem where this sense of balance between enjambed and end-stopped lines is noticeably absent is in lines 9-13 ("at your ankles. [...] had to do,"), all of which are clearly end-stopped. This clump of end-stopped lines corresponds with the speaker's feeling of being stuck (and the "tug" at the speaker's ankles) as other people's voices demand the speaker fix their lives.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "knew / what"
- **Lines 3-4:** "you / kept"
- **Lines 4-5:** "shouting / their"
- **Lines 6-7:** "house / began"
- **Lines 7-8:** "tremble / and"
- **Lines 8-9:** "tug / at"
- **Lines 14-15:** "pried / with"
- **Lines 15-16:** "fingers / at"
- **Lines 17-18:** "melancholy / was"
- **Lines 19-20:** "late / enough"
- **Lines 21-22:** "fallen / branches"
- **Lines 25-26:** "burn / through"
- **Lines 27-28:** "voice / which"
- **Lines 28-29:** "slowly / recognized"
- **Lines 30-31:** "company / as"
- **Lines 31-32:** "deeper / into"
- **Lines 33-34:** "do / the"
- **Lines 35-36:** "save / the"

REPETITION

Repetition is an important part of the poem. Given that the speaker seems to be talking to a younger version of themselves, it makes sense that the word "you" often appears throughout. This also helps bring the reader into the poem, since it feels like the speaker is also talking directly to them.

The speaker also repeats the phrase "you know what you had to do," with a slight variation, two times (in lines 1-2 and 13). This creates a sense of emphasis and determination; regardless of what obstacles stand in the speaker's way, the speaker is very clear on what needs to be done.

Apart from anaphora and parallelism, discussed separately in this guide, the other main form of repetition is diacope. These moments also add to the speaker's sense of determination on their metaphorical journey. In line 23, for example, the speaker says that "little by little" they left the shouts and cries of those other people—all those negative influences of their

past—behind. The repetition of the word "little" points to the incremental nature of changing one's life; becoming self-reliant and trusting of oneself is not something that happens overnight. Instead, big changes happen a little at a time. The reader gets a sense for this passage of time through repetition.

Later, nearer the poem's end, the speaker describes walking "deeper and deeper / into the world." The use of diacope again evokes that sense of the speaker very carefully and deliberately putting one foot in front of the other on this "journey."

Finally, the diacope in the poem's final two lines emphasizes the importance of self-reliance:

> determined to save
> the only life that you could save.

Repeating the word "save" here hammers home the idea that the speaker is doing the right thing in putting their own well-being first and listening to their own inner voice; trying to "save" other people is futile.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "you finally knew / what you had to do"
- **Line 13:** "You knew what you had to do"
- **Line 23:** "little by little"
- **Line 31:** "deeper and deeper"
- **Lines 35-36:** "to save / the only life that you could save."

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears throughout the poem, creating moments of emphasis and music despite the fact that the poem generally uses very direct and non-decorative language. For instance, the chattering /t/ sounds of lines 7-8 evoke both the shaking of the house and the sharpness of that "tug" on the speaker's ankles:

> began to tremble
> and you felt the old tug

Consonance gets more common as the poem moves along and the speaker leaves this "house" behind. The sudden flurry of sounds makes the poem's language feel more intense, evoking the overwhelming experience of setting of on one's own.

Take the /f/ and /l/ sounds of "stiff fingers," "foundations," "full of fallen," "melancholy," "terrible, and "already late." This swirl of both consonance and alliteration suggests the howling of the wind and the sound of all those "voice[s]" trying to hold the speaker back.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "One," "finally," "knew"
- **Line 6:** "whole," "house"
- **Line 7:** "to," "tremble"
- **Line 8:** "felt," "tug"
- **Line 9:** "at"
- **Line 15:** "stiff," "fingers"
- **Line 16:** "foundations"
- **Line 17:** "melancholy"
- **Line 18:** "terrible"
- **Line 19:** "already," "late"
- **Line 20:** "wild"
- **Line 21:** "full," "fallen"
- **Line 22:** "stones"
- **Line 23:** "little," "little"
- **Line 24:** "behind"
- **Line 25:** "began," "burn"
- **Line 30:** "kept," "company"
- **Line 31:** "deeper," "deeper"
- **Line 33:** "determined," "do"
- **Line 34:** "do"
- **Line 35:** "determined"

ALLITERATION

Much like consonance, alliteration helps draw attention to the clamor and clangor of what's going on around the speaker as they try to leave these clinging, negative influences behind. Many times alliterative words appear in pairs, such as "whole" and "house" in line 6, "full" and "fallen" in line 21, and "kept" and "company" in line 30. These pairs add a moment of emphasis; it's not just the house but the "whole house," not just fallen branches but a road "full of fallen branches." The sonic emphasis makes the image pop and stand out in the reader's mind.

In lines 22-25 ("branches and stones. [...] began to burn") there is a cluster of /b/ alliteration that lends an even greater significance to the moment when the speaker begins to hear their own voice clearly—and the things that might have held them back begin to grow faint.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "whole," "house"
- **Line 15:** "fingers"
- **Line 16:** "foundations"
- **Line 21:** "full," "fallen"
- **Line 22:** "branches"
- **Line 23:** "But"
- **Line 24:** "behind"
- **Line 25:** "began," "burn"
- **Line 30:** "kept," "company"
- **Line 31:** "deeper," "deeper"
- **Line 33:** "determined," "do"

ASSONANCE

Much like both consonance and alliteration, assonance in this poem adds emphasis to certain moments and contributes to the poem's musicality. The opening lines of the poem, for example, begin with strong /oo/ assonance, which evokes the echoes of the voices shouting their bad advice at the speaker. It also draws attention to the relationship between specific words: "knew," "you," and "do" have an important relationship because they link the speaker's intuition (what they suddenly know to be true) with their subsequent action (acting on their intuition is what allows them to leave this negative situation behind and begin living a fuller life).

There is also short /i/ assonance in lines 14-15: "though the wind pried / with its stiff fingers." The quick /i/ sounds evoke that stiffness, which suggests something rather rigid and lifeless rather than something flexible and robust.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "knew"
- **Line 2:** "you," "do"
- **Line 3:** "you"
- **Line 10:** "life"
- **Line 11:** "cried"
- **Line 13:** "knew," "you," "do"
- **Line 14:** "wind"
- **Line 15:** "with," "its," "stiff," "fingers"
- **Line 20:** "wild," "night"
- **Line 28:** "slowly"
- **Line 29:** "own"
- **Line 31:** "strode"

VOCABULARY

Mend (Lines 10-11) - To repair or fix something that is broken or damaged.

Pried (Lines 14-16) - To use force to open, move, or separate something.

Melancholy (Lines 17-18) - A prolonged or habitual state of sadness.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Journey" is a 36-line poem that takes the form of a single, rather narrow stanza. This is typical of Oliver's work, and also perhaps evocative of the poem's metaphorical journey: the poem's form, with its cascade of short, enjambed lines, propels the reader forward in much the same way the speaker is propelled by their own inner voice. The fact that Oliver doesn't impose any sort of traditional form on "The Journey" is also fitting for a poem about listening to oneself rather than depending on the advice of others.

METER

"The Journey" is a free verse poem, meaning it has no steady rhyme scheme or meter. A regular pattern of stressed beats would likely feel too rigid and formulaic for a poem about finally learning to listen to one's own inner voice. The lack of meter also adds to the poem's conversational tone; there's an ease and a casualness to the rhythm here. The speaker is at ease in the world because they have chosen to live life according to their own terms rather than the terms of those around them, and so there is a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in the way the speaker tells this story of breaking out on their own.

RHYME SCHEME

There is no set rhyme scheme for this poem. In fact, the poem hardly uses rhyme at all—which, much like the poem's lack of meter, helps keep the tone intimate and casual throughout.

The only exception is in the first few lines of the poem, where /oo/ assonance results in both internal and end rhyme:

> One day you finally knew
> what you had to do, and began,
> though the voices around you

The fact that the poem begins these comparatively intense moments of rhyme/assonance evokes the sense of being surrounded by shouting voices; there is an echoing quality to all these /oo/ sounds. However, as the speaker moves toward living their own truth away from these voices, all rhyme fades.

SPEAKER

Readers don't know anything specific about the speaker, apart from the fact that this is someone who for too long listened to the "bad advice" of other people—people who expected the speaker to "mend," or fix, their lives. The speaker clearly felt at least somewhat responsible for others' well-being in the past, implied by the fact that seeing such people's "melancholy," or sadness, seems "terrible" to the speaker.

The speaker is looking back on all this from a present in which they're no longer reliant on other people's advice and demands. The use of the word "you" throughout the poem implies the speaker talking directly to this earlier version of themselves. The use of "you" draws the reader into the poem as well. The lack of any biographical information about the speaker—their age, gender, occupation, etc.—also makes it easy for a wide variety of readers to see their own journeys reflected here.

SETTING

The setting of the speaker's "journey"—which seems to move from inside a house out into the night—is metaphorical. This "house" represents the speaker's the circumstances and relationships that the speaker must leave behind in order to forge their own path in life. The fact that it's "already late" as the speaker starts this journey suggests that the speaker has spent much of their life contending with the advice and needs of other people, while the fact that the night is "wild" implies that the journey towards self-reliance feels frightening and unpredictable. The path the speaker takes is also "full of fallen / branches and stones." In other words, the path that the speaker has chosen isn't easy; there are many obstacles, and the way isn't always clear. Yet, as the speaker moves forward, the "terrible" voices fade and stars begin to shine through the cloud cover, symbolically indicating that the speaker is beginning to feel a sense of clarity.

Note that this is all taking place in the past as well; the speaker is talking to their *former* self, which implies that the speaker has since learned to listen to and trust their gut.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Journey" was published in Mary Oliver's first collection, *No Voyage and Other Poems*, in 1963. The poem displays many of the characteristics that would come to make Oliver one of America's best known—and bestselling—poets. Written in free verse with simple, direct language, "The Journey" is both highly accessible and inspirational.

While the natural setting in the poem serves as a metaphor for the "journey" of life, it also points to Oliver's lifelong fascination with nature. Oliver grew up idolizing the works of transcendentalist poets like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, and later would become interested in the work of poets such as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Marianne Moore, and Elizabeth Bishop. Oliver was also firm in her belief that poetry should spiritually inspire and direct. For this reason, she was also very influenced by the works of Persian poets Rumi and Hafez, and also cited the Romantic poets Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats among her favorites.

Thematically, Oliver's poems often deal with love, beauty in the midst of difficulty, awe, and, as in the case of "The Journey," self-reliance. Because of her dedication to the more positive aspects of life (in a rare interview she said, "I don't mess around with what makes me unhappy when I'm writing") and her lack of formal experimentation, her work has been criticized as being overly sentimental. But while her work failed to gain traction in many academic circles during her lifetime, she is undoubtedly one of America's most widely read and beloved poets. She was also prolific, writing nearly 40 books—mostly poetry collections, but also some nonfiction—over the course of her life.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mary Oliver was born in Maple Heights, Ohio in 1935. She left home at the age of 18, fleeing her father's sexual abuse and her mother's neglect (events this poem likely subtly references). She spent much of her childhood wandering around in the woods outside her home, jotting notes for poems. Being alone in the woods was a source of comfort and inspiration for Oliver, something that would remain true for the rest of her life.

Oliver met the photographer Molly Malone Cook in the late 1950s at the former home of Edna St. Vincent Millay; they fell in love quickly and would remain together for over 40 years, until Cook died. Homosexuality was far less accepted in the 1950s than it is in today's society—a fact that might shed further light on the events that inspired the poem's description of shutting out negative influences and forging one's own path in life.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a recording of Oliver reading "The Journey." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDVAzJKnk4c)
- Oliver's Life and Work — Learn more about Oliver in this biography from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/mary-oliver)
- The Summer Day — Another of Oliver's best known poems, which similarly touches on the theme of taking charge of one's own life and happiness. (https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/poet-laureate-projects/poetry-180/all-poems/item/poetry-180-133/the-summer-day/)
- Mary Oliver and Amazement — An article by Rachel Syme about Oliver's legacy for the New Yorker. (https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mary-oliver-helped-us-stay-amazed)
- Oliver's Obituary — Read Oliver's 2019 obituary in The Washington Post. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/mary-oliver-pulitzer-prize-winning-poet-who-found-solace-in-nature-dies-at-83/2019/01/17/1d281eb4-1a74-11e9-88fe-f9f77a3bcb6c_story.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER MARY OLIVER POEMS

- The Black Walnut Tree
- Wild Geese

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