Wild Geese

SUMMARY

The speaker tells readers that they don't have to be perfect, nor do they have to beat themselves up by wandering the desert as if paying for their sins. Instead, people only have to treat their bodies like the vulnerable animals that they are, simply letting them love whatever they want to love. The speaker offers to commiserate with readers about their suffering and unhappiness, but adds that while they talk about this, the world will continue like normal—sunshine and rain will move over the earth's wide-open plains, tall trees, mountains, and rivers. Wild geese will fly overhead in the open sky on their way home. No matter who you are or how lonely you are, the speaker says, you can always lose yourself in the wonders of the natural world, since these wonders call out like the urgent squawks of wild geese—a sound that, again and again, puts people back in touch with their surroundings and makes them feel at home in the world.

THEMES

THE COMFORT AND WONDER OF NATURE

The poem acknowledges that human beings are soft, vulnerable creatures prone to suffering and despair. At the same time, it frames the vast, awe-inspiring beauty of nature as a soothing and comforting force—something that reminds people that they're part of something bigger and more meaningful than their everyday problems.

The speaker starts by acknowledging that human beings tend to wallow in despair or punish themselves for not being "good" enough. There's no need for this, the speaker insists, in part because doing so doesn't help matters, and in part because human problems are so small in the grand scheme of the natural world.

As such, after briefly offering to commiserate with the reader, the speaker turns their attention elsewhere: "Meanwhile the world goes on." The earth won't stop turning, the speaker implies, because of human pain. The speaker puts such pain in perspective by describing all of the beautiful things that will happen in the natural world regardless of any one person's feelings—the sun and rain will move over enormous "landscapes," for example, while wild geese call out from above.

All of these beauties, the poem intimates, make human "despair" seem much less dire and more manageable. And "no matter how lonely" or upset a person is, it's difficult to remain focused on life's difficulties while simultaneously taking in the beauty and grandeur of the surrounding world.

But it's not simply that nature is indifferent to human troubles. The speaker's attention to "despair" makes it clear that personal problems play out *alongside* everything that happens in the natural world. The speaker insists that human beings are, in fact, a part of that very world—that they have a "place / in the family of things." Feeling this sense of connection to nature offers comfort, inspiration, and a sense of belonging, reminding people that the struggles they face only make up a small part of life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-18

HUMAN VULNERABILITY AND SUFFERING

"Wild Geese" seeks to put the pressures and difficulties of everyday life into perspective. The speaker acknowledges the burden people feel to be "good" and also notes that everyone inevitably experiences "despair" or loneliness from time to time. Beating yourself up for perceived mistakes or failings, the speaker implies, is a fruitless endeavor that saps people's happiness.

The poem begins by declaring "You do not have to be good," immediately giving readers permission to stop striving for perfection. Life is difficult and full of emotional turmoil, the poem suggests, so people should be kinder to themselves.

Not doing so won't make things any better, which is why the speaker insists that "You do not have to walk on your knees / for a hundred miles through the desert repenting." In other words, people don't have to exhaustively punish themselves to make up for mistakes, because mistakes are human! Instead, people should recognize that they are nothing but "soft animal[s]" looking for love. The speaker is saying that human beings are imperfect and delicate creatures, and that what they really need is tenderness—an idea that encourages people to accept their faults and vulnerabilities.

This doesn't mean the speaker pretends suffering doesn't exist. On the contrary, the speaker commiserates with the reader, saying, "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine." The point is that people shouldn't *wallow* in self-pity. Doing so simply distracts them from the rest of the world—a world that "calls to" them and "offers itself to [their] imagination." The poem ultimately implies that if you're too focused on being "good," you can't see all the "good" that already exists.

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Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 14-18

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

You do not ...
... the desert, repenting.

The speaker begins by addressing an unidentified "you." Rather than speaking directly to a specific person, it seems likely that the speaker intends to address *anyone* who reads the poem. The "you," in other words, refers to all of humanity.

That general human audience, according to this speaker, needs to hear this message: "You do not have to be good." These words acknowledge the pressure people often feel to be morally flawless. By urging readers to leave behind the idea that they always have to be "good," the speaker opens the poem in a welcoming, gentle way, inviting people to embrace normal human imperfection.

The speaker goes on:

> You do not have to walk on your knees
> for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

The phrase "you do not have to" is an anaphora, since the speaker uses the exact same words at the beginning of the first line. This repetition adds rhythm to the beginning of the poem while also stressing the idea that people aren't required to act or feel a certain way. While society might make it seem like people must strive for perfection (or else feel guilty and ashamed), "Wild Geese" tries to free readers of such unforgiving expectations.

The speaker is also making a general allusion with these words. This image of people wandering the desert recalls biblical or religious tales—for instance, the wanderings of the Israelites in the Book of Exodus, or the stories of desert mystics who went through agonies and temptations in the wilderness. This dramatic allusion adds a little humor at the reader's expense: probably nothing you've done, the speaker seems to say, is so bad that you need to crawl through the desert on your hands and knees to make up for it.

The gentle, loving message of these first lines is that it's okay to be imperfect. Life, the speaker implies, is hard enough as it is, so there's no need for people to beat themselves up for failing to "be good." This perspective lays the groundwork for the speaker's later, bigger point: people, this poem will say, can find relief from their petty concerns in the grandeur of nature.

LINES 4-7

You only have ...
... world goes on.

Having already told readers that it's not always necessary to be "good," the speaker suggests that one should focus on letting "the soft animal" of the body "love what it loves." The phrase "the soft animal of your body" metaphorically presents the human body as a tender animal, suggesting that humans are not only vulnerable, but natural—just as "animal" as a mouse or a moose.

Instead of beating themselves up over their vulnerability and their animal natures, the speaker suggests, people ought to embrace their own sensitivity and allow themselves to feel whatever they feel. More specifically, the speaker urges people to let the body "love what it loves," an idea that encourages people to stop fixating on their problems and instead focus on the aspects of human existence that make life worth living.

But that doesn't mean that pain isn't real. The speaker commiserates with readers by saying, "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine." This is a moment of human connection that makes the speaker seem like an empathetic and kind person—the sort of person willing to listen and relate to others.

"Meanwhile," though, "the world goes on." In other words, while the speaker and the reader talk about their "despair," the world will continue like normal. While certain emotions might feel overwhelmingly painful, the world will never just grind to a halt because of them. In fact, it's rare that the world will even reflect or acknowledge a person's internal pain. This gives people a new perspective on their own suffering, making their feelings seem slightly less daunting or all-encompassing.

The consonant /l/ sound runs throughout these lines, adding subtle emphasis to the speaker's language.

> You only have to let the soft animal of your body
> love [...]
> Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
> Meanwhile the world [...]

The repeated /l/ sound gives this section a musical feeling. It also connects important words like "meanwhile" and "world," emphasizing the idea that the world will continue to turn even if people feel overwhelmed by their worries.

LINES 8-13

Meanwhile the sun ...
... heading home again.

While people commiserate with each other and dwell on their despair, the rest of the world continues as normal. The speaker uses anaphora in this section, repeating the word "meanwhile":

- Line 7: "**Meanwhile** the world goes on."
- Line 8: "**Meanwhile** the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain [...]"
- Line 12: "**Meanwhile** the wild geese, high in the clean blue air [...]"

This repetition illustrates the fact that human emotion can't bring the world to a standstill. Rather, the natural world keeps on keeping on, regardless of how people feel. The speaker demonstrates this with naturalistic imagery, describing the sun and the rain as they move over large landscapes—landscapes made up of prairies, forests, mountains, and rivers.

The speaker juxtaposes these different elements of the natural world in lines 8-11:

> Meanwhile **the sun** and the clear pebbles of **the rain**
> are moving across the landscapes,
> over **the prairies** and **the deep trees**,
> **the mountains** and **the rivers**.

This juxtaposition of sun and rain, prairie and forest, mountain and river invites readers to consider the gorgeous variety of the nature. These differences make the world seem vast and complex. They're also beautiful—a beauty that is unfortunately easy to overlook when one is fixating on everyday human problems.

In line 12, the speaker describes migrating geese flying through "clean blue air." The act of flying symbolizes freedom—an appropriate image, since the poem wants readers to free themselves from the petty worries of daily life.

There is some noteworthy sibilance in these lines, like when the speaker repeats the /s/ sound in lines 8 through 10:

> Meanwhile the **s**un and the clear pebbles of the rain
> are moving acro**ss** the landscapes,

This hissing subtly mimics the delicious sound of rainfall. The speaker's use of the assonant /ee/ sound paired with the consonant /z/ sound in line 10 also contributes to this musical effect:

> over the prair**ies** and the d**ee**p tr**ees**

These sounds bind the words together and add melody to the lines. Here, the poem's language reflects the harmonious, varied beauty of the landscape it describes.

LINES 14-16

Whoever you are, ...
... and exciting –

While suffering is real, the speaker goes on, even the loneliest people will find that the world "offers itself" to them if they look beyond their own problems.

Here, the speaker uses a simile to suggest that the world will call out to people "like the wild geese" flying overhead. The "harsh and exciting" sounds of those geese feel vital, urgent—and *loud*. If the reader remembers having heard a flock of geese pass overhead, honking all the way, they'll know that the speaker is suggesting it's not difficult to tap into the beauty of the surrounding world. Although it might *seem* hard to look beyond the many worries of daily life, the image of the geese suggests that nature is right there, loud and insistent, waiting only to be noticed.

When the speaker says, "Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, / the world offers itself to your imagination," it once again becomes clear that this poem is intended to speak directly to readers and connect with them on an emotional level. But nature *also* wants to make that connection: in a moment of vivid personification, it reaches out like a friend to "[offer] itself to your imagination." Nature offers; it's the role of the human imagination to *respond* to that offer and see the comfort that's to be found there.

Like most of this poem's lines, lines 14-16 are end-stopped. This creates a slow, steady rhythm that makes the speaker's words seem contemplative and gentle. The caesura in line 14 accentuates this effect:

> Whoever you are, || no matter how **lonely,**
> the world offers itself to your **imagination,**

The pause after "Whoever you are" calls attention to the idea that anybody at all can benefit from stopping to appreciate the natural world. In the same way that the speaker's pace in this moment slows down, then, the poem urges readers to slow down in their own lives.

LINES 17-18

over and over ...
... family of things.

The poem's final two lines extend the simile from line 16, in which the speaker says that the world "calls out" to people "like the wild geese." Here, those calls are "announcing your place / in the family of things." The call of nature invites people to reflect upon their true place in the world—a place that's prepared and waiting for every "soft animal" alive.

By paying attention to the beauty of the natural world, the poem implies, people will feel more connected to their environment. The idea that everyone has a "place" in the "family of things" metaphorically suggests that everything and everyone in the world is somehow related. More importantly, everyone *belongs* to the world. Even the loneliest, most despairing people are part of a something bigger than themselves.

The speaker's use of diacope in line 17 emphasizes the geese's insistent calls:

> over and over announcing your place

That the geese's honks come "over and over" reminds the reader once more that it's not actually all that hard to stop and pay attention to nature, which is always there, waiting to be recognized. And yet, people often ignore nature while obsessing over everyday problems, failing to hear that the world "calls" to them. The poem's final message, then, is to listen up, look up, and see the truth of humanity's connection with the world.

SYMBOLS

GEESE

The wild geese in the poem symbolize exuberant freedom, especially freedom from the struggles and burdens of everyday life. This kind of freedom, the poem implies, can come from recognizing the beauty of nature. The speaker insists that, no matter how lonely or desperate people get, they can always listen for the "harsh and exciting" cries of the geese above them, and be reminded of a bigger, wilder reality.

But the freedom the geese embody isn't just invigorating: it also helps people feel more at ease in their own lives. The speaker hints at this by saying that the sound of the geese "announc[es] your place / in the family of things." This suggests that paying close attention to nature will not only free people from their struggles, but also make them feel like they belong to something bigger than themselves.

The geese therefore embody the freeing beauty of nature—a beauty that the poem implies we're all part of.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-18:** "Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, / are heading home again. / Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, / the world offers itself to your imagination, / calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting — / over and over announcing your place / in the family of things."

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

Repetition plays an important role right from the beginning of "Wild Geese," as the speaker uses an anaphora in the first two lines:

> You do not have to be good.
> You do not have to walk on your knees

This anaphora makes the speaker sound insistent. Repeating the phrase "You do not have to," the speaker reassures readers that it's not necessary to meet society's rigid expectations—even though it might be hard to believe that at first. This anaphora is also just plain musical, giving these opening lines a hypnotic rhythm that urges the reader into the poem.

The speaker uses another important anaphora later on, repeating the word "meanwhile" in lines 7 and 8:

> Meanwhile the world goes on.
> Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
> [...]

This repetition (and its return in line 12: "Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, / are heading home again") reminds readers that the world goes on even while people are hung up on their own "despair." These repeated "meanwhile[s]" suggest the vastness of all that goes on in the world, all the time, even when people are focused on their own petty problems: so much can fit into that "meanwhile"!

The speaker also uses subtler forms of repetition. For example, line 5 features epanalepsis, since the speaker uses the word "love" at the beginning and end of the line: "love what it loves." Here, the repetition suggests the ease and naturalness of love for the "soft animal of your body." Meanwhile, the diacope of line 17 ("over and over announcing your place / in the family of things") echoes the wild geese's rhythmic calling as they fly overhead.

Repetition thus lends the poem both music and meaning, creating harmonious rhythms and drawing attention to big ideas.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "You do not have to"
- **Line 2:** "You do not have to"
- **Line 5:** "love," "loves"
- **Line 6:** "Tell me," "tell you"
- **Line 7:** "Meanwhile"
- **Line 8:** "Meanwhile"
- **Line 12:** "Meanwhile"
- **Line 17:** "over," "over"

ASSONANCE

The assonance in "Wild Geese" often just plain sounds nice. The very first line, in which the speaker repeats an assonant /oo/ sound, is a good example:

> You do not have to be good.

This round, cool /oo/ begins the poem on a musical note, one that makes the language sound satisfying and soothing—and that helps to establish the speaker's kind, gentle tone.

Another notable moment of assonance appears in line 10:

> over the prairies and the deep trees

This repeated /ee/ sound connects the image of wide-open prairies with the image of tall trees, helping the speaker to juxtapose these different landscapes and emphasizing the vastness and variety of nature.

In line 12, the speaker uses both the long /i/ and /ee/ sounds:

> Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,

The long /i/ sound connects the words "meanwhile," "wild," and "high," supporting the idea that beautiful and "wild" things take place in the sky while people obsess over petty concerns on the ground. The /ee/ sound, on the other hand, connects the words "geese" and "clean," making the entire line sound even more cohesive and melodic.

Assonance is thus both beautiful and useful here. It evokes the pleasures of nature with harmonious, musical sounds, and draws attention to some of the poem's big ideas.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "You do," "to"
- **Line 3:** "through," "desert, repenting"
- **Line 4:** "You"
- **Line 6:** "mine"
- **Line 7:** "Meanwhile"
- **Line 8:** "rain"
- **Line 9:** "landscapes"
- **Line 10:** "prairies," "deep trees"
- **Line 12:** "Meanwhile," "wild," "geese," "high," "clean"
- **Line 13:** "home"
- **Line 14:** "no," "lonely"
- **Line 15:** "itself," "imagination"
- **Line 16:** "like," "exciting"

CONSONANCE

Moments of consonance in "Wild Geese" intensify the speaker's language. For example, consider line 7, where the speaker repeats /w/ and /n/ sounds:

> Meanwhile the world goes on.

The speaker's use of consonance makes this short line attention-grabbing. The /w/ sound in "meanwhile" and "world" links the two words, underlining the idea that the world continues like normal even while people focus on their little problems.

Other instances of consonance are subtler, like when the speaker uses a combination of the /v/ and /f/ sounds in lines 4 and 5:

> You only have to let the soft animal of your body
> love what it loves.

The word "have" features a consonant that sounds like a mixture of the /v/ and /f/ sounds. Because of this, it pairs well with the /f/ sound in "soft." The word "of," meanwhile, has more of a /v/ sound that goes well with the /v/ sound in "love." Altogether, "have," "soft," "of," and "love" create a similar effect, one that adds a soft quality to these to lines—just like the softness of that "soft animal."

The speaker's use of sibilance also achieves this soft, smooth effect. For example, lines 8 through 10 combine the sibilant /s/ sound with the consonant /z/ sound:

> Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
> are moving across the landscapes,
> over the prairies and the deep trees,

The /s/ sound appears in the words "sun," "across," and "landscapes," whereas the /z/ sound appears in the words "pebbles," "prairies," and "trees." Both forms of sibilance add a hissing, lisping sound to these lines, creating a feeling of movement and fluidity that matches the image of sun and rain sweeping over the earth. Consonance thus helps the language of the poem feel both musical and meaningful.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "not," "on," "knees"
- **Line 3:** "for," "hundred," "miles," "through," "desert, repenting"
- **Line 4:** "only," "have," "let," "soft," "animal," "of"
- **Line 5:** "love"
- **Line 6:** "me," "despair, yours," "will tell," "mine"
- **Line 7:** "Meanwhile," "world," "on"
- **Line 8:** "Meanwhile," "sun," "clear pebbles," "rain"
- **Line 9:** "moving," "across," "landscapes"
- **Line 10:** "over," "prairies," "deep," "trees"
- **Line 11:** "mountains," "rivers"
- **Line 12:** "Meanwhile," "wild," "clean blue," "air"
- **Line 13:** "are," "heading home"
- **Line 14:** "Whoever," "are," "matter," "how," "lonely"
- **Line 15:** "world," "offers itself," "imagination"
- **Line 16:** "calls," "like," "wild," "geese," "harsh," "exciting"
- **Line 17:** "over," "announcing," "your," "place"

METAPHOR

The metaphors in this poem evoke human beings' relationships to themselves and to nature—for better and for worse.

The poem's first metaphor is an uncomfortable one, suggesting that beating oneself up for one's failures is the same as crawling "on your knees / for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting." This metaphor is also an allusion to biblical stories in which people are forced to wander in the desert to pay for their sins—a kind of story that is perhaps itself a metaphor for periods of depression and confusion. In the Book of Exodus, for example, the Israelites make a long and difficult journey through the desert after God tells Moses to lead them out of Egypt, and in the New Testament, Christ goes into the desert to overcome Satanic temptation. These are pretty grand and dramatic stories! Getting too remorseful over your own failings, the speaker seems to imply, is a disproportionate punishment for normal human folly.

The speaker uses a metaphor again in lines 4 and 5, saying:

> You only have to let **the soft animal of your body**
> love what it loves.

If the human body is a "soft animal," it's a delicate, sweet, and vulnerable creature. Here, the speaker reminds readers to be gentle with themselves, acknowledging how hard it can sometimes feel to be a human being. But the speaker also reminds readers that humans **are** animals, no matter how lost in their own lofty thoughts they might become.

The poem's final metaphorical idea fits right in with these ideas of humanity's connection to nature:

> the world offers itself to your imagination,
> calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —

In the first of these lines, the speaker personifies the world by suggesting that it can "offer itself" to people. In the next line, this personification transitions to a simile, as the speaker says that the world "calls to you **like the wild geese**, harsh and exciting." In this image, the whole world is wild as the geese—and as free from petty human concerns.

But the overarching metaphor here is that the world is a friend. By "announcing [their] place / in the family of things," the world actively reaches out to people, reminding them that they belong here.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "You do not have to walk on your knees / for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting."
- **Lines 4-5:** "You only have to let the soft animal of your body /   love what it loves."
- **Lines 15-18:** "the world offers itself to your imagination, / calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting — / over and over announcing your place / in the family of things."

END-STOPPED LINE

The majority of the lines in "Wild Geese" are end-stopped, making the poem's rhythm feel contained and controlled. The first end-stop establishes the speaker's slow and deliberate pacing:

> You do not have to be **good.**

This end-stopped line makes the speaker sound matter-of-fact and emphatic. But then, the very next line is enjambed:

> You do not have to walk on your **knees**
> **for** a hundred miles [...]

With this variation, the poem's pace begins to feel a little less predictable. This push-and-pull effect also appears in lines 4-5:

> You only have to let the soft animal of your **body**
> **love** what it **loves.**

Line 4 is on the longer side, and its enjambment smoothly extends it into line 5. But line 5 is the poem's shortest, and its strong end-stop emphasizes its contrast with line 4. This abrupt change in pace and rhythm highlights the simple, important idea that the body should be allowed to "love what it loves."

Meanwhile, the gentler end-stops in lines 14-16 help to create a lilting rhythm:

> Whoever you are, no matter how **lonely,**
> the world offers itself to your **imagination,**
> calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and **exciting** —

These consecutive end-stops urge readers to move attentively and thoughtfully through the lines—just the way the poem encourages readers to move through the world.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "good."
- **Line 3:** "repenting."
- **Line 5:** "loves."
- **Line 6:** "mine."
- **Line 7:** "on."
- **Line 9:** "landscapes,"
- **Line 10:** "trees,"
- **Line 11:** "rivers."

- **Line 12:** "air,"
- **Line 13:** "again."
- **Line 14:** "lonely,"
- **Line 15:** "imagination,"
- **Line 16:** "exciting —"
- **Line 18:** "things."

ASYNDETON

The asyndeton in "Wild Geese" both changes the poem's pace and reflects the action it describes. Take a look at how it works in lines 9-10, for example:

> are moving across the landscapes,
> over the prairies and the deep trees,

It's easy to imagine this portion of the poem rewritten to include the word "and": "moving across the landscapes / and over the prairies and the deep trees." But the speaker chooses not to include that "and," using a comma instead. This creates a feeling of momentum that aligns with the image of sun and rain "moving" over the landscape.

Asyndeton also appears toward the end of the poem, when the speaker once again omits the word "and" in lines 15 and 16:

> the world offers itself to your imagination,
> calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —

In this case, the omission of the "and" doesn't speed up the pace of the poem. Instead, it creates a noticeable pause, like a breath, that makes the speaker's tone seem contemplative and slow. Here, the asyndeton urges readers to take their time as they work their way toward the end of the poem: to give themselves a moment to sink into the wonders the speaker describes.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "moving across the landscapes, / over the prairies and the deep trees, / the mountains and the rivers."
- **Lines 15-16:** "the world offers itself to your imagination, / calls to you like the wild geese"

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition is built into "Wild Geese": there's an inherent contrast between human "despair" and the astounding beauty of the natural world. The speaker spends the first six lines of the poem ("You do not [...] tell you mine") acknowledging that life is often painful and that human beings tend to be hard on on themselves. Then, the speaker makes a turn:

> Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
> Meanwhile the world goes on.

Here, the speaker abruptly juxtaposes human "despair" with the continuity of the natural world, where life just "goes on." The juxtaposition make it clear that the problems of everyday life can feel less weighty when compared to the beauty, persistence, energy, and vastness of the surrounding world.

The speaker emphasizes nature's scale and variety with even more juxtapositions. For example, the speaker mentions the contrasting elements of "the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain" in the same breath. Similarly, they talk about both prairies and forests of "deep trees," and landscapes of both mountains and rivers. These juxtapositions convey just how wide and wild the world truly is—a fact that makes it easier to understand why everyday problems pale in comparison to the complex beauty of nature.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. / Meanwhile the world goes on."
- **Line 8:** "the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain"
- **Line 10:** "the prairies and the deep trees"
- **Line 11:** "the mountains and the rivers"

VOCABULARY

Repenting (Line 3) - To "repent" is to feel regret or remorse, or to do penance. The word has religious connotations: worshipers are sometimes said to "repent" for their sins.

Pebbles (Line 8) - Small, smooth stones, here used metaphorically to describe raindrops.

Prairies (Line 10) - Wide-open grassy plains.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Wild Geese" doesn't use an established poetic form, but rather invents its own. It is made up of a single 18-line stanza, and its lines vary in length, following the speaker's language in an easy, natural way. This free-flowing form reflects the poem's idea that people should open themselves up to the world and look beyond the petty struggles of their daily lives. The poem isn't boxed in by a specific structure—and neither, the speaker implies, should people be boxed in by their everyday problems.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, meaning that it doesn't follow a specific metrical pattern. The lines vary wildly in length and rhythm. Consider, for example, the contrast between lines 4

and 5:

> You only have to let the soft animal of your body
> love what it loves.

The first of these two lines sounds long and free, creating a momentary feeling of expansion. This changes, however, in the next line, since the phrase "love what it loves" is very short. The quick change of pace here might feel a little jarring, but it also forces emphasis onto "love what it loves," highlighting the idea that people ought to treat themselves kindly by embracing tender emotions like love.

The pace of the poem also fluctuates in lines 12 and 13:

> Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
> are heading home again.

The general flow shifts once again when the speaker moves from a long line to a short line. This change calls attention to the phrase "are heading home again," but it also simply gives the poem an unpredictable rhythm that makes the speaker's language feel like it's constantly evolving. This free-flowing tone matches the sense of uninhibited freedom symbolized by the wild geese flying overhead: the language here responds to the poem's ideas of an unstructured but harmonious natural world.

RHYME SCHEME

"Wild Geese" doesn't use a rhyme scheme, a fact that helps the language sound natural and conversational. It also adds to the poem's free-flowing quality, since the speaker doesn't have to adhere to strict rhyming patterns that might otherwise make the lines feel rigid or formulaic.

This is especially appropriate for this poem, considering that it focuses on the comforting and liberating effects of embracing the natural world. It makes sense, in other words, that the speaker's language doesn't follow a rhyme scheme, since this would only detract from the feeling of freedom symbolized by the vastness of nature.

SPEAKER

Although it's never clear who, exactly, the speaker is, their nurturing and empathetic personality still shines through in their commiseration with their readers: "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine." This casts the speaker as a kind and caring person—the sort of person who will listen to other people's worries. But this speaker is also a person with a deep sense of awe and wonder, one who can feel the energy of the whole world in the "harsh and exciting" cry of a goose.

Considering that Mary Oliver often wrote about nature and what it's like to be human (two themes that are very much present in "Wild Geese"), some readers will perhaps choose to view the speaker as Oliver herself. Either way, though, what's clear is that the speaker is sensitive, generous, and appreciative of the world's vast beauty.

SETTING

The speaker of "Wild Geese" never mentions a specific time or place. Instead, they describe nature in a broad, all-encompassing way, observing wild geese flying through clear blue skies, and the sun and rain sweeping over wide-open prairies and deep forests. By keeping its visions of the landscape broad, the poem encourages people to open themselves up to nature in a more general sense: the point here isn't to encourage readers to visit, say, Yosemite, but instead to step outside and open themselves up to a natural world that's always right there.

There might, however, be a little hint of a more specific landscape in those "prairies"—a kind of grassland strongly associated with the midwestern United States. Perhaps Oliver's own Ohio upbringing has some influence on the landscape her speaker envisions here.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Mary Oliver published "Wild Geese" in 1986, two years after she won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for her collection *American Primitive*. "Wild Geese" showcases her characteristic interest in the relationship between humanity and nature—a relationship she also explores in poems like "Sleeping in the Forest," "Morning Poem," "Poppies," and "The Black Walnut Tree."

An extremely prolific poet, Oliver began publishing in the early 1960s and continued writing until shortly before her death in 2019. Her poetic voice has always fit in with contemporary style: like a lot of writers of this period, she tends to use free verse and simple language. But while many of her contemporaries in the 1960s and '70s played around with form and the limits of language, Oliver's poetry remained fairly straightforward and contemplative.

In her simplicity of style and interest in the natural world, Oliver follows in the footsteps of English Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and John Keats, both of whom were interested in the beauty and power of nature, and in old poetic forms like the ballad. She was also influenced by the thoughtful, awed, spiritual tone of American Transcendentalist writers like Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau.

Oliver's work has long been beloved and influential. In more

recent years, her poetry has influenced writers like Ross Gay, Joy Harjo, and Camille T. Dungy—all of whom share Oliver's delight in nature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While "Wild Geese" is a timeless poem about a timeless subject, it clearly responds to the changing United States that Oliver grew up in. Born in 1935, Oliver was a young adult when the counter-culture movements of the 1960s encouraged many people to become environmentalists. American environmental activists at the time rebelled against the capitalistic frenzy of the post-war 1950s, arguing that humans should protect, conserve, and coexist with the wilderness, rather than trying to master or exploit it. Humans, they pointed out, are *part* of nature, interdependent with it. This philosophy was sometimes known as the "Back-to-the-Land" movement, and though "Wild Geese" was written long after it initially took form, the poem clearly resonates with that movement's belief in the beauty and power of nature.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- An Interview with Mary Oliver — Watch a rare interview with Mary Oliver from 2015, only a few years before she died. (https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-listening-to-the-world/)
- Mary Oliver Reads the Poem — Watch Mary Oliver give a public reading of "Wild Geese." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lv_4xmh_WtE)
- Helena Bonham Carter Reads the Poem — To hear a different take on the poem, listen to the actor Helena Bonham Carter read "Wild Geese" and talk about the uses of poetry during hard times. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgBEIi4h1Mo)
- More About Mary Oliver — To learn more about Mary Oliver, take a look at this brief overview of her life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/mary-oliver)
- Celebrating the Poet — Check out this article from The New Yorker, in which the writer Rachel Syme sings Oliver's praises and looks back at her prolific career in the aftermath of her death. (https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mary-oliver-helped-us-stay-amazed)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER MARY OLIVER POEMS

- The Black Walnut Tree

HOW TO CITE

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