

Lecture outline: *Crossing the Swamp*

I. Hook and main argument

1. Swamps are things of nightmares: vines, shadows, mud, weird noises, haze, stagnant water, pervasive damp, etc. fear: trapped in a swamp, unable to move.
2. Another word for “swamp” is “morass” -- or confusion, clutter, and chaos. (Maybe high school can feel this way at times?)
3. Mary Oliver, however, invites her readers to think about swamps in a new light. Her poem, “Crossing the Swamp,” first entraps us in a mud-filled, boggy world, only to release us as stronger, more confident human beings. She takes us back to a primordial beginning where we are struggling to survive. Her poem shows us the magic of nature, of evolution, and of the human ability to gain strength from the very thing that holds us down (in this case, the swamp).

II. Quick background on Mary Oliver and the poem I’ll be lecturing about

1. Mary Oliver
 - a. one of the greatest living American poets
 - b. From New England, lives in a rural area; her poems are almost always about nature
 - c. Known for her beautiful imagery and the interplay between emotional and physical landscapes
 - d. “Crossing the Swamp” was first published in 1978 in a compilation of poetry called *American Primitive*.
 - e. Paraphrase of the poem: The poem is 36 lines of free verse. Each line is very short, and lines are staggered on the page. In this poem, a speaker encountering difficulty in trying to cross a swamp. She enters the swamp with difficulty but develops hope as she crosses the swamp. The poem explores topics of perseverance, nature and rebirth; this lecture will discuss how Mary Oliver uses poetic elements to convey the human ability to gain strength from the very thing that holds us down. In addition, she shows us the beauty and majesty of our natural world, and how we are at its whim.

III. First claim about poem: Oliver’s word choice and use of sound establish the setting of the poem in a swamp that appears dangerous, filled with uncertainty and primordial.

1. Concrete imagery evokes visceral reaction: “belching bogs,” “dense, sticky sap”
2. Sound of individual words conveys entrapment and immobility
 - a. Line 2 has just two words in it: “wet” and “thick”. Both words end in a harsh sounds, forcing the reader to come to what feels like a full stop when pronouncing

these words. The sounds force the reader to slow down while reading the poem, evoking a feeling of difficulty.

IV. Second claim about poem: Oliver next uses anaphora and imagery to establish the swamp as a metaphor for struggle.

1. Anaphora in lines 8-10 “Here / is *swamp*, here / is struggle” confirms that the swamp symbolizes a seemingly untraversable morass. This is the first hint that the speaker of the poem is facing not just the physical barriers of the swamp, but the emotional or mental barriers of hardship, setbacks, or inertia in life.
2. We see the enormity of this struggle through an image of a vast expanse of mud, specifically, “pathless, seamless, peerless mud” (12-13). The repetition of words with the suffix “-less” as well as the commas that stand for pauses force the reader to figuratively trudge through language before experiencing what surrounds the speaker: mud.
3. Finally, the speaker suggests that the swamp not only stands for struggle, but also something more ominous: the inability to continue, or death. Line 11 contains a single word: “closure.” On one level, the swamp appears to enclose the speaker, preventing her from moving forward. On a symbolic level, the swamp represents an end. If the speaker is unable to move through the swamp -- if she is stopped -- she will be unable to survive.

V. Third claim about the poem: Oliver introduces us to the speaker in the next part of poem and her description of how she is trying to cross the swamp. Oliver’s diction and imagery illustrate the basic, universal, and age-old battle between man and nature.

1. Line 13 “My bones” is significant because we are finally introduced to a person who is trying to cross the swamp
2. The imagery in the lines “My bones / knock together at the pale / joints” evokes the physical pain and weakness associated with attempting to overcome a natural barrier, like a swamp. The speaker talks of her body in terms of its basic building blocks -- bones -- that are trying to navigate the basic building blocks of the swamp: “such slick crossings, deep / hipholes, hummocks / that sink silently / into the black, slack / earthsoup” (18-22). The speaker’s use of metonymy (bones = her body) reduces this struggle into one of basic, elemental importance: man’s struggle to survive in nature.

VI. Fourth claim about the poem: Oliver’s use of sound and structure in this part of the poem recreates the physical, mental, and emotional challenges associated with persisting through adversity.

1. Oliver plays with the words “foothold, fingerhold / mindhold” (16-17) to illustrate her repeated attempts to gain stability within the swamp. Her attempts to cross the swamp begin on the physical level (“foothold, fingerhold,”) before evolving into one of emotion and mindset (“mindhold”). The repetition and evolution of these words that end with “-

hold” casts the swamp as a place of not just physical hardship, but mental and emotional as well.

2. The sound of individual consonants and the arrangement of lines also forces the reader to encounter difficulty while reading about a difficult experience: crossing a swamp. Every physical step the speaker takes meets challenge: The sibilant alliteration and consonance in “such slick crossings” (18) forces the reader to slide through the pronunciation of the words, much like the speaker losing her step on a slippery stone. This slippery experience follows one that requires a great deal of labor: the speaker is trying to navigate “deep / hipholes” and “hummocks.” The effort it takes to simply pronounce the sounds in these lines, which describe holes and mounds of earth found in a swamp, reflect the uncertain, hazardous steps the speaker must take in order to continue on her journey through the swamp.
3. Finally, the structure of the poem -- the way in which lines are arranged on the page -- resembles sinking steps. This is fitting, as the speaker is continually sinking on her way across the bog; indeed, she steps into the “black, slack / earthsoup” -- an image and rhyme that mimics the sound of footsteps through muck.

VII. Fifth claim about the poem: A shift occurs in diction and figurative language in the second half of the poem, suggesting the speaker’s developing attitude towards the swamp.

1. “I feel / not wet so much as / painted and glittered” (22-24) indicates the speaker’s shifting attitude towards the swamp. She sees the “wet” mud and water that she has crossed through as something that actually decorates and adorns her. The connotation of “painted” and “glittered” is positive and suggests beauty and awe. Could the swamp symbolize something else than just confusion, struggle and hardship?
2. What decorates the speaker? The “fat grassy / mired, the rich / and succulent marrows / of earth” (25-28). What a shift in attitude towards the swamp! From the nasty “belching / bogs” (7-8) to the “rich / and succulent marrows / of earth.” The speaker is no longer noticing the swamp in terms of its negative qualities; the use of the word “marrows” indicates that she now sees the swamp as something nurturing and even life-saving. The word choice of “rich” and “succulent” indicates the vast potential of good contained in the swamp.

VIII. Sixth claim about the poem: A major theme of the poem arises here through Oliver’s use of metaphor.

1. Lines 28-31: The speaker calls herself “a poor / dry stick given / one more chance by the whims / of swamp water.” The magical, life-affirming and enriching qualities of nature here are summed up by the alliterative “whims of swamp water” that allow the speaker another shot at life. The speaker finds herself reborn -- from feeling dead (described through the image of a “poor dry stick” to being given “one more chance.”

2. Lines 31-36 describes how the speaker sees herself as a bough - a small branch -- that could actually become a “breathing palace of leaves” because of the swamp’s healing and life-giving “whims.” Oliver’s use of metaphor here illustrates the speaker’s mindset that she is being rejuvenated by the very thing -- the swamp -- that has posed a challenge to her. The language found in the metaphor “breathing palace of leaves” serves as a contrast to the earlier vision of the swamp -- a “nugget of dense sap, branching vines...dark burred faintly belching bogs (4-8). The shift in diction, from earthy and visceral to abstract and refined, illustrates the development in the speaker’s attitude, from feeling near death to gaining immense hope.
3. Even the sound and rhythm in the final lines of the poem suggest a lighter, easier road ahead: “make of its life a breathing / palace of leaves” is in near iambic pentameter, the meter associated with the human heartbeat and spoken English. The rhythm in these lines indicate that the speaker has regained her step, her focus, and her sense of hope for the future.

IX. Conclusion / recap of thesis Oliver uses figurative language, diction, sound, structure and development to illustrate the life-giving (and taking) qualities of nature. Her poem recreates the physical and emotional sensation of encountering both hardship and hope in nature and throughout life’s journey.

1. Structure: the arrangement of lines on the page illustrates the difficulty of stepping through swamp, and then finally finding one’s footing
2. Figurative language and diction: Oliver uses numerous metaphors to cast a traditionally threatening natural element -- a swamp -- as a place of struggle and hardship. She also conveys the speaker as someone who is near death (“a poor dry stick”) to someone who has the potential to overcome -- and gain strength from -- life’s hardships, becoming “a breathing palace of leaves”)
3. Development: The poem contains a number of shifts, most importantly towards the end, where the swamp is recast as a place of foreboding and difficulty to one of hope and beauty
4. Mary Oliver’s “Crossing the Swamp” forces us to rethink our attitudes towards what we think of as struggle. Is the morass of everyday life something that will stop us in our tracks -- or will it lift us closer to our dreams?