

From Nature's Wisdom to Personal Growth through Mary Oliver's poem "Swan"

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Abstract

Ecopoetry blends artistic expression with ecological awareness, exploring how nature impacts human well-being, development and behavior. Connecting with nature, often referred to as "nature connectedness," can lead to personal growth and change, positively impacting both individual well-being and environmental stewardship. Reading can be an effective intervention to foster nature connectedness and its associated benefits. Mary Oliver is one of the most well-known poets drawing inspiration from nature. Her poem "Swan" connects readers to the natural world through vivid depictions, challenging them to think about their own lives and journeys of transformation. The poem was selected for bibliotherapy using the Hynes and Hynes- Berry (2012) criteria and it was analyzed through their model which offers a structured pathway to deepen the therapeutic engagement with the text. The poem's structure mirrors a dialogue, creating space for diverse interpretations and personal meaning, and its themes encourage readers to integrate new perspectives, prioritize moments of awe and actively seek growth and purpose. "Swan" can act as a catalyst for self-reflection, emotional processing and personal growth, serving as a valuable tool in various bibliotherapeutic contexts.

Keywords: nature writing; ecopoetry; bibliotherapy; Mary Oliver; "Swan"; Hynes and Hynes-Berry model

Introduction

"Nature and Books belong to the eyes that see them."
(Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Nature literature serves as a bridge between human experience and the natural world, offering vivid depictions that awaken our senses and imagination. Through the words of poets, novelists, and essayists, readers are immersed in remote wilderness, verdant forests, and majestic mountains, allowing themselves to vicariously experience the beauty and wonder of nature.

From Hermann Hesse's "trees as sanctuaries" to Henry David Thoreau's "need of the tonic of wildness" and Mary Oliver's "sacred home," nature through the book pages invites readers to develop a deeper appreciation and understanding of the natural world, fostering a connection that enriches the relationship with the authentic self.

Nature writing is a multifaceted – both fiction and non-fiction – genre that blends artistic expression with ecological awareness, encompassing a broad range of works that focus on the natural environment. It explores various aspects of how nature impacts human well-being, development, and behavior, as well as how humans interact with and perceive nature.

The “New Nature Writing” in Britain and Ireland has emerged as a contemporary form that combines innovative stylistic elements with ecological awareness and conservation practices (Smith, 2017).

Nature poetry, a subset of the genre of nature writing, has long been a source of inspiration, with poets drawing connections between the natural world and human soul (Ryff, 2021).

In recent years, climate change has emerged as a dominant theme in literature, including poetry. Ecopoetry emerged from growing ecological awareness in the late 20th century, sought to integrate human experiences with the natural world, offering insights into the complex relationships between nature and culture. Modern ecopoetry exhibits ecological awareness and engages with current environmental degradation issues (Johns-Putra, 2016). It goes beyond traditional nature poetry by adopting an eco-centric view and addressing contemporary ecological concerns (Karaaslan Özgü, 2024).

The prefix *eco-*, from the Greek *oikos* (meaning “house”), carries three contextual meanings: home (as in *economy*), living environment (as in *ecology*, *ecosystem*), and ecological reduction (as in *eco-sustainable*) (Bulfaro, 2022). According to Tania Haberland (2022), ecopoetics invites us to ask how a poem can function as *prattein* – an act of making (*poiesis*) – rooted in the concept of dwelling.

Ecopoetry encourages readers to engage with ecological issues at both the micro and macro levels, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of the environment (Ledesma, 2024). It is characterized by its emphasis on balancing human interests with the needs of nature, recognizing that humans are not at the center of the natural world (Scigaj, 1999).

Interestingly, ecopoetry challenges the notion of humans as external observers, positioning them as active participants within the biosphere. It aims to evoke an emotional response through the creation of an “atmosphere” between environmental attributes and human experience (O’Loughlin, 2023).

Research on nature connectedness

Research on nature poetry and ecopoetry reveals their significant role in shaping our understanding of the natural world and their influence on human emotions and experiences.

The rise of ecopoetry and climate change poetry initiatives in the media has led to increased engagement with environmental issues in literary studies, particularly in the field of ecocriticism (Johns-Putra, 2016). This trend reflects a growing recognition of poetry's power to foster empathy, understanding, and advocacy for environmental causes (Poindexter, 2002).

As the field continues to evolve, it offers new perspectives on the interplay between spirituality, well-being, and the natural world, drawing inspiration from indigenous wisdom that sees spirit in everything (Ryff, 2021).

Scientific studies have consistently supported the idea that connecting with nature, often referred to as “nature connectedness,” can lead to personal growth and change. This connection has been shown to have positive impacts on both individual well-being and environmental stewardship (Chawla, 2020; Arola et al., 2022; van Heel et al., 2023).

As our understanding of the underlying mechanisms grows, it opens up possibilities for designing more effective interventions and spaces to foster nature connectedness and its associated benefits (Sheffield et al., 2022). Reading can be one such intervention. Research has demonstrated that any form of exposure to nature – even through reading or virtual experiences – can have positive psychological impacts on individuals. Several studies have explored this phenomenon, revealing interesting findings and potential mechanisms.

Tillmann et al. (2018) highlight that nature positively influences mental health outcomes, including emotional well-being, attention deficit disorder/hyperactivity disorder, self-esteem, stress, resilience, depression, and health-related quality of life. While this research primarily focused on direct exposure to nature, it suggests that nature experiences, in general, can be beneficial for mental health (Tillmann et al., 2018).

While direct immersion in nature provides various psychological benefits, as noted by Frost et al. (2022), there is growing evidence that virtual or indirect experiences of nature can positively impact well-being. This includes reading about nature or viewing nature-related content.

Yang et al. (2022) suggested a novel account of the benefits of nature on psychological well-being through the lens of Self-Determination Theory. Their research found that exposure to nature scenes, including digital ones, led to higher levels of positive affect, life satisfaction and meaning in life. Even indirect exposure to nature, such as only viewing images, can have positive psychological effects as well (Yang et al., 2022). However, more research is needed to fully understand the mechanisms and extent of these effects, particularly in comparison to real-world nature experiences (Frost et al., 2022, Yang et al., 2022).

Examining the poem “Swan” for bibliotherapeutic use

Mary Oliver’s nature poetry

Different poets have employed nature and tackled its natural aspects for various purposes, resulting in the rise of nature poetry. Mary Oliver is one of the most well-known poets drawing inspiration from nature. Her poetry encourages a deep connection and a sense of communion with the natural environment (Sunny & Narayana, 2024). She is an American poet who has received the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize among many other awards (Beacon Press). Her poetry can be seen as a form of literary mindfulness practice, encouraging readers to engage deeply with the natural world (Hasan, 2024; Bazregarzadeh, 2023).

Oliver's poetry often encourages readers to observe nature closely and attentively, aligning with the concept of “perceptual sensitivity” identified as a key mechanism of mindful engagement in nature (Macaulay et al., 2021).

Her work frequently invites readers to step outside themselves and immerse in the natural world, mirroring the process of “decentering” that allows individuals to observe their thoughts and emotions as transient phenomena (Hanley et al., 2017). Hence, this approach can help readers “get out of their heads” and into the surrounding environment, fostering a deeper connection with nature. The spiritual dimension in Oliver's nature poetry resonates with findings that spirituality can mediate the positive effects of nature exposure on psychological well-being (Kamitsis & Francis, 2013).

Her work often portrays nature as a source of transcendental experiences, echoing the American literary tradition of encountering an “unseen, transcendental presence within the natural world” (Gatta, 2004). This spiritual aspect of nature engagement through poetry may contribute to increased connectedness to nature and improved mental health outcomes, as observed in nature-based therapy studies (Joschko et al., 2023). Overall, by reading Oliver's poetry, individuals may experience benefits similar to those observed in nature-based interventions, including increased mindfulness, connectedness to nature, and mental well-being (Choe et al., 2019; Ray et al., 2020; Swami et al., 2020).

Swan by Mary Oliver*

Did you too see it, drifting, all night on the black
river?
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery
air,
an armful of white blossoms,
a perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned
into the bondage of its wings: a snowbank, a bank of
lilies,
biting the air with its black beak?
Did you hear it, fluting and whistling
a shrill dark music, like the rain pelting the trees,
like a waterfall
knifing down the black ledges?
And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds—
a white cross streaming across the sky, its feet
like black leaves, its wings like the stretching light
of the river?
And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained
to everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is
for?
And have you changed your life?

Mary Oliver (2010) uses the image of a swan to motivate readers to think deeply and connect with nature. She chooses a swan, an element of the natural environment, to effectuate a transformation in one's life by contemplating this exquisite creature soaring in the skies.

Metaphors play a vital role in helping us understand our experiences and the world around us (Lakoff and Turner, 1989). Metaphors not only enrich the narrative but also serve as powerful tools for introspection and connection, helping individuals to articulate and navigate their emotional landscapes more effectively. This poem, rich in metaphors, uses the figure of a swan to serve as anthropocentric viewpoint of the human experiences (Sunny & Narayana, 2024).

***Mary Oliver: Swan. In Oliver, M. (2010). *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems* (p. 22). Beacon Press. Used with permission of The Charlotte Sheedy Literary Agency, Inc (Editor's Note)

A swan is a central symbol of grace, freedom, and transformation, challenging readers to explore complex themes of transition, beauty and purpose in a relatable and emotionally resonant manner. Swan's journey mirrors the human quest for meaning and the possibility of renewal. Other natural components are included in the poem, contributing to a comprehensive depiction of nature that aims to evoke readers' imaginations.

People often overlook this scene of the swan, failing to pause and reflect upon it. Oliver offers the opportunity to halt, examine, and appreciate, thus altering one's perception and instigating internal change (Al-Zubaidi et al., 2020).

The poet asks a series of questions to encourage the reader to observe and experience the beauty of the swan and its surroundings. By focusing on the sensory details like sight ("Did you see it...") and sound ("Did you hear it..."), she invites the reader to be present and attentive to the natural world. The existential questions in the end make this a valuable tool for fostering self-awareness and transformation.

Overall, the themes of the poem challenge readers to integrate new perspectives, prioritize moments of awe, and actively seek growth and purpose.

Criteria for selecting the poem for bibliotherapeutic use

Bibliotherapy aims to promote mental health, personal growth, emotional healing and psychological well-being through guided reading of literature. The primary goals of bibliotherapy include helping individuals cope with psychological issues, promoting personal growth, facilitating self-actualisation and developing effective coping skills (Hynes et al., 2012; De Vries et al., 2017; Lenkowsky, 1987). From the perspective of bibliotherapy, the poem "Swan" can serve as a catalyst for self-reflection, emotional processing and personal growth.

The poem was selected for bibliotherapy using the Hynes and Hynes-Berry (2012) criteria for choosing bibliotherapeutic material. The key dimensions considered for evaluation were as follows:

Thematic Dimensions

Universal experience or emotion: The theme can be readily identified and connected to by the participants.

Powerful: This theme is presented in a way that has a strong, vital impact on the participants.

Comprehensible: The theme is easily grasped by the participants, without requiring too much abstraction or metaphorical understanding.

Positive: The work offers hope and affirmation, rather than being overly negative or despairing.

Stylistic Dimensions

Compelling rhythm: Strong, appealing, impactful rhythm.

Imagery: Striking, concrete imagery.

Language: Simple, precise vocabulary and clear diction.

Complexity: Quite short, succinct and not complex work.

Themes and bibliotherapeutic potential of the poem

Hynes and Hynes-Berry's (2012) model emphasizes the use of literature in the psychotherapeutic context through four key steps: recognition, examination, juxtaposition, and application to the self. Each stage focuses on how literature can evoke personal meaning, lead to realization or insight, and connect readers to themselves, others, or the world. Using this model, Mary Oliver's "Swan" was analyzed to uncover its bibliotherapeutic potential.

The recognition step involves identifying the key themes, images, or emotions in the text that resonate with the reader.

Oliver's vivid descriptions evoke strong sensory responses, engaging readers emotionally and imaginatively. The themes recognized at this poem are the beauty and transience of nature, transformation and transcendence, the capacity of beauty to inspire personal change.

Contrasts can be used to engage the reader. Darkness vs. light: The "black river" contrasts with the "silvery air," representing movement from obscurity to clarity. Stillness vs. motion: The swan "drifting all night" becomes dynamic as it "streams across the sky," symbolizing growth or change.

Regarding imagery and mood, vivid images such as "an armful of white blossoms" and "a white cross streaming across the sky" evoke a sense of awe and respect. Mood alternates between calm observation and spiritual intensity, inviting the reader to pause and reflect.

Regarding emotional response, readers might feel wonder, hope, or even longing as they engage with the swan's journey from the dark river to the open sky.

The second step of the Hynes and Hynes-Berry model (2012) is examination, which encourages a deeper exploration of the text, examining the concept or feeling of the self, focusing on personal meaning.

This poem presents beauty as an essential transformative force. The swan's journey – beginning in the darkness of the "black river" and ascending into the "silvery air" – mirrors the reader's own potential for growth and self-discovery. The imagery invites readers to ask themselves: *What moments of beauty have profoundly affected me? How have they influenced my choices or perspective?*

The swan's movement, described as "a perfect commotion of silk and linen," might evoke a personal memory of witnessing something equally graceful and awe-inspiring. This encourages readers to reflect on how encounters with nature have affected their emotional well-being, perhaps serving as a reminder of life's interconnectedness and resilience.

The poem's existential questions nudge the reader to examine their own journey of transformation: *What inner "black rivers" have I navigated? What has helped me rise into the "silvery air"?*

Focusing on the personal meaning of the poem, the black river is an image that can represent personal struggles or times of uncertainty. Readers might reflect on periods in their lives when they felt "adrift," identifying parallels between the swan's flight and their own search for clarity.

The white cross in the sky, the swan's ascent, is a powerful metaphor for transcendence and liberation. Readers can explore how they find meaning or hope in life's challenges; what gives them the strength to rise above difficulties?

The final provocation through the direct question “And have you changed your life?” challenges readers to consider how they respond to moments of beauty or inspiration and take the poem’s themes personally: *Have I embraced opportunities for transformation? What beauty have I ignored or overlooked in my daily life?*

This examination invites readers to find parallels between their own lives and the swan’s journey, focusing on personal meaning and the role of awe, beauty and transformation in shaping their paths.

During the third step, juxtaposition, the reader compares the themes and emotions in the poem to their own experiences or perceptions. The swan’s journey can be juxtaposed with the reader’s own experiences of overcoming challenges or finding clarity after a period of struggle.

The questions in the poem invite reflection on the universal human response to beauty and its potential to inspire change across time and cultures.

The final step, application to the self, focuses on how the reader integrates the poem’s insights into their personal life. In this last step, readers are invited to bridge the gap between insight and action. The transformative potential of nature and beauty, as expressed in *Swan*, challenges readers to align their lives with what inspires and uplifts them.

The poem suggests that connection with nature and beauty can awaken a deeper sense of purpose. Readers might ask themselves: *Am I living in alignment with what moves me? How can I bring more beauty, mindfulness, or reverence into my daily life?*

The poem teaches that beauty has a purpose -to inspire and uplift. Readers might integrate this insight by cultivating a habit of gratitude for beauty, whether through journaling, creating art or sharing these experiences with others. By recognizing beauty’s power to provoke transformation, readers might integrate these insights into their identity and values. For example, reframing challenges as part of a journey toward growth, much like the swan’s ascent, viewing beauty not as an escape but as a guide to living a richer, more meaningful life.

Bibliotherapy motivates readers to identify with characters or situations, allowing a narrative reconstruction. Through reframing, individuals reinterpret their own stories, often seeing adversity as a source of strength rather than just suffering. This narrative shift helps to rebuild a coherent sense of self after difficult experiences such as trauma (Jain, 2024).

The swan’s graceful flight might inspire readers to seek a balance between groundedness and aspiration, finding ways to “rise” above life’s difficulties while staying connected to their core. It’s ascent from the “black river” to the “silvery air” represents the possibility of rising above struggles. Readers may integrate this by committing to embrace change in their own lives, perhaps by setting new goals, addressing challenges, or seeking personal growth. Readers might ask themselves: *What small step can I take to transform a part of my life that feels stagnant or unresolved?*

Inspired by the swan’s grace and transformative journey, readers might decide to spend more time in nature, practicing mindfulness to notice beauty in their surroundings. This could involve intentional walks, journaling about natural encounters, or simply pausing to appreciate the sky, rivers, or birds.

The last questions of the poem invite readers to reflect on whether they have allowed moments of awe, like encountering beauty in nature, to influence their choices and worldview: *When have I experienced something so beautiful or profound that it shifted my understanding of life? Have I*

acted on those moments of clarity, or have they remained fleeting? This reflection helps the reader identify opportunities to make meaningful changes inspired by such moments.

The final question “Have you changed your life?” challenges readers to consider how beauty, nature, or transformative moments have influenced their lives. It is an invitation for the readers to consider whether they are living in alignment with their values or whether moments of beauty have inspired them to seek transformation. The reader can integrate the insights and themes from the poem into their personal life, focusing on their actions, mindset, or perspective.

The poem suggests that encountering beauty is not a passive act—it has the potential to reshape perspectives and inspire action. *What specific change can I make in my life today? What have I learned from moments of awe or connection with nature that I can apply to my relationships, work, or personal well-being?*

For some, this might mean taking concrete steps to simplify their lives, pursue passions, or deepen their connections with others.

Overall, analyzing Mary Oliver’s “Swan” through the Hynes and Hynes-Berry model offers a structured pathway to deepen the therapeutic engagement with the text. Each step – recognition, examination, juxtaposition, and application to self – guides the reader from an emotional and intellectual connection with the poem to a personal integration of its themes.

Population the poem can be used

The poem can be used in a bibliotherapeutic context with various populations, including:

Individuals Experiencing Life Transitions: People facing major life changes (e.g., career shifts, relationship changes, or moving to a new place) can resonate with the theme of transformation and become inspired to embrace new beginnings.

Grief and Loss Support Groups: The swan's journey from darkness to light can provide comfort and hope for individuals processing grief or mourning, encouraging them to find beauty and meaning amidst loss.

Adolescents and Young Adults: Teenagers and young adults exploring their identities or navigating personal growth may connect with the themes of self-discovery, beauty and the call to change their lives intentionally.

Individuals Seeking Purpose or Motivation: Those feeling stuck, uninspired, or searching for meaning can use the poem as a catalyst for introspection and motivation to make transformative life changes.

People in Nature-Based or Eco-Therapy Programs: The poem's focus on the natural world makes it especially relevant for individuals in therapeutic programs centered around environmental connection and mindfulness.

Burnout Recovery Groups: Professionals recovering from burnout, particularly in health or caregiving roles, may find inspiration in the poem's themes of renewal, beauty, and re-centering one's life around moments of awe.

Spiritual or Existential Therapy Clients: Individuals exploring spiritual or existential questions may find the poem's reflective tone and emphasis on the meaning of beauty and change resonate deeply with their process.

Applications of *Swan* in bibliotherapy

This poem serves as a compelling bibliotherapeutic tool, aligning with Hynes and Hynes-Berry's (2012) concept of literature as a catalyst for action. Through its exploration of the natural world as a metaphor for personal transformation, the poem inspires not only reflection but also the courage to take meaningful steps toward a renewed sense of purpose.

The poem's structure mirrors a dialogue, addressing the reader directly with repeated questions. This conversational tone can encourage active engagement, making readers feel personally invited into the poem's reflective journey. The questions are open-ended and nonjudgmental, creating space for diverse interpretations and personal meaning.

In group bibliotherapy, *Swan* can be used to prompt dialogue about life changes, moments of beauty and the transformative power of art and nature.

The poem's focus on the swan's grace and movement encourages readers to cultivate mindfulness, observing their environment with a fresh perspective.

Journaling or creating personal rituals around nature, beauty, or being present in the moment could be a practical outcome of engaging with the poem.

Individual readers may use the poem as a journaling prompt, exploring how encounters with beauty have shaped their lives and whether they feel inspired to embrace change.

The repeated sensory and emotional appeals immerse readers in the immediacy of the experience, making the final question "And have you changed your life?" both provocative and urgent. This question can be used as a journaling or dialogue prompt to challenge the readers to assess their own lives, values, and priorities, encouraging them to act on insights gained from their encounters with beauty and awe. This closing question is not just rhetorical; it's a call to action and it can be used as a catalyst and commitment for change.

The poem can be utilized in bibliotherapy in alignment with Nicholas Mazza's Tripartite Practice Model for Poetry Therapy (2003), which incorporates receptive/prescriptive, expressive/creative and symbolic/ceremonial modes (RES). Building on the themes of the poem, participants can engage in expressive or creative activities, such as crafting their own poetry, journaling responses to the poem's existential questions, or creating visual representations of the swan's journey. Group rituals, ceremonial or art activities can help anchor the transformative insights gained during the session.

Conclusions

Mary Oliver's "Swan" demonstrates the power of nature literature to evoke emotion, spark realization and inspire transformation. Through this poetic exploration, Oliver demonstrates how engaging with the natural world, even in simple moments, can lead to a deeper emotional awareness. The poem's themes of beauty, nature, and personal change aligns with core principles of

bibliotherapy, encouraging readers to engage with their emotions, reflect on their lives and find inspiration in the world around them. The poem's vivid imagery and probing questions guide readers through a therapeutic journey, helping them explore life's experiences and deeper purposes. By bridging introspection and action, the poem fosters resilience and a renewed perspective, helping readers navigate life's complexities with greater clarity. In a bibliotherapeutic context, "Swan" can be a powerful tool to facilitate self-awareness, personal growth, emotional expression and a sense of interconnectedness.

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