The Summer Day

SUMMARY

The speaker wonders about the world's creation, asking who made animals like the swan, black bear, and grasshopper. The speaker is talking about a specific grasshopper, actually—one who has just jumped from the grass in front of the speaker. The speaker feeds this grasshopper some sugar and watches as the insect chews, moving her jaws horizontally instead of vertically (as human beings do when they chew). The grasshopper looks around with her huge, complex eyes before wiping her face clean with her light-colored legs. Then she quickly spreads her wings and sails away in the air. The grasshopper gone, the speaker reflects on not knowing how to pray. What the speaker does know, however, is how to be attentive to the world, and how to sink down and kneel in the grass. The speaker does know how to rest and feel fortunate, and how to walk casually through the fields, which is exactly what the speaker has spent the day doing. Addressing the reader directly, the speaker asks how else they should have spent the day, given that life is short and everything dies too soon. The speaker then asks the reader how they themselves plan to spend the one glorious life they're going to get.

THEMES

THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

The speaker of "The Summer Day" muses about the nature of prayer, mortality, and, above all, life's purpose. The poem doesn't try to define the meaning of life but rather pushes readers to think about what life means to them—to figure out their own life's purpose and then do their best to honor it. For this speaker, living authentically and intentionally is more important than adopting a specific way of life.

After encountering the grasshopper, the speaker makes a sudden admission: "I don't know exactly what a prayer is." But the speaker *does* know "how to pay attention" (to the grasshopper, for instance). And that's not all: the poem lists other things the speaker definitely knows how to do, such as fall and kneel down in the grass, be "idle and blessed," and stroll through fields.

All of these things, it becomes clear, give the speaker's life meaning. Spending quiet time outdoors simply observing the environment is a kind of prayer for the speaker, in that such activities help the speaker find a sense of joy, gratitude, and fulfillment.

The speaker thus feels no guilt about spending "all day" in nature, relaxing, and being "idle." On the contrary, the speaker confidently asks, "what else should I have done?"

Since everything dies "at last, and too soon," the speaker reasons, people should do their best to live with intention and immerse themselves in what they love. For this speaker, that means being outdoors, observing nature, and relaxing among the grass and grasshoppers.

By asking how "you" plan to spend "your one wild and precious life," the poem ultimately implies that it's up to individuals to fill their own lives with meaning. While that meaning may come from appreciating nature, as it does for the speaker, the poem leaves open many other possibilities. Above all, "The Summer Day" challenges people to live with passionate purpose—whatever that purpose may be.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19

THE BEAUTY AND MYSTERY OF THE NATURAL WORLD

"The Summer Day" celebrates the wondrous beauty of nature. As the speaker first considers the origins of the world and its creatures, and then tenderly observes a single grasshopper, the poem implies that nature is mysterious in a wonderful way: though human beings don't or can't entirely understand nature, simply exploring it can make people feel that they're a small and valuable part of a vast, beautiful, interconnected world.

The poem begins with a big question that reflects the speaker's awe of nature: "Who made the world?" The "world" could mean the entire universe or the planet Earth; either way, the question indicates the speaker's wonder at the immense, perhaps unknowable scope of nature.

Next, the speaker asks somewhat more down-to-earth questions: "Who made the swan, and the black bear? / Who made the grasshopper?" These questions are more specific, but they're still big, challenging, and perhaps impossible to answer! The poem doesn't seem too anxious to come up with definite answers, however. Rather, these open-ended questions express the sense of majesty and astonishment the speaker feels when experiencing nature in all its mystery.

Following these big questions, the poem celebrates the beauty of a particular creature in a particular moment. Whereas the speaker previously wondered about the origin of grasshoppers in general, now the poem considers a specific grasshopper—one that is actually "eating sugar" from the

speaker's hand.

In some ways, the grasshopper is like a person—she "washes her face," as a person might after a messy meal, and her insect legs remind the speaker of "pale forearms." Yet the grasshopper is also very different from the speaker. She moves her jaws "back and forth"—not "up and down," as people do—and unlike human beings, she can fly.

This encounter with a tiny grasshopper makes the speaker feel connected with nature, despite not entirely understanding where it came from. For the speaker, the grasshopper is a kind of simple, everyday miracle and a point of close connection with a natural world that remains distinct, mysterious, and perhaps unknowable. Encountering that miracle on the "[s]ummer [d]ay" of the poem fills the speaker with deep spiritual contentment, as well as the conviction that experiencing nature in this way is a truly worthwhile pursuit.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-19

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Who made the ...
... made the grasshopper?

"The Summer Day" begins with a question that human beings have grappled with essentially forever: "Who made the world?" Whether the speaker means the whole universe or just Earth, that's a big question to ask! Rather than try to answer it, however, the speaker immediately asks two *more* questions. These are a little more specific than the first, but they're still unwieldy, difficult, and related to creation.

These three questions can be called rhetorical, since they aren't really looking for answers. It's not even clear whom the speaker is talking to; the questions could be addressed to nature, an unknown deity, the speaker's inner self, readers of the poem, or no one in particular!

These questions indicate the awe that the speaker feels when thinking about nature. For this speaker, the simple existence of the natural world and its many kinds of inhabitants (from the swan to the black bear to the grasshopper) is a miracle. The speaker appears to be a curious, attentive, imaginative person—one who is perhaps more interested in asking questions than insisting on firm answers.

These opening lines are written in free verse; in other words, they don't follow a regular meter or rhyme scheme. The rest of the poem will follow this pattern, too, using lines of various lengths and rhythms. The flexibility of the verse allows for a wide range of expression and gives the poem an intimate, conversational feeling.

The title indicates that the poem takes place on a summer day, perhaps in a place where there are swans and black bears (as readers will see, there are definitely grasshoppers!). Notice that there's a subtle difference between calling the poem "The Summer Day" and "A Summer Day." *A* summer day might seem unremarkable—merely one of many days in the season—but *the* summer day is something special.

This slight elevation raises the spiritual, philosophical, and personal stakes of the poem and gives it an almost allegorical quality. This is *the* day when a special thing happened (or else, every day is *the* day to start making the most of your "wild and precious life").

LINES 4-8

This grasshopper, I ...
... and complicated eyes.

In the first three lines, the speaker asked a series of rhetorical questions ending with "Who made the grasshopper?" Now, the speaker homes in on a *specific* grasshopper and establishes the concrete setting and action of the poem.

The speaker is somewhere outdoors, in nature, where a grasshopper has hopped onto the speaker's hand. Carefully observing the insect, the speaker enjoys a moment of intimate connection with nature as the grasshopper eats some sugar and looks around. This encounter seems to bring the speaker a sense of peace and happiness; it's a simple moment, but it has a big impact.

The speaker's affectionate personification of the insect gives the creature a human-like sense of agency and personality. The grasshopper hasn't merely hopped at random (as grasshoppers tend to do) onto the speaker's hand; it has "flung herself out of the grass" toward the speaker, as if on purpose. The speaker also calls the grasshopper a "she," despite probably not knowing for sure whether it's male or female.

The anaphora in these lines evoke the speaker's affection for this tiny creature. The repetition of "the one who" and "who is" at the beginning of these lines suggests the close attention the speaker pays to "her" while describing her. (Notice, too, the use of the personifying "who" rather than "that.")

As the speaker observes the grasshopper, the grasshopper also seems to observe the speaker. "Gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes," the insect looks with apparent curiosity at this large, strange human creature.

Mentioning the grasshopper's gaze establishes the encounter as a reciprocal relationship. Each creature studies and perhaps learns from the other; the speaker gives the grasshopper some sugar, and the grasshopper gives the speaker a pleasant moment of connection with the natural world.

Even as the grasshopper brings the speaker peace, happiness,

and connection, it can't help the speaker answer the poem's initial questions. Holding a particular insect in one's hand doesn't reveal the secrets of the world's creation; even "[t]his grasshopper" remains part of the larger mystery expressed in the poem's initial lines. Nonetheless, the poem takes comfort in the fact that the speaker *can* connect meaningfully with nature, even if many of its mysteries remain elusive.

LINES 9-10

Now she lifts ...
... and floats away.

Line 9 brings a sudden change to the speaker's moment of connection with the grasshopper:

- Before, the grasshopper was described in the present perfect ("has flung") and present progressive ("is eating," "is moving," "is gazing"), which created a sense of calm, continuous observation.
- "Now," however, the grasshopper's action is more concrete and definitive, cast in the simple present tense: "she *lifts* her pale forearms and thoroughly *washes* her face."

Having started with a vast philosophical question, the speaker now "zooms in" to give a moment-by-moment report of one creature's activities.

The grasshopper has finished her meal of sugar, and in a striking personification, the speaker describes the grasshopper as "thoroughly wash[ing] her face" with her "pale forearms"—which are actually insect legs.

This description is affectionate and gentle, marked by soft sibilance (/s/ and /sh/ sounds), consonance on the /l/ and /r/ sounds, and alliteration between "forearms" and "face." Together, these sonic devices communicate the intensity of the connection the speaker feels:

> Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Line 10 shifts to another fresh "Now" (the repetition of "Now" is another example of anaphora). Having cleaned herself, the grasshopper "snaps her wings open" and flies away. The sudden snap of wings is a reminder that, while the speaker has enjoyed this moment of connection, the grasshopper and speaker are very different. The speaker's insect friend belongs in nature, and she can't answer the speaker's philosophical questions. Nature remains unknowable and uncontrollable—but the poem seems to propose that this is a good thing.

The grasshopper's departure, too, is marked by gentle sibilance, as she lightly "floats" (rather than flies) away. She's not escaping from her human observer; the time has simply come for her to go elsewhere in the natural environment, where she belongs and where the speaker is only a visitor.

LINES 11-15

I don't know ...
... doing all day.

The grasshopper's departure prompts the speaker to reflect: "I don't know exactly what a prayer is." The speaker then juxtaposes that sudden admission with a long affirmation of what they *do* know.

This second statement repeats the words "how to" at the beginning of successive phrases, emphasizing, through anaphora, how much spiritual knowledge they've gained despite their distance from traditional spirituality.

The speaker's areas of knowledge may seem simple, leisurely, and almost childlike: paying attention, falling and kneeling down in the grass, being "idle and blessed," and strolling through the fields. But by implicitly comparing these things (which the speaker has "been doing all day") to "prayer," the speaker suggests that they answer a deep spiritual need. Being in nature makes the speaker feel happy, connected, and fulfilled. (Also, implicitly, inspired to write poetry!) Spending "all day" on these "idle" activities is something to be proud of, not embarrassed about.

Though there are some religious overtones to the speaker's language ("[kneel]ing" in the grass may parallel kneeling in prayer, and "blessed" has a strong religious connotation), the poem is not traditionally religious. Rather, it portrays spending time in nature as a form of spiritual enrichment that doesn't require organized religion.

LINES 16-17

Tell me, what ...
... and too soon?

The poem ends much as it began, with three rhetorical questions. This time, however, the questions seem directly addressed to readers, whom the speaker twice challenges to "Tell me" answers. (The repetition of "Tell me" is another example of anaphora.)

These rhetorical questions are mainly intended to persuade. In other words, the speaker doesn't *really* want to know "what else [I should] have done." In fact, the speaker is confident that spending "all day" in nature has fulfilled a spiritual need. The question strongly implies that there's *nothing* else the speaker would have been better off doing; in this way, it defies any readers who might consider "idle" time in nature pointless.

The speaker drives this point home with the second question, which acknowledges the inevitability of death and laments that everything dies "too soon." Consonance on the /s/ and /t/ sounds, as well as the assonance of "too soon," enhance the musicality of the line and the poignancy of its question. Since

death is coming for everyone, the speaker suggests, people should live their lives to the fullest and seek out meaning wherever they can. For the speaker, that search involves exploring nature. For readers, it may involve something else entirely. The poem leaves open many possibilities.

The final couplet of "The Summer Day" may be the most famous, frequently quoted lines Mary Oliver ever wrote.

The speaker ends the poem with another challenge to the reader to "Tell me" something—yet it's clear the speaker doesn't *really* expect an answer to this question. Rather, the speaker means something like "Tell *yourself*" or "Figure it out for *yourself*."

The question pushes readers to look within themselves and decide whether they're pursuing their true purpose—or, instead, wasting their "one wild and precious life" on meaningless pursuits. This final couplet marks a definitive shift: the poem turns from a meditation on the speaker's own experience into a gentle, outwardly directed challenge.

"[W]ild and precious" is a memorable, evocative way to describe "life." The speaker suggests that people's lives are "wild" as in full of possibility; they're not bound by others' expectations and demands. Of course, "wild" also indicates that people are part of the beautiful, complex natural world. "[P]recious" suggests the immense value of life and conveys the urgency of living with intention. "[O]ne" is important, too: you get only one chance to live the life you desire. In the speaker's view, life is simply too beautiful, fragile, and meaningful to waste. That lesson resonates throughout "The Summer Day," as it has resonated with many readers since the poem was first published.

SYMBOLS

THE GRASSHOPPER

In "The Summer Day," the grasshopper is an actual insect that eats sugar out of the speaker's hand, moves her jaws "back and forth," looks around, rubs her face with her "pale forearms," and then flies away. Closely encountering this particular grasshopper on this particular summer day makes the speaker feel deeply, intimately connected with nature.

But the grasshopper also symbolizes the larger mystery and grandeur of the natural world. Even as this single insect—whom the speaker personifies and calls "she"—gives the speaker a moment of close connection, it reminds the speaker of all the world's *other* creatures (including swans, black bears, and other grasshoppers). In this way, the grasshopper stands in for the awe-inspiring scope of nature, which the speaker believes human beings can enjoy but never fully comprehend.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-10:** "Who made the grasshopper? / This grasshopper, I mean— / the one who has flung herself out of the grass, / the one who is eating sugar out of my hand, / who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down— / who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes. / Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face. / Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away."

POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

At several moments in "The Summer Day," assonance adds emphasis, indicates subtle connections between words, and/or helps to form imperfect rhymes. Take, for example, the imperfect (internal) rhyme in line 5 between "one" and "flung," which depends on the repeated /uh/ sound and emphasizes the speaker's playful personification of the grasshopper. (The insect hasn't just hopped randomly; she's "flung herself" with human-like agency and intention.)

Likewise, in lines 7–10, shared vowel sounds link "down," "around," and "Now," as well as "face" and "away." These effects add to the musicality of the verse, enhancing the beauty of the speaker's moment of connection with the grasshopper.

Two more examples of assonance demonstrate its expressive range in the poem. In lines 11-12, as the speaker asserts her spirituality despite not knowing "exactly what a prayer is," the repeated /o/ sound of "don't know" contrasts (in both sound and meaning) with "do know." In line 17, the doubled /oo/ sound adds emphasis to the speaker's claim that all things must die eventually, and far "too soon." This emphasis, in turn, helps drive home the speaker's larger point: that people should live their brief lives with awareness and purpose, whatever that means for them.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "one," "flung"
- **Line 7:** "down"
- **Line 8:** "around"
- **Line 9:** "Now," "face"
- **Line 10:** "Now," "away"
- **Line 11:** "don't know"
- **Line 12:** "know"
- **Line 17:** "too soon"

SIBILANCE

"The Summer Day" uses subtle sibilance in the speaker's description of the grasshopper. On one level, the repeated /s/

sounds may mirror the sounds the grasshopper makes while flinging "herself out of the grass." More broadly, the sibilance conjures a soothing, pleasant, relaxed atmosphere and signals a moment of increased emotional intensity. The speaker's moment of connection with the insect is the major event of the poem, and sibilance helps highlight its importance.

Repeated /s/ sounds mark several other important moments, too. In lines 13-14, sibilance highlights the satisfaction the speaker takes in the "grass" (a word used three times in the poem—and twice more as part of "grasshopper"), in being idle and "blessed," and in "stroll[ing]" through fields. These soft, comforting /s/ sounds reflect the speaker's conviction that these activities give life meaning and fulfill a deep spiritual need.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "grasshopper"
- **Line 4:** "This," "grasshopper"
- **Line 5:** "herself," "grass"
- **Line 13:** "grass," "grass"
- **Line 14:** "blessed," "stroll"

ALLITERATION

In "The Summer Day," occasional alliteration marks moments of special intensity or importance. For example, in lines 9 and 10, the shared /f/ sound between "forearms," "face," and "floats" contributes to the intensity of the speaker's final moments with the grasshopper, with whom she has made a special (if fleeting) connection.

In lines 11 and 12, the /p/ shared by "prayer" and "pay" underscores the contrast between what the speaker doesn't know ("exactly what a prayer is") and most certainly does know ("how to pay attention"). Later, in lines 15–17, the repeated /d/ sounds intensify the speaker's impassioned defense (via rhetorical question) of spending idle time in nature.

In the final couplet, the repeated /w/ and /p/ sounds ("with your one wild"; "plan"/"precious") make the speaker's question slightly more emphatic. The added emphasis makes sense, as the whole poem has built toward this crucial question, with its insistence on the "precious[ness]" of life.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "black bear"
- **Line 9:** "forearms," "face"
- **Line 10:** "floats"
- **Line 11:** "prayer"
- **Line 12:** "pay"
- **Line 15:** "doing," "day"
- **Line 16:** "done"
- **Line 17:** "Doesn't," "die"
- **Line 18:** "plan"
- **Line 19:** "with," "one wild," "precious"

CONSONANCE

Along with assonance, sibilance, and alliteration, consonance plays a powerful role in "The Summer Day." Lines 5–10, which describe the speaker's encounter with the grasshopper, are full of repeated consonant sounds, which generate emotional intensity and emphasize the importance of the moment. Take a close look at line 9:

> Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly
> washes her face.

Along with alliteration ("forearms," "face"), the repeated /l/ and /r/ sounds give special intensity to the line. That intensity is appropriate, given that this is the high point (and the final moment) of the speaker's encounter with the grasshopper. The insect has eaten her fill of sugar and is preparing to fly away. It's no coincidence, either, that this moment of peak sonic intensity corresponds with the speaker's most vivid personification of the grasshopper. All of these elements work together to express the close connection the speaker feels.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "black bear"
- **Line 4:** "This grasshopper"
- **Line 5:** "flung herself," "grass"
- **Line 9:** "she lifts her pale forearms," "thoroughly washes her face"
- **Line 10:** "snaps," "open," "floats"
- **Line 11:** "prayer"
- **Line 12:** "pay"
- **Line 14:** "idle," "blessed," "stroll"
- **Line 15:** "doing," "day"
- **Line 17:** "Doesn't," "die," "last," "too soon"
- **Line 18:** "Tell," "plan"
- **Line 19:** "with," "one wild," "life"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

"The Summer Day" begins with three rhetorical questions, or questions that don't necessarily seek an answer.

First comes one of the biggest questions of all: "Who made the world?" This is followed by more specific (but still pretty big!) questions: "Who made the swan, and the black bear? / Who made the grasshopper?"

By asking multiple, related questions about the creation of the "world" and its creatures, the speaker expresses a sense of awe at the immensity and beauty of the natural world. The speaker doesn't seem anxious to know exactly who made the world; on

the contrary, these opening questions establish a calm sense of wonder that animates the rest of the poem.

The poem ends with three different rhetorical questions. This time, the questions seem directly addressed to readers. Twice, the speaker says "Tell me," as if urging readers to say something. Of course, readers can't literally answer the speaker; rather, the speaker aims to persuade or challenge readers to discover their inner purpose.

These final questions defend spending time in nature—in fact, spending time on anything that makes you happy and adds meaning to your life. Since "everything die[s] at last, and too soon," the speaker urges people to make the most of their lives.

The very last question is thus a provocation, an invitation, and perhaps a gentle chastisement all at once. By leaving it open-ended, the speaker motivates readers to answer it for themselves: to find the purpose of their "wild and precious life" and pursue it to the fullest.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "Who made the world? / Who made the swan, and the black bear? / Who made the grasshopper?"
- **Lines 16-19:** "Tell me, what else should I have done? / Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? / Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?"

ANAPHORA

"The Summer Day" contains many instances of anaphora. This special kind of repetition is commonly used, especially in free verse poems, as a way to establish connections between related lines and emphasize emotionally charged moments.

Notice how both sets of rhetorical questions that open and close the poem (lines 1-3 and lines 16-19) benefit from anaphora. The repetition of "Who made" and "Tell me" make the questions seem more profound, thoughtful, and urgent.

The speaker's close encounter with the grasshopper (lines 5-10) is also full of anaphora: "the one who," "who is," and "Now she" all repeat at the start of successive lines. Here, anaphora underscores the close, careful attention the speaker devotes to the grasshopper, with which the speaker feels a special connection.

In lines 12–14, the words "how to" begin five successive phrases, emphasizing that while the speaker may not know "exactly what a prayer is," they *do* know "how to" do other things that are just as spiritually fulfilling. To the speaker, these activities may themselves be forms of prayer. In fact, the poem as a whole sounds a little like a prayer or meditation, thanks to the frequent use of anaphora.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Who made the"
- **Line 2:** "Who made the"
- **Line 3:** "Who made the"
- **Line 5:** "the one who"
- **Line 6:** "the one who is"
- **Line 7:** "who is"
- **Line 8:** "who is"
- **Line 9:** "Now she"
- **Line 10:** "Now she"
- **Line 11:** "I don't know"
- **Line 12:** "I do know," "how to," "how to"
- **Line 13:** "how to"
- **Line 14:** "how to," "how to"
- **Line 16:** "Tell me"
- **Line 18:** "Tell me"

JUXTAPOSITION

"The Summer Day" contains several examples of juxtaposition. In line 2, for instance, "swan" and "black bear" appear right next to each other. The dramatic contrast between swans (harmless, elegant white birds) and black bears (large, possibly dangerous mammals) suggests the wide variety of creatures that populate the earth. The juxtaposition underscores the wonder the speaker feels when contemplating the diversity of the animal world.

In line 7, the way the grasshopper moves her jaws ("back and forth") is juxtaposed with the way humans move theirs ("up and down"). This contrast establishes an important point of difference between the grasshopper and the speaker. Though the speaker personifies the grasshopper and feels a close connection with "her," the insect remains part of a natural world to which the speaker will never completely belong.

Lines 11-14 juxtapose the speaker's admission that "I don't know exactly what a prayer is" with what the speaker *does* know: how to "pay attention," relax in the grass, walk through the fields, and be "idle and blessed." Here, the juxtaposition suggests that the speaker views enjoyment of nature as itself a kind of prayer. Though unfamiliar with what is conventionally called "prayer," the speaker has found peace, happiness, and spiritual fulfillment in nature.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Who made the swan, and the black bear?"
- **Line 7:** "who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—"
- **Lines 11-14:** "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. / I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down / into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, / how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker of "The Summer Day" describes the grasshopper almost as if it were a human being. This personification emphasizes the emotional and spiritual connection the speaker feels with the insect—and, by extension, wild creatures in general.

The grasshopper has "flung herself out of the grass," as if purposely seeking out the speaker rather than jumping at random. The grasshopper's insect legs are described as "pale forearms," and she "thoroughly washes her face" with them—as if she were a lady brushing crumbs from her lips after high tea.

Not only does the grasshopper possess near-human agency; it's also a "she," at least in the speaker's eyes. (In all likelihood, the speaker doesn't actually know the insect's gender.) More subtly, the speaker thinks of it as a "who" rather than a "that."

Personification helps the speaker feel a close bond with the insect, which comes to symbolize the mystery and beauty of nature as a whole. The grasshopper makes the speaker feel like a wild creature, even as "she" also reminds the speaker that humans remain distinct from nature: they'll never fully understand or belong to that world. The grasshopper moves her jaws "back and forth," not "up and down," as people do; likewise, she has wings and can fly away, unlike human beings.

By personifying the grasshopper, then, the speaker expresses a desire to connect with nature. Though the grasshopper and nature ultimately remain elusive, encountering them at close range makes the speaker happy.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-10:** "This grasshopper, I mean— / the one who has flung herself out of the grass, / the one who is eating sugar out of my hand, / who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down— / who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes. / Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face. / Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away."

VOCABULARY

Complicated (Line 8) - This word likely refers to the fact that grasshoppers have two compound eyes, each of which contains numerous tiny lenses.

Blessed (Line 14) - Being happy or enjoying good fortune. The word's religious connotation relates to the poem's earlier mention of prayer and the spiritual contentment the speaker finds in nature.

Idle (Line 14) - Relaxed, inactive, or at rest.

Wild (Line 19) - Unbound, free, and full of possibility. The word underscores the speaker's belief that it's each individual's responsibility to give life meaning. "Wild" can also mean part of nature or the wilderness, like the creatures the speaker mentions.

Precious (Line 19) - Beautiful, extraordinary, and valuable.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Summer Day" doesn't follow a traditional form. Instead, it contains a single stanza composed of 19 free verse lines (lines that don't follow a particular meter or rhyme scheme). This flexible form helps the poem reflect the natural, spontaneous movement of the speaker's curious mind.

Though "The Summer Day" doesn't follow a strict form, its single stanza can still be divided into rough sections:

- In lines 1–3 ("Who made [...] grasshopper?"), the speaker asks three rhetorical questions that express a sense of wonder at the mysteries of nature.
- Lines 4–10 ("This grasshopper [...] floats away.") detail the speaker's close encounter with a grasshopper.
- In lines 11–15 ("I don't know [...] all day."), the speaker meditates on prayer, spirituality, and attentiveness to the surrounding world.
- Finally, lines 16–18 ("Tell me [...] precious life?") ask three more questions, now seemingly directed at readers themselves. These questions consider mortality and the meaning of life, challenging readers to create meaning in their own lives.

METER

"The Summer Day" is written in free verse, meaning that it doesn't follow a regular meter or rhyme scheme. Free verse tends to be highly flexible, and many poets began to favor it starting in the 20th century. In "The Summer Day," the free verse lines give the poem a conversational, relaxed, intimate tone. The lines range in length from very short to quite long, and their varied rhythms allow for a wide range of expression.

Even if it doesn't follow a regular meter, a poem can use rhythm to communicate meaning. In "The Summer Day," for example, the rhythm of line 2 helps express the speaker's wonder and curiosity about the natural world:

Who made | the swan, | and the | black bear?

This line is made up of four metrical feet: a spondee (dum-dum), an iamb (da-dum), a pyrrhic (da-da), and another spondee (dum-dum). But remember, the poem doesn't follow a regular meter, so the important thing is the effect of specific rhythms in particular moments.

Here, the initial double stress on "Who made" emphasizes the mystery of the "maker" as the speaker marvels and ponders. Likewise, the quick-then-slow rhythm of "and the black bear" reflects the *additional* wonder the speaker feels when thinking about the bear. The rhythm of this line draws attention to the juxtaposition between swan and bear, two very different animals that highlight the amazing variety of nature's creatures.

Line 5 provides another example of meaningful rhythm:

the one | who has flung | herself out | of the grass,

This line contains an iamb (da-dum) followed by three anapests (da-da-dum). Anapests typically create a light skipping or leaping rhythm—which is appropriate here, since this line describes a grasshopper hopping into the speaker's hand! It's as if the line itself is leaping along with the grasshopper, demonstrating how even free verse can use metrical effects to enhance its meaning.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Summer Day" is written in free verse, so it doesn't follow a regular meter or rhyme scheme. Its verse is flexible and highly expressive. The poem's formal freedom reflects both the way the speaker feels in nature and the way people's lives (according to the speaker) are "wild," free, and open to possibility.

There *are* a few subtle rhymes in "The Summer Day," however. For example, in lines 6–8, an imperfect rhyme between "down" and "around" adds emphasis to the speaker's moment of connection with the grasshopper.

Later in the poem, rhyme emphasizes the speaker's belief in the importance of finding purpose in life. In lines 16–19, "done" shares a slant rhyme with "soon," which, in turn, chimes with "do." These shared sounds increase the emotional intensity of the poem's closing rhetorical questions, which challenge readers to fulfill their life's purpose.

SPEAKER

Though the speaker of "A Summer Day" is unidentified, it's clear that this person is someone who is curious, attentive, and very fond of nature. The speaker is happy to spend "all day" in nature, walking around, lying down, observing a grasshopper, and being "idle and blessed." Though seemingly aware that some people might see this as a waste of time, the speaker is living life with purpose, and is therefore spiritually content. In the poem's final lines, the speaker challenges readers to live their own lives with purpose, whatever that purpose may be.

It's possible that the speaker is Mary Oliver herself, though there's no clear evidence of this in the poem. Still, it's notable that Oliver drew from her own experience with nature when writing her poems.

During her difficult childhood outside Cleveland, Ohio, Oliver would retreat to the natural shelter of the woods, where she first began writing poetry. For much of her life, she lived in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where the natural beauty of Cape Cod provided clear inspiration for her poems.

Likewise, Oliver expressed strong spiritual beliefs while remaining skeptical of organized religion; she would have shared the speaker's conviction that being in nature is itself a kind of prayer. Though the speaker of "A Summer Day" can't specifically be identified as Oliver, there's little doubt that they have much in common.

SETTING

The poem clearly takes place in nature—somewhere with grass, fields, and grasshoppers, and probably swans and black bears, too. This pastoral setting is idyllic; the speaker is carefree, relaxed, and happy, and nothing in the setting threatens or spoils that happiness.

It's useful to note that some of Mary Oliver's poems were inspired by specific places in nature, especially the Ohio woods of her childhood and the landscape around Provincetown, Massachusetts, where she lived for much of her life. Though "The Summer Day" isn't clearly drawn from Oliver's own life, it was likely influenced by the natural environments she knew and loved.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Summer Day" is arguably the most famous poem written by Mary Oliver (1935-2019), one of the most popular American poets of recent decades. The poem first appeared in Oliver's 1990 collection *House of Light*.

A prolific writer, Oliver published many books in her lifetime, including a number of bestsellers, and won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, among various other honors. She had a wide influence on both literary and popular culture; her work earned admiration from both critics and ordinary people seeking inspiration, solace, and beautiful words to live by.

Much of Oliver's writing, including "The Summer Day," is rooted in a deep appreciation of the natural world. British Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley served as models for her exploration of humankind's relationship to nature.

Oliver was strongly influenced by the ecstatic free verse style of Walt Whitman, as well as the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David

Thoreau. As a young woman, she was also influenced by the work of Edna St. Vincent Millay, whose home she briefly lived in and whose papers she helped organize following Millay's death. Rumi, the 13th-century Persian poet, informed Oliver's distinctive approach to spirituality and the natural world.

The questions considered by "The Summer Day"—people's relationship to nature, spirituality, mortality, life's purpose—are typical of Oliver's poetry. By probing the mysteries and pleasures of human life on earth, Oliver enriched the lives of her many readers and set an example that still inspires poets today.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mary Oliver grew up in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, where she endured an abusive father and a difficult childhood. As a girl, she would take shelter in the woods near her home; there, she began to write poems. Nature would remain the central preoccupation and driving force of her poetry throughout her life.

As an adult, Oliver lived for many years in Provincetown, Massachusetts, with her partner, Molly Malone Cook. She was known to take long walks in the woods before sunrise with her dogs, and the natural surroundings of Cape Cod often influenced her poems, sometimes in specifically recognizable ways. Later in life, she lived in Florida, a very different natural environment that also shaped her work.

"The Summer Day" is not clearly influenced by any particular time or place in Oliver's life, and it's not certain that the speaker is Oliver herself. Nonetheless, Oliver's poetry was defined by the close relationship she cultivated with nature from girlhood onward—and "The Summer Day" is no exception.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet Remembered — The poet Billy Collins reflects on Oliver's poetic legacy. (https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/01/22/when-mary-oliver-signed-books/)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to Mary Oliver read "The Summer Day." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBPHUE961zI)
- Oliver's Life and Work — A brief biography of Oliver from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/mary-oliver)
- What Is Nature Poetry? — A short entry on nature poetry by the poet Edward Hirsch. (https://poets.org/glossary/nature-poetry)
- Listening to the World — A rare interview with Oliver from the On Being Project. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkJTcB27hHI)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER MARY OLIVER POEMS

- The Black Walnut Tree
- The Journey
- Wild Geese

HOW TO CITE

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