

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY

Meditation on Death in Mary Oliver's Poetry

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**By
Anita Giri**

**Central Department of English
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Anita Giri

Abstract

This research examines the images of death in Mary Oliver's poetry. Meditation on death is the motif behind this research. As we know, there is co-relation between life and death, where there is life; it's sure and certain that there is death. Oliver's most of the poems are related to death. A number of her poems have the word death occurring in them and there are terms linked with the effects of death, silence, grave, funeral, and tomb. Time and again she has imagined her own death, or of poetic persona, or the death of any other character in her poetry. Her death poems give the glimpse of life poems. Except death nothing is beautiful for her. Whatever position human beings acquire in the society is nothing for her because one day everyone should die. In most of her poetry, she is searching her existence in death. Nothingness is the goal of her life. Death is a certainty among innumerable uncertainties of life. Death is the gateway to achieve freedom in her life and it is the essential factor in her poetry.

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I. Oliver's Works and Existentialism

Death is a dominant theme in Mary Oliver's poetry. She takes it as a natural process. Rather than in materialistic things, she sees her existence in death. She wants eternity through the medium of death. She thinks that death has no country but no countrymen can escape from it. Whatever position human beings acquire in the society is nothing for her because one day everyone should die. Death for her is the mother of beauty.

The power of Oliver's poetry earned her numerous awards, including 1984's Pulitzer Prize for *American Primitive* and the National Book Award in 1992 for *New and Selected Poems*. Oliver was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1935 to Edward William Oliver, a teacher, and Helen M. Vlasak Oliver. She studied at Ohio State University for one year, and then moved east to attend Vassar College. Beginning in the early 1950s, Oliver occasionally stayed at Steepletop, the upstate New York farm of the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, where she served as an assistant to Millay's sister. Millay's lyrical style and themes influenced Oliver's early work, and Oliver later found an artistic home in rural Provincetown, Massachusetts, just as Millay had. In the early 1980s Oliver served as Mather Visiting Professor at Case Western Reserve University. She went on to become poet in residence at Bucknell University in 1986 and, beginning in 1991, Margaret Banister Writer in Residence at Sweet Briar College in Virginia.

Oliver's first poetry collection, *No Voyage, and Other Poems* (1963), established her reputation for treating nature in a direct, unsentimental, yet lyrical fashion. Subsequent publications, including *Twelve Moons* (1980) and *American Primitive* (1983), found her delving further and further into the natural world for subject matter while pulling farther away from human subjects. Thematically, the poems in these collections unflinchingly face nature and its continuous cycle of life and often vicious death to embrace the stark beauty of this process. Oliver shifted her perspective in *Dream Work* (1986) to feature certain human-

centered themes of personal suffering and the past, including a poem dealing with the Holocaust, but returned in *House of Light* (1990) to a nature-based focus on isolation from human concerns and assimilation into various aspects and beings of nature. In her first book of prose, *A Poetry Handbook* (1994), Oliver brought her years of writing experience to bear on a close study of the processes of poetry writing.

Critics have commended Oliver's poetry for its clarity, simplicity, and descriptive precision. *American Primitive*, which won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for poetry, was highly acclaimed for its rendering of familiar objects and places in unique, refreshing ways. Some critics, however, noted that several poems contain, as Carolynne Wright asserted in *Prairie Schooner*, "conventional imagery and sentiments" that weaken the collection as a whole (22). Stylistically, critics have noted the lyrical beauty of Oliver's lines and turns of phrase, and the author has found favor for serving up her rapturous visions of nature without lapsing into sentimentality. While some feminist literature compilations have neglected her poetry because of her perceived status as a "woman in nature" poet, other critics have noted that Oliver forges outside of traditional Romantic poetry stereotypes to claim her own individual place in nature poetry. Critics have favorably reviewed *A Poetry Handbook* as an incisive guide to the mechanics of writing poetry. The book goes beyond mere instruction, said Susan Salter Reynolds in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, to "connect the conscious mind and the heart" (4). Some critics have charged Oliver as a self-conscious, unembarrassed Romantic. They say she talks a lot about Keats, Blake, Shelly, and Whitman, but Emerson and Thoreau provide her real roots in New England Romanticism. She shows us nothing is insignificant in the Romantic's world. Romantics also often work on large canvases, sometimes even presenting very long poems as "fragments". Her celebration of presence, both in place and time, contradicts her critics' charges of otherworldliness, unreality, and quaintness.

McNew's closely reasoned essay places Oliver's poetry within the framework of the traditional romantic nature poetry paradigm, revealing striking differences in the relationship of the speaker to her subjects. She says Oliver's visionary poetry is not so much to defy patriarchal boundaries as to ignore their defining powers. She has just expressed her feelings through the medium of her poetry. She writes:

What Oliver does in her most intense visionary poetry is not so much to defy patriarchal boundaries as to ignore their defining powers. The terms "soul" and "body," for example, do appear in her poetry, but her mischievous phrasing often confuses the expected dichotomy. Two poems, "Pink Moon – The Pond" and "Humpbacks" provide examples, from which it is concluded that: "In Oliver's 'primitive' world, physicality thus becomes the most visionary spirituality. (*Contemporary Literature* 60)

She clarifies that Oliver's poetry has somehow relation with culture. Likewise, the terms 'soul' and 'body' do appear frequently in her poetry. She adds Oliver's mischievous phrasing confuses reader. To support her view, she has taken Oliver's two poems, "Pink Moon – The Pond" and "Humpbacks". She also says physicality becomes the most visionary spirituality in Oliver's 'primitive' world. In her view construction of culture can be understand through Oliver's poetry. As she says:

At its most intense, her poetry aims to peer beneath the constructions of culture and reason that burden us with an alienated consciousness to celebrate the primitive, mystical visions that reveal "a mossy darkness – / a dream that would never breathe air / and was hinged to your wildest joy 'like a shadow'" (*Dream Work* 64), a dream of oneness with a maternal earth-womb. (70)

From her view, it is clear that Oliver's poetry aims to peer beneath the constructions of culture and reason that burden us with an alienated consciousness to celebrate the primitive

and mystical visions. It reveals a mossy darkness. It also signifies a dream of oneness with a maternal earth- womb. Those kinds of reflection are rare to find in other poet's poetry.

Likewise, another critic Vicki Graham has also given her view regarding Oliver's poetry. Graham examines Oliver's third collection, *American Primitive*, in which Oliver imaginatively enters the perspective of an other, often an animal. At the close of her essay, she offers comparisons with native American beliefs. She writes:

Oliver's celebration of dissolution into the natural world troubles some critics: her poems flirt dangerously with romantic assumptions about the close association of women with nature that many theorists claim put the woman writer at risk. But for Oliver, immersion in nature is not death: language is not destroyed and the writer is not silenced. To merge with the non-human is to acknowledge the self's mutability and multiplicity, not to lose subjectivity. But few feminists have wholeheartedly appreciated Oliver's work, and though some critics have read her poems as revolutionary reconstructions of the female subject, others remain skeptical "that identification with nature can empower women. (*Women's Studies* 1)

Graham clarifies that loss of self in Oliver's poetry is never permanent because Oliver changes herself in different creatures through her poetry. But she says that Oliver's celebration of dissolution into the natural world troubles some critics. They think her own style of flirting dangerously with romantic assumptions about the close association of women with nature put the woman writer at risk. Unlike, other critic, Graham supports Oliver and clarifies that for Oliver, immersion in nature is not the death. She has not destroyed language and the writer is progressive in her view. Graham and other feminists have whole heartedly appreciated Oliver's work. They see new perspectives in her poetry. They think that she has

reconstructed the female subject. But other critics are not ready to accept that identification with nature can empower women. She further adds:

American Primitive ends with fulfillment; the blank space at the end of "The Gardens" implies that Oliver has lost herself in the "body of another." But this loss of self is never permanent. Oliver becomes, in turn, a bear, a whale, a fish, but, as each poem and each subsequent transformation suggests, she returns again to human consciousness and must repeat the process of becoming another over and over. Rooted in the binary oppositions that structure Western thinking, Oliver can never fully escape the teaching of her culture that the mind is divided from the body and identity depends on keeping intact the boundaries between the self and others. Each of the selves Oliver becomes in this collection is self-contained and separate. A bear, like a human, has its own boundaries and becoming bear as Oliver understands this process involves moving back and forth across the boundaries between herself and the bear rather than dissolving the boundaries themselves. (366)

Through these lines Graham clarifies that Oliver has imagined her in different creatures but at the same time she returns to human consciousness. Again she repeats the process of becoming another over and over. She justifies Oliver can never fully escape the teaching of her culture that the mind is divided from the body and identity depends on keeping intact the boundaries between the self and others. She says that each of the selves Oliver becomes in *American Primitive* is self-contained and separate. Even though, Oliver changes herself in different creatures but she never forgets that she is a conscious human being who is breathing in this world.

Robin Riley Fast has seen Oliver's poetry from the perspectives of whites' literary response to Native experience and culture. He says a strong sense of place, and of identity in

relation to it, is the central theme of Oliver's poetry. He again adds her poems resemble her surrounding. He justifies his views in this way:

Mary Oliver's poetry offers European-American readers a way of responding to Native Americans and the past we share with them that both acknowledges the history and the consequences of colonization and uses that knowledge to start moving beyond the limits of cultural bias and individual disaffection. A strong sense of place, and of identity in relation to it, is central to her poetry. Her poems are firmly located in the places where she has lived or travelled particularly her native Ohio and New England; her moments of transcendence arise organically from the realities of swamp, pond, woods and shore. The vital importance of native or adopted places, however, renders acute her discomfort about how her forebears came to be established in Ohio, and about how white Europeans in general established themselves on this continent – by evicting the Indians for whom, too, a sense of self was (and is) fundamentally bound to place. (*Kentucky Review* 59)

He analyses Oliver's poetry through the eyes of politics. He hasn't said it directly but we can understand it through his views. He says that her poems are firmly located in the places where she has lived or travelled. Particularly, she has portrayed her native Ohio and New England in her poetry. He adds her moments of transcendence arise organically from the realities of swamp, pond, woods and shore. How white Europeans have established themselves on that continent can be understood through her poetry. As he says:

Oliver's confrontation with her historically rooted discomfort, and her imaginative rapprochement with Indian ways of being in nature, constitute the political grounding of the poems I will discuss here, and contribute to the intensity of many others where politics is not directly evident but where she

seeks a holistic relationship to the world. Her treatment of Indians differs significantly from those of such major white male contemporaries and twentieth-century predecessors as Jerome Rothenberg, William Carlos Williams, and Gary Snyder; her poetry, like theirs, raises questions about the meanings of whites' literary response to Native experience and culture. (60)

He says that politics is not directly evident in Oliver's poetry but she seeks a holistic relationship to the world. He analyses her treatment of Indians differs significantly from those of such major white male contemporaries and twentieth-century predecessors. She raises questions about the meanings of whites' literary response to Native experience and culture. She is searching the existence of native culture. Her love of native culture can be seen in her poetry.

Another critic Sue Russell analyses Oliver's poetry from the perspectives of lesbian criticism. She compares Oliver's life with her contemporary writers like Marilyn Hacker and Adrienne Rich. Her view is quite different. Most of the critics have observed the description of nature in Oliver's poetry. They say that only nature is everything for Oliver. Russell analyses not only Oliver's poem but also her life style. Oliver has lamented in the death of her lady partner in some of her poetry. Her deep affection towards that lady can be seen in her poetry. After analyzing that Russell has developed her own view to analyze Oliver's poetry. She believes that in the age of postmodernism that kind of affair can be possible and it is the latest practices in people's life. Only traditional thinker cannot respect those kinds of feelings. For new generation that is not any new things. She clarifies it through these words:

Mary Oliver will never be a balladeer of contemporary lesbian life in the vein of Marilyn Hacker, or an important political thinker like Adrienne Rich; but the fact that she chooses not to write from a similar political or narrative stance makes her all the more valuable to our collective culture. Poets who

choose indirection as a strategy do so, at least in part, because that is what poetry means to them as a form of expression that can transcend its historical context. We owe them the favor of giving their work our fullest attention, no matter what shelf we find it on. (*The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 22)

She says that Oliver's poems are far away from any kinds of political agenda. For her poetry means only as a form of expression. She has expressed her feelings. Readers can analyze her poetry through any perspectives. There is not any boundary.

Annette Allen has seen Oliver's poem from the perspectives of naturalism. She says simple vision of nature can be found in Oliver's poetry. In most of her poetry, description of nature can be seen. She has analyzed Oliver's poems of thirty years and her prose collection, *Blue Pastures*. She compares her poetry with romantic poets. She has found simplicity in Oliver's poetry. She believes that any kinds of reader can easily understand her poetry. Portrait of natural beauty is the most attractive part of her poetry. She declares that Oliver is one of America's finest nature poets. While reading her poetry, we feel as if we are within nature. As we know, nature is the mother of beauty; Oliver's poems are the product of that nature. Allen has analyzed the hidden beauty of Oliver's poetry. Nothing is more beautiful than Oliver's poetry for her. Due to portrait of nature; it becomes so she adds. She says:

The power of Oliver's highly acclaimed poetry rests in its passionate attention to the natural world which she sees as the source of revelation about ultimate things. Like her romantic predecessors, Oliver locates wisdom in the wilderness she seeks in solitude, where discoveries about the self and nature's otherness can be made. Her poems of thirty years and her recent prose collection, *Blue Pastures* (1995), reveal an art driven by visionary conviction in a manner similar to her claimed influences, William Blake and Walt Whitman. Expressed in simple language and familiar imagery, evoking dark

and joyous states, this vision of nature is often conveyed in an ecstatic voice that compels. Celebratory and spiritual in her poetic vision, Oliver is one of America's finest nature poets. (*Encyclopedia of American Literature* 578)

She also says that Oliver has expressed her feelings in simple language. Like her romantic predecessors, she believes that Oliver locates wisdom in the wilderness; she seeks in solitude, where discoveries about the self and nature's otherness can be made.

Although, Oliver's poems have been analyzed from various perspectives; but the approach of Existential Nihilism has not been applied yet. There exists a strong need to carry out research on this issue. For this purpose, I have selected her eleven poems. All poems are related to imagined death. For her, death is nothing but a gateway to freedom. I would like to present here a striking stanza from her poem "Gravel":

Everything is participate.
 Everything is a part of the world
 We can see, taste, tickle, touch, hold onto,
 And then it is dust.
 Dust at last.
 Dust and gravel. (41-46)

In the above stanza, Oliver has presented the meaninglessness of the world. Everything in this world is participate and it is a part of the world. We, human being can see, taste, tickle, touch, hold onto. But at last, we become only the particle of dust and nothing else. All things are momentary in her view. We run here and there to search materialistic happiness. All are meaningless and valueless for her.

This is only a glimpse of her poems. While reading deeply, I found a correlation between her poems and Existential Nihilism. Existential Nihilism deals with nothingness and I found

that reflected in her poems. Regarding Existential Nihilism, I will discuss in the second chapter.

This research consists of four chapters. First one is introduction of the whole research as well as critical views of different critics. Second chapter aims to give details of Existential Nihilism and its attributes as the methodology and third chapter is the textual analysis of the selected eleven poems. Likewise, the fourth chapter is the last and important chapter that proves the title of the thesis. It is the conclusion of the whole research.

II. Existentialism: A Brief Introduction

Existentialism is a philosophical movement which claims that individual human beings have full responsibility for creating the meanings of their own lives. It is a reaction against more traditional philosophies, such as rationalism and empiricism, which sought to discover an ultimate order in metaphysical principles or in the structure of the observed world. The movement had its origins in the 19th century thought of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and was prevalent in Continental philosophy. In the 1940s and 1950s, French philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus wrote scholarly and fictional works that helped to popularize themes associated with existentialism: dread, boredom, alienation, the absurd, freedom, commitment, and nothingness.

As it has been described as the latest movement of European thought, its beginning can be traced back to Kierkegaard whose first important work, *Either/Or*, was published in 1843. Many people trace the roots of existentialism to ancient philosophy (*History of Philosophy: Existentialism* 423). Their behaviour finds expression in existentialism that may be described as the revolt of life against thought, of passion and feeling against reflective contemplation. This is not a new phenomenon but a rethinking and purification of philosophical thinking. Philosophically, it now applies to a vision of the condition and existence of man, his place and function in the world and his relationship or lack of one with God (Cuddon 316). The term existentialism is defined in two different ways: atheistic existentialism and theistic existentialism. Theistic existentialism is taken as an old concept of Christian faith, which is made famous by Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel and Buber Martin. These existentialists believe in God and his existence.

Soren Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling* (1843), elaborates the belief that through God and in God man may find freedom from tension, peace of mind and spiritual serenity, an

idea that has prevailed in much Christian thinking over many centuries (*Existentialism* 316).

Green explains this concept thus:

Kierkegaard was prophetic in his estimate of the place *Fear and Trembling* was to have in his authorship. Although several of his pseudonymous works have also become philosophical classics, *Fear and Trembling* continues to haunt us like no other of his writings. Its defense of individual existence still resonates at the end of a century marked by horrifying mass movements, while its depiction of radical religious obedience stirs new fears as we enter a period when older political ideologies are being replaced by renewed expressions of religious absolutism. (*Fear and Trembling* 257)

Thus, *Fear and Trembling* is a religious work in existential thinking. It deals with the works of individuals that are marked by terrifying mass movements. Fear moves with the ages as older ideologies are replaced by newer ones.

In "Spirit, Human Existence and Reason", Karl Jaspers says that each individual has a tight responsibility, which supports his/her whole intellectual existence. In that existential world, we become purposeless objects of amusing survey because of our irresponsibility. That irresponsibility turns to individual struggle and allows us to become effective in our lives. At last, the individual becomes serious in his/her personal ideas (44-45). Regarding the cycle of this existential world, Jaspers puts forward his view in this way:

Human existence is firm commitment that supports our whole intellectual existence. Without such commitment all we experience becomes the random object of hedonistic contemplation, irresponsible theorizing and empty aestheticism. The meaning of what we do eludes all attempts at formulation. It becomes manifest only in our innermost beliefs. Only the seriousness of our personal resolve can allow ideas to become effective in our lives. (44-45)

Thus, existentialism is a formulation of an intellectual effort. So, we cannot escape from the real engagement of human existence. The philosophical movement that exemplifies the anxiety and uncertainty of intellectuals in an era of World Wars is existentialism. Like writers and artists, existentialist philosophers are responding to a European civilization that seems to be in the unpleasant condition of their thinking.

Gabriel Marcel is very aware of being and having. He wants to link between ownership and burden with the help of concrete primary and secondary reflections. Primary reflection, according to Marcel, is abstract, analytical, objective, universal and verifiable, whereas secondary reflection is concrete, individual and open. It begins with wonder and astonishment of mystery (Perry et al. 759).

But atheistic existentialists do not believe in the existence of God. As the great World Wars of nuclear holocaust prove that human rationality does not work, people are very frightened of wars and they have no hope of secure life. These terrified people of the western world begin to think over the role and activity of individual irrationality in the overall existence of human beings. New technology and scientific reasoning ruled nineteenth century that synthesized new ideas. However, this more recent concept avoided older concepts of unity, rationality and Christianity. Anxiety and uncertainty ruled the fragmented world. The existentialist philosophers examined European civilization that failed and was at the verge of destruction (Perry et al. 755).

Sartre defines existentialism as an attempt to continue life by creating a system in which one realizes human loneliness and human subjectivity (*Existentialism* 15). So, the focus of existentialism is on "being." In this vision, man is born into a kind of void and he has liberty to remain stuck in this mud. He leads a passive existence in a semi-conscious stage in which he is scarcely aware of himself. However, he may come out of his subjectivity and passive situation, becomes increasingly aware of himself. If so, he will then have a sense of

the absurdity of his dread and despair, which create anxiety. This anxiety invites anguish; but, after a long experience, the individual acquires an education and energy. The energy derived from this awareness will enable him to drag himself out of the mud and to begin to exist. By exercising his power of choice he can give meaning to existence and to the universe. Thus, in brief, a human being is obliged to make himself who he is. The existentialists do not believe in the power of passion.

Theistic existentialists oppose the view of atheistic existentialists. According to them, atheists reject the reality and earnestness of rebirth after death. Sartre summarizes their charges thus:

From the Christian stand point, we are charged with denying the reality and seriousness of human undertakings. Since if we reject God's commandments and the eternal varieties, there no longer remains anything but pure caprice, with everyone permitted to do as he pleases and incapable, from his own point of view, of condemning the points of view and acts of others. (10)

Atheistic existentialists do not believe in Christianity or the religious concepts of Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Marcel and Buber. For them God does not exist.

Sartre frequently talks of an "anguish" and "despair," what he calls "grandiloquent words" (8). The man who feels his total and deep responsibility for himself and for all men cannot escape from anguish. It is an inescapable sense of deep and total responsibility for one's own choice and deeds. In anguish, the individual's relationship with the world seems to be "uncanny" and "factual" though true existence requires that dreadful situation. The anguish of existential man is like the anguish of a military officer on who depend the lives of several men. He, however, has to give the order to attack and send certain soldiers to their death. He shall decide and, in making the decision, he feels the anguish.

About despair, Sartre argues that it is confining ourselves "to reckoning only with what depends upon our will" (29). In this sense, despair incites us not to deeds and commitments but to thinking only. A sort of bitter sense of life comes with despair. Anguish differs from despair because anguish provokes us to engagement and commitment whereas despair discourages us from it. In despair, man may take refuge in pessimism and even in nihilism. But existentialism is, according to Sartre, humanism. It is an optimistic doctrine of action and not of despair (51). Authenticity demands from life a free choice without excuse and without help that presupposes full responsibility. The adoption of responsibility, in consequence, causes certain uneasiness from which no one can save oneself. This uneasiness or anguish is the heart of human existence. In society, there exists a pressure of so-called morality or social values. Thus, existential anguish presents a reality of human life that has to be faced heroically and optimistically.

Kierkegaard believes in Christian faith and he has an opinion that God exists first. According to him, the concept of God is related to the life of an individual who, if he/she believes in God, can discover truth. In this way the individual can also find mental peace, which he can not find in a crowd because the crowd is untruth. In a crowd men do not search for the real existence of a Being. Crowd is a part of cowardliness in congregation. For Kierkegaard, crowd and cowardliness are one and the same thing ("The Individual and the Crowd" 810). He talks about the two views of thinkers about life: one considers that truth lies in congregation only and the other that it lies only with the individual being (809). Kierkegaard believes in the second type of view and declares that "crowd" is "untruth" (809). The individual is a combination of temporal (in the process of being) and eternal (far from existence) and finite and infinite ("Concrete Existence" 813). So, the individual is a paradox within himself. Kierkegaard holds that the belief in gathering is a belief in abstract system,

which is a mere possibility that never occurs; but, belief in concrete existence is one that continues activity.

An atheistic existentialist, Nietzsche advocates for the unconditional mental and physical activities of the free thinkers rather than the consensus of the "herd" ("Free Thinker" 814-816). Nietzsche believes that the free thinker does not care about good and evil while exercising his "life will" to reach unbounded "power will". The subjective will and instincts play a major role in shaping the ideas of an individual ("Subjective Will" 816-822). An objective individual that is in search of general truth is acceptable in any culture and society. Nietzsche asks us not to try to be Oedipus and solve the riddle of the Sphinx to arrive at truth and certainty because truth is impossible (818). The Kierkegaardian concept, according to Nietzsche, is blind faith in the binary opposition between good and evil, truth and untruth, rational and irrational, certainty and uncertainty, logical and illogical. Such values have been the causes of delusion.

The phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger focus on the internal role and activities of the individual in the production of emotion or belief rather than the external world. The doctrine of intentionality holds that every thing depends upon the consciousness of an individual who perceives things other than himself as objects. Making others as "intentional objects" signifies that other people in the perceptions of the individual appear different from what they think of themselves. So, the existential notion of individual can be considered as the systematic growth of phenomenological concept of intentionality. Different perceptions of the crowd and the individual that lives in himself/herself are essential ideas of existentialism. For existentialism, the most important thing is the knowledge of absurd existence of a group or a person. This knowledge awakens us to freedom and choice, and, as a result, prevents us from being an ordinary thing.

In existential philosophy the concept of existence is restricted to the kind of being exemplified in man. Existence of human being is differentiated from the existence of other objects in the world. Atheistic existentialists hold that only man "exists." Thus, for them, trees and mountains just are, but they do not exist. Heidegger elaborates that the being whose manner of being in existence is man. Man alone exists. A rock is, but it does not exist. A tree is but it does not exist. A horse is but it does not exist. An angel is but he does not exist. God is but he does not exist (Qtd. in Macquarrie 29).

Thus, man's existence does not depend simply in 'standing out' in the world like other objects in the sense that he is open to become what he is not. What counts for his existence is, thus, the possibility of his going beyond himself. As an existence at any moment of time he aspires to go beyond himself towards his own possibilities. The possibility of human existence is the anticipation, the expectation and the projection of future. Existence is always stretched out towards the future. Human existence is then transcendental to its own possibilities.

Relation to Nihilism

Though nihilism and existentialism are distinct philosophies, they are often confused with one another. A primary cause of confusion is that Friedrich Nietzsche is an important philosopher in both fields, but also the existentialist insistence on the absurd and the inherent meaninglessness of the world. Existentialist philosophers often stress the importance of Angst as signifying the absolute lack of any objective ground for action, a move that is often reduced to a moral or an existential nihilism. A pervasive theme in the works of existentialist philosophy, however, is to persist through encounters with the absurd, as seen in Camus', "The Myth of Sisyphus", and it is only very rarely that existentialist philosophers dismiss morality or one's self-created meaning: Kierkegaard regained a sort of morality in the religious (although he wouldn't himself agree that it was ethical; the religious suspends the

ethical), and Sartre's final words in *Being and Nothingness* are "All these questions, which refer us to a pure and not an accessory (or impure) reflection, can find their reply only on the ethical plane. We shall devote to them a future work" (61). Hence, existentialists believe that one can create value and meaning, whilst nihilists will deny this.

Nihilism

Nihilism is the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. It is often associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism that condemns existence. A true nihilist would believe in nothing, have no loyalties, and no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy. While few philosophers would claim to be nihilists, nihilism is most often associated with Friedrich Nietzsche who argued that its corrosive effects would eventually destroy all moral, religious, and metaphysical convictions and precipitate the greatest crisis in human history. In the 20th century, nihilistic themes--epistemological failure, value destruction, and cosmic purposelessness--have preoccupied artists, social critics, and philosophers. Mid-century, for example, the existentialists helped popularize tenets of nihilism in their attempts to blunt its destructive potential. By the end of the century, existential despair as a response to nihilism gave way to an attitude of indifference, often associated with antifoundationalism.

Origins

"Nihilism" comes from the Latin word nihil, or nothing, which means not anything, that which does not exist. It appears in the verb "annihilate," meaning to bring to nothing, to destroy completely. Early in the nineteenth century, Friedrich Jacobi used the word to negatively characterize transcendental idealism. It only became popularized, however, after its appearance in Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862) where he used "nihilism" to describe the crude scientism espoused by his character Bazarov who preaches a creed of total negation.

In Russia, nihilism became identified with a loosely organized revolutionary movement (c.1860-1917) that rejected the authority of the state, church, and family. In his early writing, anarchist leader Mikhael Bakunin (1814-1876) composed the notorious entreaty still identified with nihilism: "Let us put our trust in the eternal spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unsearchable and eternally creative source of all life--the passion for destruction is also a creative passion!" (*Reaction in Germany* 842). The movement advocated a social arrangement based on rationalism and materialism as the sole source of knowledge and individual freedom as the highest goal. By rejecting man's spiritual essence in favor of a solely materialistic one, nihilists denounced God and religious authority as antithetical to freedom. The movement eventually deteriorated into an ethos of subversion, destruction, and anarchy, and by the late 1870s, a nihilist was anyone associated with clandestine political groups advocating terrorism and assassination.

The earliest philosophical positions associated with what could be characterized as a nihilistic outlook are those of the Skeptics. Because they denied the possibility of certainty, Skeptics could denounce traditional truths as unjustifiable opinions. When Demosthenes (c.371-322 BC), for example, observes that "What he wished to believe, that is what each man believes" (*Olynthiac*), he posits the relational nature of knowledge. Extreme skepticism, then, is linked to *epistemological nihilism* which denies the possibility of knowledge and truth; this form of nihilism is currently identified with postmodern antifoundationalism. Nihilism, in fact, can be understood in several different ways. Political Nihilism, as noted, is associated with the belief that the destruction of all existing political, social, and religious order is a prerequisite for any future improvement. Ethical nihilism or moral nihilism rejects the possibility of absolute moral or ethical values. Instead, good and evil are nebulous, and values addressing such are the product of nothing more than social and emotive pressures.

Existential nihilism is the notion that life has no intrinsic meaning or value, and it is, no doubt, the most commonly used and understood sense of the word today.

Max Stirner's (1806-1856) attacks on systematic philosophy, his denial of absolutes, and his rejection of abstract concepts of any kind often places him among the first philosophical nihilists. For Stirner, achieving individual freedom is the only law; and the state, which necessarily imperils freedom, must be destroyed. Even beyond the oppression of the state, though, are the constraints imposed by others because their very existence is an obstacle compromising individual freedom. Thus Stirner argues that existence is an endless "war of each against all" (*The Ego and its Own* 907).

Existential Nihilism

While nihilism is often discussed in terms of extreme skepticism and relativism, for most of the 20th century it has been associated with the belief that life is meaningless. Existential nihilism begins with the notion that the world is without meaning or purpose. Given this circumstance, existence itself--all action, suffering, and feeling--is ultimately senseless and empty. In *The Dark Side: Thoughts on the Futility of Life* (1994), Alan Pratt demonstrates that existential nihilism, in one form or another, has been a part of the Western intellectual tradition from the beginning. The Skeptic Empedocles' observation that "the life of mortals is so mean a thing as to be virtually un-life," for instance, embodies the same kind of extreme pessimism associated with existential nihilism. In antiquity, such profound pessimism may have reached its apex with Hegesis. Because miseries vastly outnumber pleasures, happiness is impossible, the philosopher argues, and subsequently advocates suicide. Centuries later during the Renaissance, William Shakespeare eloquently summarized the existential nihilist's perspective when, in this famous passage near the end of *Macbeth*, he has Macbeth pour out his disgust for life:

Out, out, brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
 And then is heard no more; it is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.

In the twentieth century, it's the atheistic existentialist movement, popularized in France in the 1940s and 50s, that is responsible for the currency of existential nihilism in the popular consciousness. Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905-1980) defining preposition for the movement, "existence precedes essence," rules out any ground or foundation for establishing an essential self or a human nature. When we abandon illusions, life is revealed as nothing; and for the existentialists, nothingness is the source of not only absolute freedom but also existential horror and emotional anguish. Nothingness reveals each individual as an isolated being "thrown" into an alien and unresponsive universe, barred forever from knowing why yet required to invent meaning. It's a situation that's nothing short of absurd. Writing from the enlightened perspective of the absurd, Albert Camus (1913-1960) observed that Sisyphus' plight, condemned to eternal, useless struggle, was a superb metaphor for human existence (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 42).

The common thread in the literature of the existentialists is coping with the emotional anguish arising from our confrontation with nothingness, and they expended great energy responding to the question of whether surviving it was possible. Their answer was a qualified "Yes," advocating a formula of passionate commitment and impassive stoicism. In retrospect, it was an anecdote tinged with desperation because in an absurd world there are absolutely no guidelines, and any course of action is problematic. Passionate commitment, be it to conquest, creation, or whatever, is itself meaningless.

Camus, like the other existentialists, was convinced that nihilism was the most vexing problem of the twentieth century. Although he argues passionately that individuals could endure its corrosive effects, his most famous works betray the extraordinary difficulty he faced building a convincing case. In *The Stranger* (1942), for example, Meursault has rejected the existential suppositions on which the uninitiated and weak rely. Just moments before his execution for a gratuitous murder, he discovers that life alone is reason enough for living, however, that in context seems scarcely convincing. In *Caligula* (1944), the mad emperor tries to escape the human predicament by dehumanizing himself with acts of senseless violence, fails, and surreptitiously arranges his own assassination. *The Plague* (1947) shows the futility of doing one's best in an absurd world. And in his last novel, the short and sardonic, *The Fall* (1956), Camus posits that *everyone* has bloody hands because we are all responsible for making a sorry state worse by our inane action and inaction alike. In these works and other works by the existentialists, one is often left with the impression that living authentically with the meaninglessness of life is impossible.

Camus was fully aware of the pitfalls of defining existence without meaning, and in his philosophical essay *The Rebel* (1951) he faces the problem of nihilism head-on. In it, he describes at length how metaphysical collapse often ends in total negation and the victory of nihilism, characterized by profound hatred, pathological destruction, and incalculable violence and death.

As existential nihilism is a passive world view which revolves around such topics as suffering, and futility, and even has connections to Eastern mysticism like Buddhism. In a more direct sense, existential 'social' nihilism is manifest within the sense of isolation, futility, angst and the hopelessness of existence increasingly prevalent within the modern digital world sometimes referred to as the 'downward spiral'. A direct way to describe it might be 'detachment from everything'.

Words used to describe political nihilism include - active, revolutionary, destructive and even creative. Political nihilism is defined as the realization "that conditions in the social organization are so bad as to make destruction desirable for its own sake independent of any constructive program or possibility." It deals with authority and social structures rather than simply the introspective, personal emotions of existential nihilism.

Political nihilism especially is a world-view that's rational, logical, empirical, scientific and devoid of pointless emotion. It's the logical psyche that distills everything down into what is known, what can be known and what cannot be known. It's the realization that all values are ultimately relativistic and in some ways the simplicity of nihilism is its own complexity.

Nihilism challenges the assumptions supporting common values such as 'equality'; 'pity', 'justice', etc. But also terms of conclusion about human existence such as "meaningless", "pointless" and "futile" are equally flawed because their definitions stem from the original morality values that have hitherto been rejected.

Those who disbelieve in God will usually agree that there is no "objective" meaning to their lives, but deny that therefore there is no meaning at all. Instead, they argue that their lives can be fulfilling and purposeful from the subjective perspectives of themselves and other human beings. Because they find this satisfying, they do not sink despair and they do not feel that suicide is the best option.

People who cannot be satisfied with personal meaning may not be able to resist such a move; for them, then, suicide would be appealing. Nevertheless, that is not the conclusion typically reached by existential nihilists. For them the objective meaninglessness of life can often be viewed as quite liberating because it frees humans from the demand of tradition which are themselves based upon false assumptions about the binding wills of gods and ancestors.

This is the conclusion that Camus reached in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. A mythical King of Corinth, Sisyphus was condemned to spend eternity pushing a rock up a mountain, only to have it roll back down to the bottom. Sisyphus had no meaning, no goal that could be reached – and it would never end. For Camus, this was a metaphor that in the end we are condemned to lose.

Death is not a release from our struggle and a move to another plane of existence but rather a negation of all that we might have accomplished by our efforts. How, then, can we be happy in this knowledge? Camus argued that we can be optimistic in the face of this by refusing to be blinded to the fact that this life is indeed all we have.

Pessimism is only merited if we assume that life must be given meaning from outside our lives, but that assumptions should have been dispensed with along with the assumption of God because, without God, there is no position "outside our lives" to hand down meaning in the first place. Once we get past that we are able to rebel, not against a non-existent god, but instead against our fate to die.

Here, "to rebel" means to reject the idea that death must have any hold over us. Yes, we will die, but we should not allow that fact to inform or constrain all of our actions or decisions. We must be willing to live in spite of death, create meaning in spite of objective meaninglessness, and find value in spite of the tragic, even comic, absurdity of what goes on around us.

III. Meditation on Death in Oliver's Poetry

Mary Oliver's most of the poems are related to death. In this chapter, I am trying to analyze her death poetry through the perspective of existential nihilism.

As we know, there is co-relation between life and death, where there is life; there is death. Oliver is searching for her existence in death. A number of her poems have the word death occurring in them and there are terms linked with the effects of death, silence, grave, funeral, and tomb. She never treats death as a demon like character. She makes death stand in her poetry not as a cruel terminator but as an agent which can give solace to the living, which makes life take rest from the hustle and bustle of the world. She never presents death as an accident; rather deals with it as a regular phenomenon – a part of life; she asserts that everyone must accept it. So she celebrates death as a tranquilizer, and makes death stand as a statue of serenity.

The inevitability of death is shown in Oliver's own sort of playful manner. Death is presented in her poetry as an image, which lulls life without any pain. Moreover, it is a soothing annihilator. The range and variety of attitudes towards death is very wide, like the manner of an individual's death, the death either of herself or of a poetic persona, or the death of any other character, the psychic distance death creates between the dead and the living, the quaint feeling one experiences on the funeral procession going towards grave; walking silently behind the dead, all are treated in poems with a positive note.

In some of her death poems, Oliver attempts an imaginative construction of her own death: this, in effect, to catch her at the very centre of the act of dying. Her death poems give the glimpse of life poems. In many instances she has tried to give her answers by her own death in poetry. She imagines her death, her funeral, her burial too; but the quest to know what lies beyond this life remains till the end. Furthermore, she is too intensely alive to be

capable of realizing the motifs of death. As I have selected her eleven poems related to death, I will analyze her poems one by one.

When Death Comes

Through this poem, Oliver has realized her own imagined death. She accepts it without any hesitation.

She describes when death comes like the hungry bear in autumn; when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse to buy her, and snaps the purse shut, she wants to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering: "what it is going to be like, that cottage of darkness" (10). And therefore she looks upon everything as a brotherhood and sisterhood, and looks upon time as no more than an idea. She considers eternity as another possibility. She thinks of each life as a flower, as common as a field daisy, and as singular, and each name a comfortable music in the mouth tending as all music does, toward silence, and each body a lion of courage, and something precious to the earth. When it's over, she wants to say that's all of my life. In her imagination, she was a bride married to amazement. She was the bridegroom, taking the world into her own arms. When it is over, she does not want to wonder if she has made of her life something particular, and real. She does not want to find herself sighing and frightened, or full of argument. She does not want to end up simply having visited this world.

Oliver is not an egoist because she looks upon everything as a brotherhood and sisterhood. In this commercial world; most of the people are ego centric. Relationships are judged through the eyes of profit and loss. Morality, humanity, love and care are decreasing day by day. If people remember everyone should die one day; all things may not happen. Only Oliver has realized the fact of life. She wants eternity through the medium of death. She is not afraid to accept death. As she says:

When it is over, I don't want to wonder

If I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,

Or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world. (23-27)

Whatever she achieves in life is nothing for her. The most important thing is only death. Sartre, in *Basic Writings*, elaborates the belief that a consciousness which would be consciousness of nothing would be an absolute nothing (129). Oliver's this poem supports Sartre's view. She is conscious about death. Being aware about death itself is the consciousness of nothing. Likewise, thinking about death and accepting death without any hesitation symbolize absolute nothing. The title "When Death Comes" itself signifies the value of death in her poetry. Throughout the poem, I found death and only death.

A Bitterness

Oliver has focused on the bitter reality of life through this poem, "A Bitterness." She verifies the hypocrisy of people.

Whatever people expose in the outer world is nothing for her. In her view, reality is always bitter. We do not have a happy life. We are cheated. Our best friends are loneliness and misery. Our busiest enemies are anger and depression. She believes joy is a game we can never play with without stumbling. She also believes comfort, though we crave for it, is forever a stranger. She doubts music has to be melancholy or not at all. No trinket, no precious metal, shines so bright as our bitterness. Whatever we do is nothing for her because she believes only in death. As she says:

I believe no trinket, no precious metal, shone so bright as your bitterness.

I believe you lay down at last in your coffin none the wiser
and unassuaged.

Oh, cold and dreamless under the wild, amoral, reckless, peaceful
flowers of the hillsides. (8-12)

As existentialism is dominated by pessimism, it gives emphasis on pessimistic feelings like solitariness, subjective inwardness, dread, despair, anguish, etc. It places the emphasis on the lack of meaning and purpose of life and solitude of human existence; it also focuses on the lack of meaning and purpose of life. Finally, it gives emphasis upon pessimistic feeling, i.e., death.

Our ultimate truth of life is only to lay down in the coffin. We are running here and there to achieve the goal of life and to make new friends. But in her view, only loneliness and misery are our best friends. All things are momentary for her except death which symbolizes the importance of death.

Gravel

Oliver has imagined her own death in the poem "Gravel." From the beginning to end of the poem, she is talking about only death.

Everything in the world is in their proper places while death is taking her. She wants to get freedom through the medium of death. Whatever position human being acquires in the society is nothing for her. She says goodbye to even a small creature of the world like grasshopper, goldfinches, pond lilies and so on. Not only her own existence but also other creature's existence is important for her. She says that she looks up into the faces of the stars into their deep silence. And she also says that this poem is the poem of goodbye from the journey of life. So, she seems to be so courageous to accept the reality. She does not get afraid with the ground reality of life that is death. People are becoming ego-centric day by day. They never try to accept the existence of other creatures. Pride and prejudice are the drawback of people. They are running here and there to achieve better position. But these things are worthless for her. She accepts the existence not only of human being but also of

other creatures. She believes in co-existence. She remembers all creatures, while she is being taken by death. As she says:

Goodbye to the swaying trees.
 Goodbye to the black triangles of the winter sea.
 Goodbye to oranges, the prick of their fragrance.
 Goodbye to the fox sparrow,
 Goodbye to the blue-winged teal.
 Goodbye to lettuce, and the pale turnip,
 and the gatherings of the rice fields.
 Goodbye to the morning light.
 Goodbye to the goldfinches
 and their wavering songs. (85-94)

She says this poem is the poem of goodbye. She does not like to discriminate between any earthly beings. In her view, life is nothing but the particle of dust. She believes that everything existing in this world will become dust, sooner or later. She clarifies it through these lines:

Everything is participate.
 Everything is a part of the world
 We can see, taste, tickle, touch, hold onto,
 and then it is dust.
 Dust at last.
 Dust and gravel. (41-46)

This poem depicts the meaninglessness of the materialistic world. Human value has been ruined due to the World War. People become no longer human. There is not any meaning of brotherhood and sisterhood. Only matter is everything for the people of late

capitalism. But all materialistic things, power and position, are nothing for her. That's why she has accepted death without any hesitation. She wants to find out the meaning of life through the medium of death. Her view clarifies Sartre's opinion in *Basic Writings*. Sartre says:

There is a dialectical dependency between freedom and truth. There is no truth without freedom and no freedom without truth. A human being is free but at the same time in bondage; a chooser whose power is politically and historically constrained. It is only at the moment of death that a human being is complete. Before death a brave person could become a coward or a coward could become brave. Only death brings an end to freedom. (181)

Death is only one medium through which she wants salvation. It is the final truth of her life. Images of death and the word death itself are frequently used in this poem. It offers a sustained meditation on death, particularly her own death. The words like dark, black, dust, and goodbye are used time and again which are the images of death.

Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches?

In the poem, "Have you Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches" also, Oliver has talked about death. She does not think this world is only an entertainment. So she questions "Do you think this World was only an entertainment for you?" (4).

She is expressing nothingness of the world through this poem. She denies the glittering image of the world. It seems that she carries nothingness in her heart. As Sartre says in *Being and Nothingness*:

Nothingness stands at the origin of the negative judgment because it is itself negation. It founds the negation as an act because it is the negation as being. Nothingness can be nothingness only by nihilating itself expressly toward this

world in order to constitute itself as refusal of the world. Nothingness carries
being in its heart. (52)

She looks towards the path of death. She asks without putting one foot, how one can travel
the miles. She believes the journey of life means the journey of death. Normal human being
cannot accept death easily but she says:

To put one's foot into the door of the grass, which is
the mystery, which is death as well as life, and
not be afraid!

To set one's foot in the door of death, and be overcome
with amazement! (21-25)

Only taking breath is not the meaning of life for her. As she says, "Listen, are you breathing
just a little, and calling it a life?" (35). In her view, the opening of the window is no more
difficult than the waking up from a little sleep. In this poem, she had been among the thorns
and said to the wild roses, "deny me not/ but suffer my devotion," (41-42). Then all afternoon,
she sat among them. May be at that time, she even heard a curl or tow of music, damp and
rouge red, hurrying from their stubby buds, from their delicate watery bodies. But she raises a
question and says:

I even heard a curl or tow of music, damp and rouge red,
Hurrying from their stubby buds, from their delicate watery bodies.
For how long will you continue to listen to those dark shouters,
Caution and prudence ?
Fall in! Fall in! (44-48)

At last, when the sun begins to swing down, under the peach light, she crosses the fields
and the dunes, and follows the ocean's edge. She climbs, backtracks, floats and then rambles
towards her home way.

Here, her visit towards home is nothing but the signification of death. She compares life with thorn. Only death is the bed of roses for her. She wants to achieve success and enjoyment through the medium of death.

Mockingbirds

Oliver's "Mockingbirds", also opens the door of death. She opens it without any hesitation.

To justify the meaning of death, she takes the help of two mockingbirds. In one morning, she saw two mockingbirds in the green field were spinning and tossing the white ribbons of their songs into the air. She had nothing to do rather than to listen seriously. She remembers the story of an old couple from Greece. Long ago, that old couple had opened the door to two strangers who were not men at all, but gods. The old couple had almost nothing to give but their willingness to be attentive. But for this alone the gods loved them and blessed them. When they rose out of their mortal bodies, like a million particles of water from a fountain, the light swept into all the corners of the cottage, and the old couple shaken with understanding bowed down but still they asked for nothing but the difficult life which they already had. And the gods smiled, as they vanished, clapping their great wings.

Wherever that story took place, Oliver was supposed to be, whatever that was she said she would be doing and was standing at the edge of the field. She was hurrying to open the dark doors through her own soul. At that time also she was leaning out and listening. As she says:

I would be doing

I was standing

At the edge of the field

I was hurrying

Through my own soul,

Opening its dark doors

I was leaning out;

I was listening. (49-56)

Oliver is standing at the edge of the field i.e. at the edge of life which signifies death.

In the Heideggerian idiom, Sartre says we are thrown into the world. We have no predetermined essence. First of all we exist, then we face the lifelong burden of creating ourselves, generating our essence. Whoever we are that does not matter for her because one day everyone should surrender to death. In her view, nothing is more powerful than death. Our pride, power and position are nothing for her. Only death provides equality to all human being. In this poem, 'dark door', symbolizes death.

The Egret

Like other poems, in this poem, "The Egret", also Oliver has opened the door of death. To support her idea about death she has taken other beings as the form of metaphors.

She begins this poem, like a short story. She tells every time that one the little fish and the green and spotted frogs know the egret's bamboo legs from the thin and polished reeds at the edge of the silky world of water. Then, in their last inch of time, they see for an instant, the white froth of her shoulders, and the white scrolls of her belly, and the white flame of her head. She raises question by saying, "What more can you say about such wild swimmers ?"(23-24). Little fish and the green and spotted frogs are there but they are silent due to terror. After observing all those activities, living in the shore, she has invented these words:

Therefore I have invented words

With which to stand back

On the weedy shore

With which to say:

Look!Look !

What is this dark death

That opens

Like a white door ? (29-36)

Here, 'the egret', itself symbolizes the meaning of death which is ready to take little fish and frogs. Metaphorically, fish and frogs are nothing but the other form of human being. The first principle of existentialism says man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself (*Being and Nothingness* 29). What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all. As to the egret, death is waiting for all of us. One day everyone should die. That is the bitter reality of life. But unfortunately, nobody is ready to accept that reality. We are running here and there searching our existence but all are meaningless and worthless for her.

Sunrise

Through this poem, "Sunrise," Oliver raises the existential question. She is searching for her own existence but at last she found nothing except the meaninglessness of life.

Before searching for her own existence, she analyses the life of other people. She says that people have done brilliantly, letting their small bodies be bound to the stake, creating an unforgettable fury of light. After climbing the familiar hills in the familiar fabric of dawn, she thinks of China, India, Europe and also wonders how the sun blazes for everyone just so joyfully as it rises under the lashes of her own eyes. At that time, she raises one existential question, "I am so many ! /what is my name?" (27-28).

She even doubts her own name and asks question. She also wants to know the name of the deep breath, which everyone takes over and over. Taking breath resembles life. Only taking breath is nothing for her. As she says:

Under the lashes

Of my own eyes, and I thought

I am so many!

What is my name?

What is the name

Of the deep breath I would take

Over and over

For all of us? Call it. (25-32)

She wants to know the name of deep breath. That means she is eager to know the meaning of life. But she is unable to find the meaning of life. It is a very difficult task. For this reason also, she searches the meaning of life through the medium of death. She realizes the meaninglessness of the human world. Whatever we do to achieve happiness in life is nothing for her because that is only the other way to enter fire. As she says:

To the stake,
 Creating an unforgettable
 Fury of light. But
 whatever you want, it is
 happiness, it is another one
 of the ways to enter
 fire. (30-36)

Here, 'fire', symbolizes death. Only death is the final truth in her poem. All glittering things of life are nothing for her. Nothingness is the source of not only absolute freedom but also existential horror and emotional anguish. Like other poems, death is all in all in this poem as well.

The Summer Day

In this poem, "The Summer Day," Oliver has searched for the existence of the whole world. It seems as if her mind is full of questions.

She wants to know the creator of the world. Not only her own existence, she wants to know the existence of other creatures. As she says:

Who made the world ?
 Who made the swan, and the black bear ?
 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, (1-6)

That grasshopper which she means is the one who 'has flung' herself out of the grass and also the one who is 'eating sugar' out of her hand; who is moving and gazing around with her

enormous and complicated eyes. That grasshopper lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face. Now, she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

Oliver does not exactly know what a prayer is. But she knows how to pay attention to, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel in the grass, how to be idle and blessed and how to stroll through the fields, which is what she has been doing all day. After doing so many things, at last she realizes the meaning of nothing and asks:

How to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

Which is what I have been doing all day.

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 ? (14-19)

Whatever plan we do in our life is nothing for Oliver because at last everyone should die. We act as if we remain here forever. For her life is like a dead alley, leading nowhere and it is full of dead things. Life has become a meaningless routine. She does not like to stay longer in this absurd world. Her frustration can be easily seen through this poem. Time and again, she is searching for the meaning of her life. She has struggled hard for her existence. Unfortunately, this is the world of boredom from which she gets nothing. She analyses deeply and tries to find out the meaning of this world; but at last she sees only void. Except death, nothing is eternal for her. Anxiety and uncertainty have ruled her fragmented world. It seems that this poem also talks about death and meaninglessness of life.

Where Does the Dance Begin, Where Does It End ?

In this poem, Oliver clarifies that we should not show our too much attachment with this world. Except the garden of dust, it is nothing. Through this poem also we can understand her love of nothingness i.e. death. As she says:

Don't call this world adorable, or useful, that's not it.

It's frisky, and a theater for more than fair winds.

The eyelash of lightning is neither good nor evil .

The struck tree burns like a pillar of gold.

But the blue rain sinks, straight to the white

Feet of the trees

Whose mouths open. (1-7)

Nothing is more eternal than death in her view. She explains the blue rain sinks, straight to the white feet of the trees. In one stanza, she says that the wind, turning in circles, invents the dance. The flowers have moved slowly, across Asia, then Europe, until at last they shine in our own yard. But at the same time she says, "Don't call this world an explanation, or even an education" (19).

She asks with us when the Sufi poet whirled: "was he looking outward, to the mountains so solidly there in a white capped ring, or was he looking to the centre of everything: the seed, the egg, the idea that was also there" (17). She says at last when the Sufi poet whirled he found nothing in the garden of dust. As she says:

To the center of everything: the seed, the egg, the idea

That was also there,

Beautiful as a thumb

Curved and touching the finger, tenderly,

Little love- ring,

As he whirled,

Oh jug of breath

In the garden of dust? (16-23)

Nothing is valuable for her. Glittering glimpse of this world is nothing for her. In Sartre's vision, man is born into a kind of void, a mud. He has the liberty to remain in this mud. Oliver thinks that she has the liberty to choose that void, i.e., death. Sartre's concern with man's happiness and unhappiness, their ethical problems, purposes and conduct was expressed largely in his works. Existence itself is contingent and unjustifiable. It is absurd in the sense that there is no reason for it, no outside purpose to give it meaning, no direction. Being is there and outside of it there is nothing. Oliver is struggling with the idea that things overflow all the relationships and designations which she can attach to them, a view which Sartre developed later in the form of a theory of the "transphenomenality" of being. She thinks that she is born into a kind of void and she has liberty to remain stuck in this mud. She leads a passive existence in a semiconscious stage in which she is scarcely aware of herself. She has a sense of the absurdity of her dread and despair, which create anxiety. She sees only dust everywhere which symbolizes death.

A Death

Like her other poems, Oliver talks about death in this poem too. She is describing the death of somebody. It resembles everyone's death.

Afterwards the cheerful birds wake her up, when crows are blaring and sparrows chirping for their lives. 'Somebody' is not out there in the yellow fields, trudging and talking. At the cemetery, a flock of geese flow over. Everything is disturbing her. She wants more of silence. She comes back home; night was a blue forest full of robins. She tosses and turns. She leaves the yard and goes down by the swamp. She even does not know where the farm ends. She talks about a stranger who rises from the cloth of green water. Like an outcast and a messenger the stranger cannot rest until it is heard, it just hangs around there. Black song keeps on shouting over and over. This description is nothing but the description of our own

death. One day, we should accept that reality. Oliver does not see any charm in this world. So she wants deep silence. As she says:

At the cemetery
 A flock of geese flew over,
 Disturbing everything.
 Where could I go
 For the moss of silence
 Grief wanted? (11-16)

She is searching silence. That means she is accepting death. Only death is the gateway to achieve peace in her life. As Sartre says man is the being by whom nothingness comes into the world, that is, man himself is being and nothingness. Oliver also believes that she herself is being and nothingness. Her journey of life begins from nothingness to nothingness. Her consciousness of death resembles that she has realized the hollowness of the world. The title of the poem itself resembles death. Likewise, 'black song', also symbolizes death.

Sleeping in the Forest

In the poem, "Sleeping in the Forest," Oliver is lying on the bed of death. She has imagined her own death in this poem.

She imagines that the earth remembers her. She sleeps as never before a stone on the river bed, nothing between her and the white fire of the stars, but her thoughts and they float light as moths among the branches of the perfect trees. All night she hears the small kingdoms, breathing around her; the insects and the birds who do their work in the darkness. All night she rises and falls, as if in water, grappling with a luminous doom. By morning, she is vanished at least a dozen of times into something better.

Oliver likes to sleep in the forest rather than to live in this world. Here, 'forest', resembles death. She however is enjoying it. As she says:

All night I heard the small kingdoms
 Breathing around me, the insects,
 And the birds who do their work in the darkness.
 All night I rose and fell, as if in water,
 Grappling with a luminous doom. By morning
 I had vanished at least a dozen times
 into something better. (9-15)

She is fulfilling her desire to achieve eternity. Sartre often speaks as though consciousness is a kind of nothingness or emptiness. Sometimes he says consciousness is a prerequisite for nothingness. Sometimes he says nothingness confronts consciousness. For example in *Being and Nothingness*, he says consciousness is total emptiness because the whole world is outside it, he implies that consciousness is a kind of non- being, an absence of being- in- itself (137). Like Sartre, Oliver's consciousness also shows a kind of nothingness. Ignoring the whole world, she is talking about her own death in this poem. She is conscious about her death that resembles nothingness. The word, 'vanish' symbolizes death. Only death is the proper destination of her life. So, this poem also depicts death, i.e., nothingness.

In this way, all of Oliver's poems discussed here deal with the theme of death which is not horrible but something to celebrate for the speakers. Glorifying death, Oliver has indeed valorized nothingness rather than looking for an essence in the conventional sense.

IV. Conclusion

This research work has critically examined the images of death in Mary Oliver's poetry. Most of Oliver's poems are related to death. In this commercial world, human relationships are judged through the eyes of profit and loss. Morality, humanity, love and care are decreasing day by day. Human value has been ruined. People become no longer human. There is not any meaning of brotherhood and sisterhood. Only matter is everything for the people of late capitalism. But all materialistic things, power and position, are nothing for her.

She has realized the meaninglessness of the world. Everywhere she sees only nothingness. Only death is the gateway to her life. She searches for her existence through the medium of death in the nihilistic manner. Recurring images of death in her poems reflect all those things. Dust, fire, dark and the word death itself are frequently used in her poetry. We are running here and there to achieve our destination. We never try to realize that our destination of life is only death. One day everyone should accept that reality. Oliver has realized the bitter reality of life. She has imagined her own death in her poetry. To walk with death, to talk with death, and to make friendship with death are the motto of her life.

As existential nihilism deals with nothingness, Oliver's poems also deal with nothingness. She believes that life's another name is death. She wants to achieve success and enjoyment through the medium of death. She compares life with thorn. Only death is the bed of roses for her. Our name and fame, hustle and bustle in life are nothing for her. Everything is momentary. She wants eternity through the medium of death. We even do not know who we are. But unfortunately, we are becoming more and more ego-centric. We are taking breath, laughing and dancing in this world, thinking that we will remain here forever. Realizing the fact of life, Oliver does not see any meaning in those activities. Except death, nothing is valuable for her. She never presents death as an accident; rather deals with it as a regular phenomenon – a part of life. The range and variety of attitudes towards death is very

wide, like the manner of an individual's death, the death either of herself or of a poetic persona, or the death of any other character, the psychic distance death creates between the dead and the living, the quaint feeling one experiences on the funeral procession going towards grave; walking silently behind the dead, all are treated in her poetry with a positive note.

She strongly believes that we do not have a happy life. Our best friends are only loneliness and misery because comfort and joy are like stranger in our life. The only truth she believes that we lay down in our coffin at last. She does not want to see herself sighing and frightened when death comes to her. Rather she compares herself as a bride who has married to amazement and also as a bridegroom who is taking the world into his arms. In her view, everything is a part of the world. We can see, taste, tickle, touch, hold onto, and this is nothing but dust. We are nobody but the particle of dust. It is our nature to see that the world is beautiful. But she thinks that we should stand in the dark. Except death, nothing is beautiful for her. Most of her poems are poems of goodbye. She does not like to stay any longer in this selfish world. We are breathing just a little, and calling it a life. She is not ready to accept that kind of life. Generation after generation, we are accomplishing nothing. We only live and then die. Unfortunately, we are showing too much attachment with this world. She believes that we are living in the world of illusion. We want, happiness but, for her, it is nothing more than one of the ways to enter fire.

For Oliver, whatever we plan to do in our life is nothing because we should die at last. So, she does not like to call this world useful, as we think. There is vast difference between reality and appearance. Whoever we are, that does not matter for her because when death comes, we should go alone. At that time, our relatives, power, and position, will not be with us. She has analyzed the bitter reality of life. Only death is everything for her.

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