

# Eco-psychological analysis of ecological autobiography. The case of Mary Oliver's *Upstream: Selected Essays*

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The significance of Freudian psychoanalysis in the United States

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) is widely recognized as an Austrian neurologist and the pioneer of psychoanalysis<sup>1</sup>, his therapeutic approach for understanding and addressing ailments believed to stem from psychological conflicts. During his psychoanalytical work, Freud discovered that patients' dreams could be effectively analyzed to uncover the intricate organization of unconscious material and to illustrate the psychological process of repression. Moreover, from August 29 to September 21, 1909, he traveled to the United States and delivered five lectures at Clark University. This visit is noteworthy as it symbolizes the sociocultural changes that commenced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and significantly

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Pick, *Psychoanalysis: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), 3.

impacted the United States for decades to come.<sup>2</sup> Although some scholars believe that psychoanalysis has always been controversial as a system for understanding the world, society, and human nature, the controversies of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century have obscured the extent to which earlier intellectuals and public figures in the United States embraced psychoanalytic ideas and practices. This is evident in the influence of psychoanalysis in films or on the history of local figures and organizations. Nathan G. Hale<sup>3</sup> even argued that “everyone agrees, Freud’s thinking had far greater intellectual and social impact than it did elsewhere on the planet.”

In the years following Freud’s visit in 1909 and leading up to World War II, historians discovered that psychoanalysis spread in the United States primarily through two channels: the medical field<sup>4</sup> and the intellectual and cultural avant-garde<sup>5</sup>. The influx of European analysts and other intellectuals to the United States during the interwar period resulted in significant interactions. The prominent analytic practitioners often demonstrated a high level of sensitivity towards what could be regarded as philosophical inquiries in Europe. These included not only the mind-body problem and issues related to human nature, but also encompassed questions on education, social structures, literature, and the arts. As a collective, psychoanalysts displayed a remarkable interdisciplinary background. Therefore, John Burnham<sup>6</sup> mentioned in his edited book it is not surprising that psychoanalysts had direct intellectual exchanges as well as professional interactions with prominent thinkers and artists. In other words, during the peak of both the dissemination and status of psychoanalysis in the United States in the 1940s–1960s, it was challenging to distinguish the fundamental psychoanalytic movement from the widespread cultural influence.

Besides, during World War II, professional psychologists were starting to acknowledge Freudian teachings and therapies, albeit reluctantly.<sup>7</sup> During the same period, psychoanalysis also gained prominence in other social science fields, especially from the 1930s onwards. An examination of academic publications from the 1950s demonstrates the substantial impact of psychoanalytic concepts, scholars in anthropology and related disciplines, as well as in literature and the arts, overtly and consistently integrated psychoanalytic theories into their work.<sup>8</sup> Especially, In 1959, sociologist Richard Tracy LaPiere<sup>9</sup>, from Stanford University, determined that in the United States, “the increasing prevalence

<sup>2</sup> John Donald Hicks, George E. Mowry, and Robert E. Burke, *The American Nation. A History of the United States from 1865 to the Present*, John D. Hicks, George E. Mowry, Robert E. Burke, 5th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 512–14.

<sup>3</sup> Nathan G Hale, *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> John Chynoweth Burnham, *Psychoanalysis and American Medicine: 1894-1918* (New York: International Universities Press, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> Nathan G Hale, *Freud and the Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>6</sup> John C Burnham, *After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1–4.

<sup>7</sup> David Shakow and David Rapaport, *The Influence of Freud on American Psychology* (New York: International Universities Press, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> Edward J. K. Gitre, “Importing Freud: First-Wave Psychoanalysis, Interwar Social Sciences, and the Interdisciplinary Foundations of an American Social Theory,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 46, no. 3 (July 9, 2010): 239–62.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Tracy Lapiere, *The Freudian Ethic*, by Richard Lapiere (Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1959).

of Freudianism as a rationale for and validation of human behavior represents a change of utmost importance.” The evidence clearly demonstrates the significance of Freud’s influence in America during the 1940s–1960s is compelling. This peak period came to an end in the aftermath of the cultural movements of the 1960s and the simultaneous revival of material, non-psychological concepts, and new psychopharmaceutical treatments for mental disorders.

## The id, the ego, and the superego in Freudian psychology

According to Freudian psychology<sup>10</sup>, it is argued that the separation of the psyche into the conscious and unconscious is the foundational premise of psychoanalysis. He claimed that the field of consciousness psychology is inadequate for addressing issues related to dreams and hypnosis.<sup>11</sup>

In Freud’s renowned psychoanalytic theory, he asserted that personality is comprised of three elements referred to as the id, the ego, and the superego. These components collaborate to produce intricate human behaviors.<sup>12</sup> Freud defined the ego as a component of the personality that facilitates the expression of the id’s desires in a practical and acceptable manner. The ego originates from the id but is shaped by real-world influence.

The interaction among the id, ego, and superego is significant, with the ego acting as the conscious, “executive” part of the personality. Instead of functioning separately and independently, the id, ego, and superego overlap and interact in various ways to influence thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. According to Freudian psychology, the ego acts as a mediator between the demands of the id, the superego, and reality. The iceberg analogy<sup>13</sup> illustrates that the mind is mostly concealed beneath the conscious surface, with the id being entirely unconscious while the ego and superego function both consciously and unconsciously. This interplay among the three components is comparable to the layers of a partially submerged iceberg.

## Day-dreaming and creative writers

According to Ethel Spector Person’s<sup>14</sup> statement in the introduction part of her edited volume, Freud published “Creative Writers and Daydreaming” in 1907, presenting it to an audience of around ninety intellectuals. It serves as Freud’s most direct investigation into the creative process. He argued that both the child at play and the creative writer are exercising their imaginative capacity. They both approach their activities with seriousness

<sup>10</sup>Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962), 3.

<sup>11</sup>Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962), 4.

<sup>12</sup>Simon Boag, “Ego, Drives, and the Dynamics of Internal Objects,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 5, no. 666 (July 1, 2014).

<sup>13</sup>Saul Mcleod, “Unconscious Mind | Simply Psychology,” [Simplypsychology.org](http://Simplypsychology.org), 2009.

<sup>14</sup>Servulo A Figueira, Peter Fonagy, and Ethel Spector Person, *On Freud’s “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming”* (Karnac Books, 2013).

and are able to differentiate between their imaginative creations and reality. He draws connections between creative writing and play, saying that a work of creative writing, much like a daydream, is an extension of the play of childhood. As Freud emphasized, daydreaming utilizes a present situation to construct a future image based on past experiences.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Freud observed that the connection between fantasy and time holds significant importance. A fantasy is sparked by a current event, evoking the memory of a past experience when the desire was fulfilled. He maintained that nighttime dreams and daydreams both serve as fulfillments of wishes. Thus, Ethel Spector Person contended that this insight anticipates a shift in Freud's later works, focusing on the nature and origin of unconscious fantasies.

On the other side, Trosman<sup>16</sup> emphasized that subsequent psychoanalytic studies on creativity have concentrated on three primary areas: biographical studies utilizing literary works as a reference, analyses of literary works, and inquiries into the origins of creativity. He stressed the role of positioning fantasy as central to creativity. Furthermore, Infante<sup>17</sup> concurs that artistic creation, akin to dreaming, frequently symbolizes the fulfillment of suppressed desires or an effort to navigate through traumatic or mourning circumstances and at times serves as a means to communicate a message.

## The Perception of Ecological Autobiography in the United States

Writing as a method for processing grief has existed for as long as art has. Since the romanticism era's celebration of introspective personal expression, this type of writing has frequently manifested as autobiography. According to Paschal<sup>18</sup>, autobiography is a penetration of the past by the present. Meanwhile, Mark Christopher Allister<sup>19</sup> pointed out in his monography that from Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* to Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, autobiographers have constructed narratives to articulate the pain and make sense of it all. They acquire strategies for responding that enable them to reinterpret their own histories, assisting them in mitigating their overwhelming sorrow.

On the other hand, in the ongoing development and expansion of American ecocriticism, moving away from its origins in the analysis of nonfiction nature writing, Nathan Straight<sup>20</sup> stressed in his monograph the importance of recalling that at the core of the varied genre of environmental writing lies the endeavor to grapple, through storytelling, with the connection between the individual and the world. While the environmental autobiography

<sup>15</sup>Servulo A Figueira, Peter Fonagy, and Ethel Spector Person, On Freud's "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (Karnac Books, 2013), 3–13.

<sup>16</sup>Servulo A Figueira, Peter Fonagy, and Ethel Spector Person, On Freud's "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (Karnac Books, 2013), xv.

<sup>17</sup>Servulo A Figueira, Peter Fonagy, and Ethel Spector Person, On Freud's "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (Karnac Books, 2013), xvi.

<sup>18</sup>Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*. (Routledge, 2017), 13.

<sup>19</sup>Mark Christopher Allister, *Refiguring the Map of Sorrow* (University of Virginia Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>20</sup>Nathan Straight, *Autobiography, Ecology, and the Well-Placed Self: The Growth of Natural Biography in Contemporary American Life Writing*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

and the ecological autobiography share many similarities, there are significant differences. For instance, Smith<sup>21</sup> emphasized that the environmental autobiography is more narrowly focused, examining various environments and “special places” one has encountered. Conversely, the ecological autobiography considers the entirety of one’s experiences in connection to the natural environment and acknowledges that our perceptions of the external environment are constantly influenced by our internal environment of needs, desires, memories, and visions.

Engaging in an ecological autobiography could be seen as a contemporary form of a *vision quest*<sup>22</sup>, in which an individual devotes time and effort to delve into the wilderness of their own past experiences. This vision quest is typically a gratifying experience, as it often leads to fresh insights and understandings and is frequently accompanied by a feeling of happiness and spiritual wellness. For example, this phenomenon occurs when authors of nonfictional works find personal connection and healing through their observations of the external world, leading to an end of depression and progression through mourning.

### The poet Mary Oliver and *Wild Geese* (1986)

In order to introduce specific Freudian ecopsychology within the literature of Mary Oliver, we will commence by conducting an analysis of her renowned poem *Wild Geese*. The analysis aims to highlight the dramatic essences of her writing, which are rooted in the experience of suffering and delicately outline the direction of Freudian ecopsychology. A detailed description will follow. Mary Oliver, a highly accomplished poet, is widely admired in the American literary community. She has been honored with prestigious accolades, including the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for her compelling poetry. Renowned American poet Maxine Kumin praised Oliver as an indefatigable guide to the natural world in the *Women’s Review of Books*.<sup>23</sup> Her poetry predominantly explores themes of vivid imagery and the natural world. In her seventh collection *Dream Work* published in 1986, Oliver presented *Wild Geese*<sup>24</sup>, a poem that encourages readers to embrace the beauty of nature. Also, this poem is written in the style of the Romantics, like John Keats.

You do not have to be good.  
 You do not have to walk on your knees  
 for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.  
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
 love what it loves.

<sup>21</sup>John C. Smyth, “Environment and Education: A View of a Changing Scene,” *Environmental Education Research* 1, no. 1 (January 1995): 3–20.

<sup>22</sup>Ruth A. Wilson, “Ecological Autobiography,” *Environmental Education Research* 1, no. 3 (October 1995): 308

<sup>23</sup>Poetry Foundation, “Mary Oliver | Poetry Foundation,” Poetry Foundation, 2019, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/mary-oliver>.

<sup>24</sup>Mary Oliver, *Dream Work* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 14.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

(Mary Oliver, *Wild Geese*)

The poem provides the reader with insights in a calm and tranquil manner. Oliver recognizes the human tendency to seek direction and meaning, yet people often struggle to feel content within ourselves, consistently encountering sensations of being out of place. She advises the audience that when experiencing despair or inadequacy, turn to nature and observe the wild geese. Interestingly, novel findings emerge as we shift our focus to the intricate elements of the poem.

In the opening lines of the poem, Oliver provides counsel and direction on how to lead a fulfilling life. She asserts the importance of contemplating the concept of “to be good.” The poem commences with the proclamation, “You do not have to be good,” immediately granting permission to readers to cease their pursuit of flawlessness. Suggesting that life is challenging and rife with emotional turmoil, the poem proposes that individuals should show more compassion to themselves. With a distinctly Freudian undertone, she underscores the presence of hardships in life, including suppressed negative emotions from childhood and the past. In lines 4 and 5, the author reinforces the concept that humans are inherently animals. The implication is that we should embrace our instincts, which may superficially appear hedonistic. However, upon closer examination of the poem, it becomes evident that the author is advocating for a return to nature and a rejection of societal constraints. The message is to align ourselves with the natural order.

In the subsequent lines of poetry, Oliver conveys to the reader that regardless of the events unfolding in one’s life, the world persists in its rotation. We encounter challenges in our human existence. For instance, fretting about fitting in with a specific social group. Nevertheless, in the natural world, we witness the unwavering rising and setting of the sun. The natural world will endure unchanged, despite our tribulations. When Oliver alludes to the wild geese, she encourages us to emulate them. They are certain of their place and purpose as they return home to nature. Furthermore, in the final section of the poem, Mary Oliver presents the reader with certain resolutions while demonstrating the presence of struggle in life. When experiencing solitude, take a stroll outdoors and observe the natural surroundings. The planet reaches out to us, offering contrasts of both adversity and adventure, much like the wild

geese. We should not succumb to loneliness and life-grief, for we are integral to the organic world and belong to the community of nature.

The initial impression that many readers may have of this poem is the appealing representation of the natural world and the encouragement to appreciate its uncomplicated beauty. However, upon deeper reflection, it becomes apparent that the longing for nature originates from the author's desire to escape the hardships and suffering of life. In essence, the poem not only communicates the beauty of nature but also its significance: nature serves as a remedy for the struggles of childhood and promotes healing. In other words, regardless of one's circumstances, even if one feels isolated or adrift, one can look out into the expansive realm of nature. This profound understanding of the natural world may have also altered the initial perception of Mary Oliver for many individuals.

The concluding section of the poem emphasizes the utilization of the imagination bestowed by the world, despite feelings of isolation. This imaginative faculty grants us the freedom to craft myriad creations, from poetry to other forms of literature. Freud perceives this faculty as a form of daydreaming, enabling escape from trauma while intertwining creative writing and imagination. Moreover, she claims that nature serves as a potent aid to deal with trauma and strengthen our imaginative capacity.

### The reception of Mary Oliver's *Upstream: Selected Essays* (2016)

Mary Oliver was raised in Maple Hills Heights, a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. She found comfort in a difficult home life in the nearby woods, building shelters from twigs and grass, and writing poetry. A prolific writer of both poetry and prose, her main focus remains on delving into the connection between humanity and the natural world.

*Upstream: Selected Essays* (2016), in this thoughtful and illuminating spiritual compilation of essays, Mary Oliver provides further astute observations about the natural world, animals, and the literary influencers who have guided her. *The New York Times* assigned a high rating to this work, emphasizing that it presents a compelling synthesis of the poet's reflections on the natural, spiritual, and artistic realms.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, the *Chicago Tribune* commented that within the slender volume containing 19 spiritual essays, Oliver presents to the reader epistles after epistles from her Book of Nature and the meditations therein.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Danny Heitman<sup>27</sup> also referenced Oliver's works in his review, stating that Oliver's poems about nature are deceptively simple and straightforward, similar to Robert Frost's seemingly plain outdoor poems.<sup>28</sup> However, upon closer examination, both Oliver's and Frost's verses unveil deeper and more intricate themes.

<sup>25</sup>Daphne Kalotay, "Essays," *The New York Times*, December 16, 2016, sec. Books.

<sup>26</sup>Barbara Mahany, "Brian D. McLaren, Mary Oliver and W.S. Merwin Address the World of the Spiritual," *Chicago Tribune*, November 8, 2016.

<sup>27</sup>Danny Heitman, "'Upstream' Places Poet Mary Oliver in Her 'Arena of Delight,'" *Christian Science Monitor*, October 19, 2016.

<sup>28</sup>Poetry Foundation, "Robert Frost," Poetry Foundation, 2019.

The book is segmented into five parts. In the initial section, Mary Oliver describes her deep affection for nature, reading, and poetry. She also discusses her admiration for the poet Walt Whitman and reflects on writing as an art form. It is important to note the author's motivations for leaving her parents and immersing herself in nature. Oliver disclosed in a 2011 interview with Maria Shriver<sup>29</sup> that she had experienced sexual abuse at the hands of her parents during her childhood, leading to recurring nightmares and significant mental distress. As a result, she expressed a desire to become invisible and to seek safety and healing in the natural environment of the woods. In the subsequent sections, the author not only delineates the sea creatures but also portrays the avian and amphibian inhabitants surrounding the pond and turtles from a wider viewpoint. Furthermore, Oliver divulges her beloved poets such as Emerson, Poe, Whitman, and Wordsworth. The fourth section also serves as a depiction of the natural world, but in this instance, the author does more than simply observe; instead, she integrates herself as a part of nature and views animals as companions akin to humans. This is evident in her concern for the potential damage to spider webs during a household move and in her personal efforts to tend to an injured black-backed seagull. The last part focuses on the location where Oliver resided for an extended period, Provincetown. This wistful section chronicles the city's rapid expansion in the tourism sector alongside the surging influx of tourists and resultant environmental degradation as the economy flourished. Despite the inadequate mitigation of environmental issues, her affection for the land where she dwelled endures.

Hamilton Cain<sup>30</sup> penned in his critique of *Upstream* that Oliver immerses us in an ever-widening circle, in which a shrub or flower opens onto the cosmos. Thus, imagine taking this collection of essays and immersing yourself in a garden teeming with a myriad of blossoming flowers and verdant grass. The air is filled with melodies sung by birds while warm sunlight bathes your body, and a light blue sky with drifting white clouds stretches overhead. As you settle onto the lawn with a cup of robust coffee and a slice of cake, any internal worries could be dispelled momentarily, and you could relish the exquisite moments inspired by the poet and nature.

## The courage to go upstream and reverence for nature

The book commences with "Upstream," a poetic segment where Oliver reminisces about wading upstream in rippling water as a child while her parents stayed downstream.

I walked, all one spring day, upstream, sometimes in the midst of the ripples, sometimes along the shore. My company were violets, Dutchman's-breeches, spring beauties, trilliums, bloodroot, ferns rising so curled one could feel the upward push of the delicate hairs upon their bodies. My parents were downstream, not far away, then farther away because I was walking the wrong way, upstream instead of downstream.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Maria Shriver, "Maria Shriver Interviews the Famously Private Poet Mary Oliver," Oprah.com, September 3, 2011.

<sup>30</sup>HAMILTON CAIN Special to the Star Tribune, "Review: 'Upstream: Selected Essays,' by Mary Oliver," Star Tribune, October 7, 2016.

<sup>31</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 4–5.



The author begins with a captivating narrative detailing how her individual journey distinguishes her from her parents. Her company comprises violets, trilliums, and ferns. She is gratified by the continual opening of her heart. She presents the notion of “upstream,” a metaphorical voyage against the current, an unexplored path that leads to marvels yet to be unearthed. The theme “upstream” provides a guiding framework for the entire compilation, urging readers to question traditional norms and delve into the profound aspects of their own lives. However, the reason behind the author’s immersion in nature and departure from her parents is a question that requires contemplation. From the author’s background and interview she was given, it is evident that Oliver’s childhood was overshadowed by the trauma of sexual abuse that was inflicted by her parents. According to Freudian psychoanalysis, people’s childhood memories are persistently revisited in their subconscious dreams and repressed emotions, causing significant distress to the author. Consequently, she felt the need to distance herself from her parents and seek a new world of her own. It is evident from Oliver’s accounts that the environment where she experiences profound healing is nature. Venturing into the forest and against the current, she finds solace and protection within the realm of towering trees.

She is amazed by the resilience of a hundred-year-old oak and a hungry bear. Subsequently, following these consecutive moments of wonder, Oliver implores us to assist her in teaching the children because she believes that what adults often overlook, children approach with great curiosity.

Teach the children. We don’t matter so much, but the children do. (...) Give them peppermint to put in their pockets as they go to school. Give them the fields and the woods and the possibility of the world salvaged from the lords of profit. Stand them in the stream, head them upstream, rejoice as they learn to love this green space they live in, its sticks and leaves and then the silent, beautiful blossoms.<sup>32</sup>

The author conveys her awe for the natural world in the concluding section of the essay. Moreover, Oliver underscores the importance of incorporating natural elements, such as peppermint, into daily life to foster a stronger connection between humans and nature. She advises children to cherish green spaces, as they will serve as essential tools for dispelling inner darkness in the future. When the spiritual section is connected with the babbling of a stream and blossoms amidst colorful flowers, it creates a tranquil world free from distress and filled with hope and security. This is the meaningful message relating to the power of nature that the author aims to impart to children.

## The world of poetry and Oliver’s creative writing

In her ongoing exploration “upstream”, Oliver leads readers on a captivating journey into the realm of creative intellects and her unwavering quest for art. Oliver underscores the importance of her childhood “friend” Walt Whitman, through whose work she first comprehended

<sup>32</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 8.

that a poem is a temple that a place to access and in which to experience, and who urged her to disappear into the realm of her writing.

But first and foremost, I learned from Whitman that the poem is a temple—or a green field—a place to enter, and in which to feel.<sup>33</sup>

Oliver observes that during her childhood, she lacked genuine friendships and perceived those around her as strangers. It was through poetry that she found her first friend, Walt Whitman, whom she cherished as a valued companion, despite they are in different periods. This marked the turning point in her life, as she discovered that nature healed her heart and poetry sparked her creative inspiration. This curiosity transformed her rebellious nature, which had previously led to serious truancy issues at school. In other words, poetry catalyzed her character transformation and instilled in her an appreciation for the world's beauty. It also facilitated her interpersonal connections, fostered creativity, and helped her overcome past hardships.

I never met any of my friends, of course, in a usual way—they were strangers, and lived only in their writings. But if they were only shadow-companions, still they were constant, and powerful, and amazing. That is, they said amazing things, and for me it changed the world.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, Oliver explores the profound impact of art and nature on the human spirit, encouraging individuals to find motivation in the environment. She reflects on the factors that empowered her to form a fulfilling life through work and love, emphasizing, “I could not be a poet without the natural world. Someone else could. But not me. For me, the door to the woods is the door to the temple.”<sup>35</sup> Perhaps we could interpret this passage of hers with a unique perspective. Freud employed the technical term *unconscious fantasy*<sup>36</sup> to elucidate the connection between creative writing and day-dreaming. In Oliver's journey from nature to creativity, nature serves as the primal material that stimulates her imagination. Through nature, she taps into her unconscious fantasies, which in turn prompt recollections of poems she has read and enable a deeper focus on the creative writing of her art.

Oliver also found inspiration for her creative writing in the poetry of other writers in addition to Walt Whitman. For instance, Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom she describes as being “unbelievably sweet and, for all his devotion to reason, wondrously spontaneous.”<sup>37</sup> William Wordsworth showed her that one's authentic dwelling is formed “not of beams and nails but of existence itself.”<sup>38</sup> Edgar Allen Poe, who made it clear to her that “in this universe we are given two gifts: the ability to love, and the ability to ask questions.”<sup>39</sup> It is evident that the

<sup>33</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 12.

<sup>34</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 7.

<sup>35</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 154.

<sup>36</sup>Servulo A Figueira, Peter Fonagy, and Ethel Spector Person, *On Freud's "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming"* (Karnac Books, 2013), xii.

<sup>37</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 65-66.

<sup>38</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 114.

<sup>39</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 91.

aforementioned instances are indicative of Oliver's expression of gratitude towards the authors who provided motivation and inspiration during her formative year.

## Stay alive and feel the eternity of time

Oliver, as a nature enthusiast, composes her poems and essays in a manner that not only portrays the splendor of nature and her affinity for her own natural surroundings but also connects them to her personal experiences, a characteristic of environmental autobiography that surpasses the realm of nature. As noted by Ruth A. Wilson<sup>40</sup> in her paper, the concept of ecological autobiography goes beyond simply admiring the beauty of nature; it involves incorporating personal experiences to envision and contemplate the environment. This imaginative process frequently exhibits Freudian attributes, drawing from childhood experiences or previous traumas woven into non-fictional accounts of the environment and the evolving self. In Oliver's chapter, she discusses how adults possess the autonomy to alter their surroundings, while children lack the ability to do so and must accept their circumstances quietly.

Adults can change their circumstances; children cannot. Children are powerless, and in difficult situations they are the victims of every sorrow and mischance and rage around them, for children feel all of these things but without any of the ability that adults have to change them. Whatever can take a child beyond such circumstances, therefore, is an alleviation and a blessing.<sup>41</sup>

Through her narrative, Oliver portrays a sense of powerlessness during her formative years, enduring mental anguish without the ability to effect change. She describes a feeling of sinking deeper into this despair, mentally numb as her vitality wanes. In her quest to escape this predicament, she endeavors to seek analgesic solutions that can alleviate her suffering and restore a sense of vitality. Fortunately, she discovered that nature and literary creativity served as the remedies she required to heal from her traumatic memories. Literary creation resembles a delightful daydream, while the lush greenery of nature bestows upon her a profound sense of inner peace and keeps her staying alive.

Moreover, Oliver outlines the necessary conditions for creative work as being solitude, concentration, and self-discovery throughout the creative process. Throughout her creative process, she realized she had three selves within her. They are the past self, the child. The self that is governed by time is called the social occupation. And the self that transcends the boundaries of time is the one who hungers for eternity.

I am, myself, three selves at least. To begin with, there is the child I was.<sup>42</sup>

And there is the attentive, social self. This is the smiler and the doorkeeper.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup>Ruth A. Wilson, "Ecological Autobiography," *Environmental Education Research* 1, no. 3 (October 1995): 305–14.

<sup>41</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 14.

<sup>42</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 24.

<sup>43</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 24.

It is a third self, occasional in some of us, tyrant in others. This self is out of love with the ordinary; it is out of love with time. It has a hunger for eternity.<sup>44</sup>

These three selves described by Oliver encompass the self of the past, which, though it exists in the subconscious dream world at the present possible time, never disappears and is always with us. Furthermore, upon entering society, everyone is assigned a societal role that must be fulfilled to signify their position in that society. For instance, some individuals become regular pilots, while others become ordinary company employees. It is clear that the second self is relatively influenced by time and social responsibilities. Conversely, the third self has character, a creativity that surpasses time and possesses the nature of a longing for eternity, which can be interpreted as a creative inspiration that flows constantly and is not bound by time. It is comprised of curiosity, brimming with a desire for the future and the unknown.

Interestingly, our minds have a tendency to easily make analogies to Freud's three articulated selves: id, ego and superego. The primal part of the heart, id, operates based on the principle of pleasure. The superego serves as the moral component of the mind, embodying internal social standards and values. Meanwhile, the ego adheres to the reality principle and functions as a mediator between the two.<sup>45</sup> If this theory is applied to Oliver's case, it will be discovered that the third self, referred to as such by her, functions similarly to the ego, utilizing imagination and creativity that transcends time to maintain a balance between past trauma, social morality, and societal norms. Oliver employs creativity to confront the haunting memories of her childhood while simultaneously challenging societal perspectives and establishing a new therapeutic world for herself through creative writing and nature.

There is a notion that creative people are absentminded, reckless, heedless of social customs and obligations. It is, hopefully, true. For they are in another world altogether. It is a world where the third self is governor.<sup>46</sup>

Creative artists, as Oliver notes in her work, transcend social norms and responsibilities. This is something she has been striving for all along.

## The healing function of nature

When Oliver was a child, residing in a small town surrounded by wooded areas and a meandering creek, her great joy and solitary pastime was constructing a series of miniature dwellings. And the small-scale homes she constructed consistently exhibited distinctive characteristics.

They were huts really, made of sticks and grass, maybe a small heap of fresh leaves inside. There was never a closure but always an open doorway, and I would sit just inside, looking out into the

<sup>44</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 27.

<sup>45</sup>Saul Mcleod, "Id, Ego and Superego," *Simply Psychology*, July 10, 2023, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/psyche.html>.

<sup>46</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 29.

world. Such architectures were the capsules of safety, and freedom as well, open to the wind, made of grass and smelling like leaves and flowers.<sup>47</sup>

Oliver built the shelter using basic branches and foliage. Her sole desire was to have a door that allowed the wind to enter, ensuring a view of nature from inside. This location serves as a protective capsule for her, blocking communication with those around her and society as a whole while maintaining a connection to nature. In essence, the trees, flowers, and green leaves provide the author with an invaluable sense of security, acting as a healing remedy for inner peace. Additionally, she responds to nature with solitude, which could be considered a sign of respect for nature.

(...) solitude was a prerequisite to being openly and joyfully susceptible and responsive to the world of leaves, light, birdsong, flowers, flowing water.<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile, there are numerous interactions between her and natural creatures. For example, when she goes for a walk with her dog and encounters a fox, she observes them chasing each other. Likewise, she ventures into the woods alone to search for an owl's nest, and she tends to an injured seagull to extend its life. Through these experiences, she comes to realize that humans, like any other creatures of nature, are simply a part of this ecosystem, and they support each other in times of need. This de-anthropocentric way of thinking enables the author to better comprehend nature and derive healing energy from it.

Furthermore, as the author delves into the influence of nature on herself, she further stresses that the abode she truly seeks in her own life is not a traditional house but the entire earth, or, in essence, existence itself.

And we might, in our lives, have many thresholds, many houses to walk out from and view the stars, or to turn and go back to for warmth and company. But the real one—the actual house not of beams and nails but of existence itself—is all of earth, with no door, no address separate from oceans or stars, or from pleasure or wretchedness either, or hope, or weakness, or greed.<sup>49</sup>

It is worth considering for the reader to ponder the author's discussion regarding the essence of existence itself. Perhaps the author's true intention is to convey to the audience the sublime and eternal beauty of nature. We can speculate on the plausibility of this interpretation. Whether it is the mountains and rivers, flowers, plants, or trees, their existence seems eternal compared to the fleeting experiences of human beings. In other words, people may be too fixated on their own experiences, leading them to be trapped in the haze of the past. Therefore, viewing the constancy of nature can help us realize that although we suffer in our painful struggles, we should also remember that we are part of the natural order and that we belong to the realm of things, having a recurring feeling that we have our place "in the family of things."

<sup>47</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 111.

<sup>48</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 111.

<sup>49</sup>Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 114.

This is why immersing ourselves in nature can provide clarity when we are burdened by mental stress or relationship issues. Its magnificence and eternity put human hardships into perspective.

Finally, the utilization of nature's healing power in the inner spiritual realm, facilitating the process of moving past traumas, provides a solution for individuals deeply entrenched in difficulties. This distinctive perspective on ecopsychology is prominent throughout Oliver's ecological memoir.

## Conclusion

Eco-autobiography, as a distinctive form of non-fiction narrative, not only delves into the connection between nature and humanity from an eco-critical perspective but also underscores the vital role of the natural environment in human development. Furthermore, this autobiographical approach integrates the author's childhood experiences, and the work articulates the interplay between subconscious memories and the environment. In essence, it merges Freudian psychology and eco-criticism, which tend to call it ecopsychology, providing a novel interpretation of the role of memoirs: it unearths the author's traumatic experiences through memories and offers resolution by harnessing the therapeutic influence of the natural environment. This divergence from conventional memoirs is noteworthy.

Mary Oliver, the renowned American poet, can be considered as one of the exemplars of a comprehensive depiction of ecological autobiography combined with the methodology of Freudian eco-psychology. In particular, Freud, in his psychoanalytic theory, proposed three components of psychoanalysis: the id, the ego, and the superego. And he highlighted the moderating function of the ego between the other two. However, it is important to note that Mary Oliver also mentions three "selves" in her work, similar to those identified by Freud. These include the enduring influence of the past, the societal roles individuals assume, and a transcendent self that seeks what she loves and eternity of time. She developed Freud's idea that the ego is a crucial point in the interaction of consciousness with nature and its healing influence on us. This deliberate echoing of Freud's concepts aids readers in seamlessly integrating the two perspectives.

After conducting an analysis of the volume *Upstream: Selected Essays* (2016), in conjunction with the literary theory of ecopsychology, we can possibly derive the following conclusions: Firstly, childhood memories have the potential to become integrated with long-term memory, gradually fading but never truly vanishing. As Freud has noted, they may resurface subconsciously, such as in dreams. Secondly, the work prompts readers to revisit the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Eco-psychological theory endeavors to elucidate the interconnectedness of the natural environment and human beings. Natural creatures and green spaces not only bring tranquility to the human spirit but also aid in overcoming depressed childhood memories and attaining the joy and liberation of healing. Furthermore, for Mary Olivier, nature has evolved into a sanctuary for her daydreams and imagination, inspiring her creative writing through solitary immersion and the study of poets' works that resonate with her, repeatedly nurturing her great new works.

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# KEYWORDS

## ecological autobiography

THE JOY AND  
LIBERATION OF  
HEALING

*experience of suffering*

**ABSTRACT:**

This study examines the confluence of psychoanalysis and ecocriticism in American nonfiction, particularly analyzing the ecological autobiography “*Upstream: Selected Essays* (2016)” from the Freudian eco-psychoanalytic perspective. The paper demonstrates the interplay of the ego with the id and superego in Freud’s theory and the contribution of daydreaming to creative writing. Moreover, analysis in specific work suggests that while childhood experiences of suffering persist subconsciously, revisiting human-nature relationships is vital. It tends to be clear that natural environments offer mental relief and assist in mending memories from an eco-psychoanalytic viewpoint. Meanwhile, the therapeutic potential of creative writing through daydreaming and imagery for humans is also acknowledged.

*Freudian eco-psychoanalysis*

## DAY-DREAMING

**creative writing****NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

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