

# *The Leaf and the Cloud*

by Mary Oliver

Da Capo Press

## A Reading and Discussion Guide

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### **SUMMARY:**

Mary Oliver's *The Leaf and the Cloud* is a book-length poem in six parts. It takes its title from a section of John Ruskin's work, *Modern Painters*, from which she quotes: "Between the earth and man arose the leaf. Between the heaven and man came the cloud." As the line indicates, Oliver is interested in the natural world and our place within its order. Particularly vivid are her descriptions of the smallest wonders, those that require – and deserve - our closest attention: "The green pea/ climbs the stake, on her sugary muscles...The rosy comma of the radish/ fattens in the soil." The natural world, in Oliver's poetry, has a consciousness - and this consciousness informs all life.

Death, a part of life, is felt in many of these poems. Of her buried mother and father she writes, "But I will not give them the kiss of complicity. / I will not give them the responsibility for my life." Rather, the responsibility is placed on each person to notice everything, great and small, and to take comfort in this discovery. Of the poem itself she writes, "It wants to open itself, / like the door of a little temple, / so that you might step inside and be cooled and refreshed, and less yourself than part of everything." Again, it is the natural world that provides humanity with comfort, and comfort is the best we can hope for. In fact, the poem begins, "Welcome to the silly, comforting poem." For Oliver, writing itself also brings comfort: "I have placed one world next to another/ to build something full of praise."

The sensual, gorgeous world Mary Oliver fashions in *The Leaf and the Cloud* builds as the collection develops. If the world seems small and focused at first, by the end of the book it is all-encompassing and familiar. Over and again, she describes the physical world in fresh and exciting ways, and follows up each description with, "This is the world." Of course, by the end, we are right in it with her.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Throughout the book there are many images of birds. In addition to being part of the natural world, what do the birds seem to represent for the poet?

2. Mary Oliver asks many questions in *The Leaf and the Cloud*. How do her questions help her advance the notion that life should be lived one day at a time?
3. The poet often employs lists to convey the many beautiful things in nature. However, when she writes about burying her parents, the poetry takes a narrative turn. Why? How does the Earth respond to these burials? How do they change the poet?

### **ACTIVITIES:**

Names and naming are an integral part of the poems in this collection. Words like “Wisteria” and “Catalpa” are important not only for their images, but for the way they sound. Try writing a short poem using only nouns. Include flowers, trees, people, anything. Is it possible to tell a story this way?

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

Mary Oliver was born in Ohio in 1935. She has written many books of poems including *Why I Wake Early* (2004), *House of Light* (1990), which won the Christopher Award, and *American Primitive* (1983) which won the Pulitzer Prize. She has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and from the National Endowment for the Arts. She won an American Academy of Arts & Letters Award, a Lannan Literary Award, and the Poetry Society of America's Shelley Memorial Prize and Alice Fay di Castagnola Award. Currently, she holds the Catherine Osgood Foster Chair for Distinguished Teaching at Bennington College. She lives in Provincetown, MA and Bennington, VT.

### **HELPFUL LINKS:**

<http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmID=269> : Academy of American Poets

[http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/oliver/oliver.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/oliver/oliver.htm)

Modern American Poetry website. Includes an essay on Oliver's poetry and further links.



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