“The Black Walnut Tree” By Mary Oliver

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Introduction

Mary Oliver’s “The Black Walnut Tree” and Richard Wilbur’s “The Writer” both use an ordinary domestic setting to explore memory, inheritance, and the difficult work of carrying a life forward. Oliver presents a mother and daughter considering whether to sell a mature walnut tree to pay a mortgage. Wilbur presents a father listening outside his daughter’s room as she struggles to write. In each poem, a practical activity opens into a meditation on family history and hope (Oliver, 1979; Wilbur, 1988).

The original essay correctly recognized memory as a link between the poems and noticed that Oliver’s tree carries family meaning while Wilbur’s father wishes his daughter a safe passage. It incorrectly referred to Mary Oliver as male, called both poems stories, and described the father’s care as selfish. A more precise comparison shows that both speakers must respect something they cannot fully control: inherited identity in Oliver and another person’s creative struggle in Wilbur.

The Situation in “The Black Walnut Tree”

Oliver’s poem begins with a concrete economic problem. The mother and daughter need money, and selling the black walnut tree could help them meet the mortgage. The tree has commercial value, and its physical presence creates possible risks to the house. Their conversation therefore does not oppose sentiment to a trivial concern. Financial pressure is real.

The poem’s power comes from the way this decision expands. The tree is not merely lumber. It is connected to family labor, migration, land, and the memory of ancestors who cultivated a life in Ohio. Cutting it would be a rational transaction in one sense and a symbolic break in another.

Oliver does not pretend that memory pays bills. She allows both claims to remain present. The family’s choice acquires moral weight because survival includes more than immediate cash; it also includes the stories through which people know who they are.

The Tree as Inheritance

A tree is a particularly effective symbol of inheritance. Its roots extend invisibly into the ground, while its branches occupy the present and produce future growth. It outlives individual decisions and makes time visible through size, rings, scars, and seasonal change.

The black walnut also belongs to a specific place. The poem connects the women to land worked by earlier generations. An ancestor's labor is not described as abstract heritage but as an embodied history of clearing, planting, and endurance. The tree stands where those histories meet the current mortgage crisis.

Because the inheritance is living, preserving it is not passive nostalgia. The tree drops difficult fruit, requires space, and could damage the house. To keep it is to accept burden as part of belonging.

Economic Pressure and Moral Choice

The mother and daughter discuss the sale almost like business partners. They know the likely value and understand the practical case. This measured opening makes the later emotional resistance more credible. They are not unaware of need.

The conflict raises a broader question: what should be converted into money when a family is under pressure? Property ownership often demands sacrifice, and natural objects can be treated as assets. Oliver does not condemn every use of timber. She examines one decision in which market value cannot contain the object's personal and historical value.

The women's refusal may look financially imprudent, yet the poem frames it as loyalty to a lineage. They would experience the sale not simply as losing shade or beauty but as participating in the erasure of family memory.

Dream, Guilt, and the Ancestors

The poem's dreamlike movement reveals that the decision has already been judged at a level deeper than calculation. The speaker imagines ancestors and feels accountable to them. Their presence is not a literal supernatural command; it dramatizes inherited conscience.

The women anticipate shame if they cut the tree. Shame here is connected to identity: they would become people who chose immediate money over a material witness to family endurance. Whether readers agree with the decision, the emotion shows how memory governs action.

Oliver's language moves between conversational simplicity and compressed imagery. That shift mirrors the transformation of a household debate into an encounter with history.

The Situation in “The Writer”

Wilbur’s poem begins outside a room where the speaker’s daughter types. The father hears pauses and renewed effort. He imagines her life as a ship carrying heavy cargo and wishes her a fortunate passage.

The metaphor expresses care, but it also reveals distance. A parent can wish for safety and offer shelter, yet cannot sail another person’s life. The daughter’s writing is her own voyage, and the closed door marks an appropriate boundary.

The father’s listening makes the poem intimate. He does not interrupt or tell her what to write. His role is to recognize the seriousness of the struggle.

The Starling Memory

The sound of the typewriter recalls a starling that was once trapped in the same room. The family opened the windows and waited while the frightened bird repeatedly tried to escape. The memory changes the father’s metaphor. Writing is not only a ship’s planned journey; it can be a desperate effort to find an opening.

The bird’s struggle requires restraint from the observers. Too much intervention could increase panic. The family’s help consists of creating conditions for escape and then allowing the creature to discover the route.

This memory deepens the father’s understanding of his daughter. He first offers the conventional wish of “good luck,” but then recognizes that her task may demand more than luck. Creative and personal survival involve repeated collision, exhaustion, recovery, and persistence.

Writing as Labor

The daughter’s typing is not presented as effortless inspiration. The stops and starts make composition audible as labor. The typewriter’s mechanical sounds contrast with the invisible work of choosing language, confronting experience, and shaping identity.

The father cannot know exactly what she is writing or what burdens she carries. His metaphors are attempts at understanding, not complete definitions. This humility prevents his concern from becoming control.

Wilbur therefore represents parenthood as attentive distance. Love does not guarantee access to another person’s mind. It can create a space in which that person’s work is respected.

Memory as a Guide to Present Action

Both poems use memory to decide how to behave in the present. In Oliver, ancestral memory leads the women to keep the tree. In Wilbur, the memory of the starling teaches the father to understand his daughter's struggle with greater seriousness and less interference.

Memory is not passive recollection. It produces ethical orientation. The past tells the speakers what kind of relationship they have to land, family, freedom, and responsibility.

At the same time, neither poem treats memory as perfect knowledge. Oliver's ancestors are imaginatively reconstructed, and Wilbur's bird offers an analogy rather than an exact explanation of the daughter. Memory helps, but interpretation remains necessary.

Domestic Space and Hidden Drama

The poems locate major emotional questions inside a house and yard. A mortgage conversation, a tree, a bedroom, and the noise of typing become sufficient materials for serious poetry. Neither poem needs a public spectacle.

Domestic space contains history. Oliver's property is connected to generations of work, while Wilbur's room preserves a previous encounter between human observers and a trapped bird. The familiar setting becomes layered rather than ordinary.

This approach also honors experiences often dismissed as private. Financial stress, parental concern, creative frustration, and inherited obligation shape lives as powerfully as public events.

Nature in the Two Poems

Nature appears differently in each work. Oliver's tree is rooted, enduring, and tied to place. Its value lies partly in remaining where it is. Wilbur's starling is mobile but trapped; its life depends on finding a way out.

These images create a productive contrast. One poem asks whether to preserve rootedness, while the other asks how to support departure. Family love may require keeping a connection in one situation and releasing control in another.

Neither natural image is decorative. The tree and bird organize the poems' moral reasoning. They carry meanings that direct statements could not express as fully.

Generational Relationships

Oliver's poem centers on a mother and daughter deciding together under the pressure of ancestors. The generations form a chain: forebears, present women, and the future implied by preserving the tree. Authority is shared rather than located in one parent.

Wilbur's poem centers on a father observing a daughter. He has more age and memory but not control over her future. His wisdom lies in revising his own understanding as he listens.

Both poems resist a model in which older generations simply instruct younger ones. The living negotiate with the dead in Oliver, and the parent learns how to care from watching a younger person's struggle in Wilbur.

Honor, Survival, and Freedom

The original analysis described Oliver's choice as a conflict between money and honor. That formulation is useful if honor is understood not as social pride but as fidelity to a family history. The women fear that financial survival purchased through the tree would create another kind of loss.

In Wilbur, survival is associated with freedom. The starling must find the open window; the daughter must discover a form and direction for her writing. The father can provide a safe environment but cannot complete the movement.

Both poems therefore redefine success. It is not merely paying a debt or producing a polished text. It is preserving a relationship to identity while allowing life to continue.

Language and Form

Oliver uses accessible speech, concrete details, and a gradual movement into dream and ancestral memory. The poem's apparent simplicity allows its moral complexity to emerge without abstract argument. Repetition and shifts in tone convey the women's inability to treat the decision as a neutral sale.

Wilbur's formal control contrasts with the daughter's audible struggle. Extended metaphors of voyage and flight create an orderly poem about uncertain creation. The father's revision from one metaphor to another is itself a form of learning.

Both poets trust images to hold competing meanings. The tree is asset and ancestor; the bird is memory and model; the typewriter signals work and distress; the house is shelter and site of difficult choice.

Important Differences

Oliver's central conflict is collective and economic. Mother and daughter must decide what to do with inherited property under material pressure. The likely action—cutting or keeping—is concrete and irreversible.

Wilbur's conflict is more observational. The father does not decide the daughter's future; he tries to understand how to accompany her. His transformation occurs in perception rather than through a public action.

The emotional direction also differs. "The Black Walnut Tree" moves toward refusal and rootedness. "The Writer" moves toward release and a more serious blessing for another person's passage.

Conclusion

"The Black Walnut Tree" and "The Writer" show how memory enters present responsibility. Oliver's mother and daughter preserve a tree because it embodies ancestral labor and a form of belonging that cannot be replaced by its sale price. Wilbur's father remembers a trapped starling and learns to see his daughter's writing as a struggle for freedom that he can witness but not control.

Together, the poems suggest that family inheritance is neither simple possession nor command. Sometimes love keeps a living connection rooted; sometimes it opens a window and waits. In both cases, memory becomes valuable when it helps the speakers respond to another life with patience, humility, and care.

Works Cited

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