

Raul Mogená

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Leslie Carpenter

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*Reader Response Essay*

Mary Oliver's poem "Wild Geese" opens with a direct, reassuring command: "You do not have to be good" (Oliver 1). From that first line the speaker releases the reader from guilt and moves toward a wider, kinder view of life. Rather than asking for penance or perfection, the poem asks readers to notice their desires and to let life continue alongside their pain. Through plain diction, spare organization, and steady rhythm, Oliver creates a calm, inclusive voice that comforts and encourages action: pay attention, accept yourself, and reconnect with the natural world.

Oliver's diction is simple but precise, which is part of what makes the poem so powerful. Words like "soft animal" and direct phrases such as "You do not have to walk on your knees" use common language to address deep feelings—shame, exhaustion, longing—without preaching. This plainness invites readers in; it feels like a friend speaking rather than a lecture. The repeated address "you" and phrases like "whoever you are" expand that invitation so it includes everyone, making the poem feel less like advice and more like permission.

The poem's organization also builds this effect. It begins intimately, addressing the reader's inner life, and then shifts outward to nature: sun, rain, mountains, rivers, and the geese flying home. That move from the personal to the natural suggests that our private struggles exist within a larger, ongoing world. The refrain-like word "meanwhile" (Oliver 7) performs this exact

function: it pulls attention away from obsessive inwardness and toward the persistent, generous life around us. In that way the poem doesn't deny pain; it puts pain in context.

Rhythm and line breaks in "Wild Geese" create breathing spaces that mirror the poem's emotional work. Short lines and moments of enjoyment slow the reader, letting each image land before the next one arrives. This measured pacing models the poem's lesson: instead of rushing toward punishment or perfection, live more slowly and observe. The rhythm supports the tone, gentle, steady, and clear, which is why lines like "You only have to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves" (Oliver 4–5) feel both intimate and liberating.

My personal reaction confirms the poem's power. The opening line reminded me of my grandmother's voice, gentle, forgiving, which made the poem feel like family wisdom. The geese flying home painted an image of freedom and belonging; it suggested that even when life is hard, there is a place and pattern that continues. For me, the poem's message is practical: take steady steps, accept yourself, and notice the world. Oliver's choices, direct address, plain language, calming rhythm—combine to create a poem that comforts and urges action at the same time.

In short, "Wild Geese" shows that simple language and careful form can make a strong ethical claim: accept yourself, pay attention, and trust that life goes on. Oliver doesn't solve our problems; she shows us a way to live alongside them, and in that way the poem becomes a guide for handling pain with grace and patience.

## Works Cited

Oliver, Mary. "Wild Geese." *Poetry Archive*,

[http://www.phys.unm.edu/~tw/fas/yits/archive/oliver\\_wildgeese.html](http://www.phys.unm.edu/~tw/fas/yits/archive/oliver_wildgeese.html). Accessed 30 Sept. 2025.