

# **NMSI English Mock Exam Lesson Poetry Analysis 2013 Student Activity**



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**Published by:**

National Math and Science, Inc.  
8350 North Central Expressway, Suite M-2200  
Dallas, TX 75206  
[www.nms.org](http://www.nms.org)

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## Poetry Analysis

On the 2013 AP Literature Exam, students were asked to analyze a 20<sup>th</sup> century poem by Mary Oliver called “The Black Walnut Tree.” The prompt directed them to analyze how the poet conveys the relationship between the tree and the family through the use of poetic techniques.

Students must read very carefully to sort out poetic techniques used by the poet to convey the speaker’s complex ideas about the relationship. Their findings must be coherently organized and supported with evidence from the passage. The following activities are intended to help shape the thinking and writing about the poem that can lead to an effective essay.

### I. Deconstructing the Prompt

The first step to a successful literary analysis is the deconstruction of the prompt to discover the writing task. In the prompt below, highlight, circle, or underline the elements of the prompt that direct your essay.

Carefully read the following poem by Mary Oliver. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Oliver conveys the relationship between the tree and family through the use of figurative language and other poetic techniques.

### II. Analyzing the Prompt

Answer the following questions in the space provided.

The prompt actually hints at the theme or “big picture idea” of the poem. What does it suggest this important idea might be, at least in part? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What concrete poetic technique is explicitly mentioned? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What other poetic techniques are possibilities for an essay of analysis? What other poetic techniques have you written about before? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Who is the poet? How will you refer to the poet in your essay? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### III. Interacting with the poem

Read the poem through the first time without taking notes or marking anything. Try to “see” in your own mind the scene being described and the movement from the beginning to the end of the poem. Don’t forget to start with the title “The Black Walnut Tree.”

#### **The Black Walnut Tree** by Mary Oliver

My mother and I debate:  
we could sell  
the black walnut tree  
to the lumberman,  
and pay off the mortgage.  
Likely some storm anyway  
will churn down its dark boughs,  
smashing the house. We talk  
slowly, two women trying  
in a difficult time to be wise.  
Roots in the cellar drains,  
I say, and she replies  
that the leaves are getting heavier  
every year, and the fruit  
harder to gather away.  
But something brighter than money  
moves in our blood – an edge  
sharp and quick as a trowel  
that wants us to dig and sow.  
So we talk, but we don't do  
anything. That night I dream  
of my fathers out of Bohemia  
filling the blue fields  
of fresh and generous Ohio  
with leaves and vines and orchards.  
What my mother and I both know  
is that we'd crawl with shame  
in the emptiness we'd made  
in our own and our fathers' backyard.  
So the black walnut tree  
swings through another year  
of sun and leaping winds,  
of leaves and bounding fruit,  
and, month after month, the whip-  
crack of the mortgage.

Now read the poem a second time, paying close attention to the punctuation. Pause accordingly as you read, or if you are listening to the poem being read aloud, notice the way the punctuation creates movement and actually divides the poem into parts.

The poem contains three parts. Go back to the text above and draw horizontal lines to show these three parts. Read each part again, one at a time, and then summarize the content of each part below. Part 1 is done for you.

Part 1: *The speaker begins by discussing the debate she has with her mother about selling the tree in order to pay the mortgage and preserve their home. Both parties agree that the tree is more trouble than it is worth but the decision to sell the tree is a difficult and challenging one.*

Part 2: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Part 3: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

When reading a poem, it is important to identify the speaker to be able to understand something about the perspective and point of view. Who is this speaker? What characteristics does she possess? Write a general statement about the speaker, and support it with one or more quotations from the poem. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Who is the second person in the poem? Are the speaker and this second person alike or are they different? Use a quotation from the poem as evidence to support your answer.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Describe the mood at the beginning of the poem. Use a quotation as evidence. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Where does the mood change, or shift? (Note words and punctuation that signal a shift.)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What is the mood at the end of the poem? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



## V. Identifying Poetic Techniques

Possible poetic techniques include imagery, symbolism, metaphor, simile, personification, allusion, and onomatopoeia. Identify the use of two poetic techniques in this poem, quote the line(s) in which each technique is apparent, and explain how that technique supports the meaning of the poem.

Technique #1: \_\_\_\_\_

Quotation: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Meaning: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Technique #2: \_\_\_\_\_

Quotation: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Meaning: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## VI. Evaluating Your Essay

As time allows, review the essay you wrote on “The Black Walnut Tree” for the mock exam. Identify your strongest analytical paragraph. With a partner, discuss something you could now do to revise this paragraph.

## VII. Reviewing a High Scoring Essay

With pen in hand, annotate the student essay on the next page. Mark phrases and sentences that are particularly effective in analyzing the complex relationship between the speaker’s family and the tree. In the margins, identify ways in which the writer explains how a poetic technique is connected to the meaning of the poem. Discuss your findings with a partner or with your class. After reviewing the essay and the scoring guide which follows it, assign a score of 1 – 9 to this essay. Be ready to explain your score.

Think about how this essay compares to the essay you wrote for the mock exam. What are some things you can do to improve the writing you do over poetry?

In her poem, *The Black Walnut Tree*, Mary Oliver contrasts the practical needs of a family with the emotional bonds that are equally necessary to hold people together. In illustrating this conflict, Oliver develops two images of the relationship between the family and the tree, a literal relationship between two women and a valuable piece of property, and an allegorical relationship where the tree stands in as the critical thread tying together the family. Through use of imagery, simile, symbolism, and diction, Oliver shows that the relationship between the family and the tree transcends pragmatism, and truly represents the beautiful and infinite the connections that hold together a family even against the trials of time.

As the poem begins, the women attempt to envision the tree as another possession, which can be easily destroyed. Oliver uses the imagery of the "dark boughs" and "smashing" of heavy branches against their home to evoke a feeling of fear. In practical terms, the tree is developed as a dangerous and unruly resident. The characters attempt to slowly build up the will to cut down the tree using parallel structure. They list

the dangers of the tree, one by one, “roots in the cellar drains,” along with “heavier” leaves, that threaten their ability to survive as a family. At the literal level, the family sees the tree as a potential threat, attempting to justify cutting down the tree by appealing to the practical implications of keeping the tree. In this sense, Oliver develops the tree as simply another worry the family can do away with.

Yet the fact that the women are ultimately unable to destroy the unwelcome resident demonstrates the deep importance of the tree as a mark of their family history and as a member of their family. Oliver implies that their connection to the tree is almost loving when she notes that they had an “edge” that “moves in [their] blood.” The tree forges the family together against the continual rage of time, which Oliver describes as the metaphorical “whip-crack” of the mortgage as the family “swings through another year.” The tree, against adversity and practical concerns, has become a symbol of their family, which swings on through difficult seasons on the brink of bankruptcy. At a deeper level, the tree stands in for the principle of family, “something brighter than money,” but also for the women’s connection to the father. Just as the father exists in

the natural realm of "blue fields" and "fresh and generous Ohio," the tree is a small reminder of that world. As it digs its roots under their house, it is also a piece of their father, a replacement for the "emptiness" that would come if they were to throw out their memories. The tree, along with the "[bounds]" through the years based on strong family connections and a powerful love.

The tree thus lives in two realms, a literal realm and an allegorical realm. While on the surface, the tree appears to be a danger to the family, it is also a critical part of the family holding them together in an unrelenting world. The tree, standing in for the father, is a loved member of the family.

**2013 AP<sup>®</sup> English Literature Scoring Guide**  
**Question #1: Mary Oliver, “The Black Walnut Tree”**

The score reflects the quality of the essay as a whole—its content, style, and mechanics: **Students are rewarded for what they do well.** The score for an exceptionally well-written essay may be raised by one point above the otherwise appropriate score. In no case may a poorly written essay be scored higher than a three (3).

**9-8** These essays offer a persuasive analysis of Oliver’s use of figurative language and other poetic techniques to convey her ideas about the relationship between the tree and family. These essays offer a range of interpretations; they provide convincing readings of both the ideas and Oliver’s use of figurative language and other poetic techniques. They demonstrate consistent and effective control over the elements of composition in language appropriate to the analysis of poetry. Their textual references are apt and specific. Though they may not be error-free, these essays are perceptive in their analysis and demonstrate writing that is clear and sophisticated, and in the case of essays scored a 9, especially persuasive.

**7-6** These essays offer a reasonable analysis of Oliver’s use of figurative language and other poetic techniques to convey her ideas about the relationship between the tree and family. They are less thorough or less precise in their discussion of the ideas and Oliver’s use of figurative language and other poetic techniques, and their analysis of the relationship between the two is less thorough or convincing. These essays demonstrate the student’s ability to express ideas clearly, making references to the text, although they do not exhibit the same level of effective writing as the 9-8 responses. Essays scored a 7 present better developed analysis and more consistent command of the elements of effective composition than do essays scored a 6.

**5** These essays respond to the assigned task with a plausible reading of Oliver’s use of figurative language and other poetic techniques to convey her ideas about the relationship between the tree and family, but they tend to be superficial in their analysis of the ideas and of figurative language implicit or explicit. Their analysis of the relationship of the ideas or of Oliver’s use of figurative language and other poetic techniques may be vague, formulaic, or minimally supported by references to the text. There may be minor misinterpretations of the poem. These essays demonstrate some control of language, but may be marred by surface errors. They are not as well conceived, organized, or developed as 7-6 essays.

**4-3** These lower-half essays fail to offer an adequate analysis of the poem. The analysis may be partial, unconvincing, or irrelevant, or it may ignore Oliver’s ideas about the relationship between the tree and family or her use of figurative language and other poetic techniques. Evidence from the poem may be slight or misconstrued, or the essays may rely on paraphrase only. The essays often demonstrate a lack of control over the conventions of composition: inadequate development of ideas, accumulation of errors, or a focus that is unclear, inconsistent, or repetitive. Essays scored a 3 may contain significant misreading, demonstrate inept writing, or do both.

**2-1** These essays compound the weaknesses of the papers in the 4-3 range. Although some attempt has been made to respond to the prompt, the assertions are presented with little clarity, organization, or support from the poem. These essays may contain serious errors in grammar and mechanics. They may offer a complete misreading or be unacceptably brief. Essays scored a 1 contain little coherent discussion of the poem.