The Black Walnut Tree

SUMMARY

My mother and I go back and forth: should we sell our black walnut tree to the lumberman in order to finish paying off our house? After all, there's a good chance that one day the tree will be brought down by a storm anyway, and that its huge branches will cause damage to the house. We consider the question thoughtfully, two women trying to be methodical and practical despite the financial pressure we're under. I mention that the tree's roots have made their way into the drains in the basement, and she brings up the fact that it's getting harder every year to clean up the piles of leaves and fruit that it drops on the ground. And yet, something moves deep inside us that's more valuable than money; we feel this as acutely as the edge of a small shovel that wants us to farm the land. As such, we continue to debate what we should do about the tree, but we don't actually take any action. That night I have a dream about my ancestors who emigrated from central Europe; they worked the vibrant and bountiful lands of Ohio, filling the fields with trees and other crops. My mother and I are certain that, if we were to cut down the walnut tree, we'd be utterly filled with shame to have created a hole in our own—and our ancestors'—backyard. So the branches of the black walnut tree sway back and forth in the wind for another year, which is filled with more sunshine, storms, leaves, and fruit that bounces off the ground. And the mortgage payments snap at us like a whip every month.

THEMES

FAMILY AND HERITAGE

The poem describes a mother and daughter facing a difficult choice between selling their black walnut tree and using the money to pay off their mortgage, or letting the tree continue to grow. What develops through this debate is an appreciation of the value of family; the mother and daughter realize that to remove the tree would be to dishonor the hard work of their immigrant ancestors, who found success as farmers in the U.S. The tree, then, is deeply tied to the family's heritage, something the poem implies deserves to be honored. Cutting down the tree would be to cut down the speaker's connection to the past, shamefully erasing the sacrifices earlier generations made for the speaker and her mother to live as they do in the present.

The poem implies that the speaker and her mother are struggling to meet their mortgage payments. They consider selling the tree because its wood is valuable and would thus ease their financial burdens. Yet, as the poem unfolds, it becomes clear that this tree is deeply connected to the speaker's heritage. The speaker's ancestors emigrated from Bohemia (central Europe) and had to work hard to establish a life in their new country. These generations had to be hardy and determined—qualities that the speaker now sees reflected in the tree itself.

They also notably found success as farmers, thereby establishing a close bond with the land. They even planted orchards—a fact that suggests the black walnut tree in question was originally planted by an earlier member of the speaker's family.

To remove the tree, then, would be to erase the history that the tree represents. Its absence would be an "emptiness" in which the speaker and mother would "crawl" with "shame." The mention of "emptiness" implies that the tree and the heritage it represents are an indelible part of the mother and daughter in the present. Thus, though their money woes are very real, "something brighter than money moves / in [their] blood." This bright "something" is their family lineage—the bond that ties the mother and daughter with those who came before them, and which the poem implies is far more valuable than any money the tree might bring in.

All that said, the poem is not overly sentimental. Neither the mother nor the daughter pretends that it *wouldn't* be, in truth, great to sell the tree. Not only would it raise money, but the tree also poses a danger to the existence of the house; a storm could bring crashing through the roof, and its roots threaten to block the drains.

But here, again, the tree takes on symbolism that extends into the past. Those earlier generations *also* had to face difficulties and dangers, but they stuck to their agricultural tasks and built lives of which both mother and daughter are a product—or, more accurately, a growth. So just because the walnut tree is a kind of problem, what it represents outweighs the obvious solution to this problem (getting rid of it).

In the end, neither the problem of the black walnut tree nor the mortgage find resolution. The tree "swings through another year," and the mortgage rears its ugly head every month. But in not cutting down the tree, the mother and daughter gain a quiet but determined perseverance—and an enduring respect for those who came before them. The poem, then, gently argues that family and heritage are simply more important than money.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-35

NATURE AND HUMANITY

"The Black Walnut Tree" reflects a deep connection between humanity and the natural world. It implies that the link between people and the natural environment in which they live is something strong and vital. That isn't to say that this relationship is without its difficulties, and the poem neither romanticizes nature nor denies its fundamental importance in human life. Instead, it presents nature as a powerful, nourishing force that people can turn to in times of need but never control.

In the first half of the poem, the speaker and her mother make a convincing case for why they should get rid of the black walnut tree in the backyard. Selling the wood would bring in a decent amount of money, helping with the women's mortgage. Though the poem here presents the tree as a problem to be solved, it also hints at the way the natural world provides vital resources for humanity (in this case wood for furniture).

At the same time, the tree is a burden. Its roots cause drainage problems, the tree's leaves and fruit are difficult to clear away, and, most importantly, its heavy limbs might thwack into the house during a storm. Through discussing these factors, the speaker reminds the reader that nature can be fearsome. For all nature's bounty and beauty, it can also destroy things in an instant.

The latter half of the poem looks at the more positive side of humanity's relationship with nature. The speaker and her mother feel a deep connection with earlier generations of their family, who emigrated from central Europe and established themselves as farmers in the U.S. The speaker calls the land her forefathers found "fresh and generous," directly connecting the natural world to vibrancy, opportunity, and abundance. Nature is thus a nourishing and creative force.

The poem also acknowledges that way that plants and trees take root is similar to the way families develop over time. Earlier generations found their footing in a new country by working the land—planting "orchards," and perhaps even the walnut tree itself. As these trees grew, so too did the speaker's family.

This furthers the speaker's awareness of the connection between humanity and nature, which translates into a suspicion that cutting down the tree would dishonor both the speaker's heritage and the natural world itself. The tree grew out of the land that offered itself to the speaker's ancestors, and thus to chop it down would be to disrespect not only the hard work of earlier generations—who toiled to fill fields with "leaves and vines and orchards"—but also the generosity of the natural world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-8
- Lines 11-19
- Lines 21-29
- Lines 30-33

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

My mother and ...
... off the mortgage.

The speaker and her mother are at a crossroads with a big decision to make: a black walnut tree looms over their house, and the two women must decide whether to sell it to the lumberman.

Selling the tree is an attractive option because the mother and daughter are facing money woes with their mortgage (the payments they must make on their house) and walnut is valuable wood. The poem presents selling the tree as the sensible, practical—if a little boring—option. The end-stop at the end of the first line ("My Mother and I debate:") heralds the opening of the discussion, making it clear that what will follow is a kind of weighing-up of two choices.

The opening five lines ("My mother [...] mortgage") also establish up the poem's tone and form. The use of present tense and enjambment adds a sense of urgency, bringing the reader into the "debate" as if in real time. The end-stop after "mortgage" in line 5, meanwhile, gives the word an intentionally heavy emphasis, suggesting that the mortgage payments are a kind of constant weight in the women's lives.

Though the poem has no clear rhyme scheme or meter, the use of consonance adds musicality and lyricism to its words. Take the repetition of /l/, /b/, and /m/ sounds:

> My mother and I debate:
> we could sell
> the black walnut tree
> to the lumberman,
> and pay off the mortgage.

The thick consonance feels almost as though the speaker is chewing through the words here, carefully considering the option at hand.

LINES 6-10

Likely some storm ...
... to be wise.

Here it seems like selling the walnut tree is the obvious choice: not only will it solve their mortgage problems, but the tree itself represents a physical threat to the house. It's big and imposing, and so the two women reason that "some storm" will bring the

tree's branches crashing the roof of the house (the sibilance here conjuring the sound wind and rain).

The poem uses assonance, consonance, and more alliteration here to convey the tree's potential danger:

> Likely some storm anyway
> will churn down its dark boughs,
> smashing the house. [...]

The round, sorrowful /ow/ sounds of "down," "boughs" and "house" weigh on the lines, while the alliterating /d/ sounds have a heaviness that anticipates the shock and noise of the tree crashing into the house. Here, then, the reader gets a sense that the tree represents a threat to the family—an idea that suggests the power (and fearsome beauty) of the natural world. The caesura after "house," meanwhile, lends this imagined catastrophe a scary sense of finality, as though the tree's collapse *could* completely ruin the women's lives.

After "house," the speaker states that she and her mother speak "slowly," and are "trying" to be smart and clear-sighted "in a difficult time." The caesura after "slowly" conveys this methodical reasoning as the two women look carefully at the cases for and against getting rid of the black walnut tree. The persistence of the alliteration between "two," "trying," and "time"—as well as the assonance of "trying," "time," and "wise"—seems to capture the way that this looming decision nags at them every day, demanding to be answered.

LINES 11-15

Roots in the ...
... to gather away.

The speaker and her mother list more problems with the walnut tree, in addition to the fact that it threatens to crash through the house in stormy weather: its roots are clogging up the cellar drains, the leaves grow heavier every year, and the fruit becomes "harder to gather away." If the poem can be thought of as a kind of debate, with two opposing points of view on display, this section represents the end of viewpoint number one—which says that the walnut tree *should* be sold.

But the reasons for getting rid of the tree shouldn't be taken solely at face value. They also paint a picture of stubborn, determined, hardy, and strong living thing. Despite all the trouble it causes, the tree is in itself a remarkable achievement. It's amazing that it's survived this long and flourished to become the size that it has. These qualities—determination, fortitude, and perseverance—will become an important part of the decision the two women will eventually make.

A hint as to what that decision will be appears in the phrase "Roots in the cellar drains" in line 11. This refers literally to the tree's pesky, drain-clogging roots, but also symbolically suggests that the *family's* roots—the speaker and her mother's heritage—is inextricably tied up with the tree. To sell the tree would be to rip those roots from the land, to erase part of the family's history.

On a sound level, this section uses consonance to suggests the arduousness of having to clean up after and maintain the tree year after year. Notice the repeated /v/, /r/, and /h/ sounds:

> the leaves are getting heavier
> every year, and the fruit
> harder to gather away.

Say this lines out loud and notice how they feel like a bit of a slog to get through, despite the way that the enjambment quickens the pace between them. All in all, then, the speaker has thus far made a convincing argument for selling the tree—but a twist is coming!

LINES 16-21

But something brighter ...
... anything.

Line 16 marks an important turning point. The poem has made the case for selling the walnut tree, and it was a pretty convincing argument: the tree is a potential threat to the house, and also simply difficult to care for.

The word "But" in line 16 signals the start of the counter-argument, which builds a case for keeping the tree. These reasons seem to speak something deeper, more in tune with the imagination and the human spirit. The obvious, sensible choice is to cut down the tree—but the poem implicitly argues that there's more to life than doing the obvious, sensible thing.

As if to signal the move away from practical concerns, this counter-argument starts with a metaphor (line 16-17): "But something brighter than money / moves in our blood." By "brighter," the poem here means something like more important and more convincing. The mention of blood signals that this has something to do with family (think of the way that family lineage is often referred to as a "bloodline"). The vibrant /b/ and /m/ alliteration here gives the poem its own form of brightness to go with the speaker's statement.

This "something brighter" is then further explained through simile, heightening the way that this counter-argument seems to speak to something deeper and more imaginative than practical/financial concerns (concerns that, it's important to say, the poem doesn't belittle!).

The "something" is "an edge" that's "sharp and quick as a trowel," a small hand tool used for agricultural labor. This trowel is in turn personified in line 19 when the speaker says that it wants her and her mother to "dig and sow." This recalls the deep roots first mentioned in line 11. The speaker feels an instinctive longing to remain true to something in the past—to allow the roots of the past to flourish in the garden of the

present and, in turn, the future.

This, of course, is exactly what the tree has done over the years: it has held on through thick and thin to become tall and strong. The speaker starts to sense that to cut it down would be to cut something else down too, something harder to define that nonetheless has a clear link to the past. Accordingly, though the speaker and her mother continue to lay out practical reasons for cutting down the tree, they "don't do / anything." The caesura full-stop after "anything" signals their deliberate inaction, signalling that they are coming to the decision *not* to cut down the tree.

LINES 21-25

That night I ...
... vines and orchards.

The speaker recounts a dream she has that night after the discussion with her mother. She dreams of her "fathers," meaning previous generations, who emigrated to America from Bohemia (central Europe) and had to work hard to make a life for themselves in their new country. This involved working the land as agricultural laborers.

This dream, running up to "orchards" at the end of line 25, thus makes sense of the language in lines 16-21 ("But something [...] anything."): the speaker and her mother can't sell the walnut tree, because to do so would be to betray the generations that came before them in their family. Suddenly, the walnut tree takes on new significance, connecting the speaker and her mother in the poem's present with the preceding generations of the past—to whom the walnut tree was around to bear witness.

Notice how the description of dream is full of luscious sounds, the thick alliteration and consonance suggesting a bounty of natural beauty and an abundance of life. The voiced consonants in particular—/v/, soft /g/, and /z/ sounds—add a deep resonance to the lines, creating a dreamy atmosphere:

> of my fathers out of Bohemia
> filling the blue fields
> of fresh and generous Ohio
> with leaves and vines and orchards.

The polysyndeton adds to the sense of abundance as well. All these "leaves and vines and orchards" represent, on a symbolic level, the generations of family that have flourished in the years since the speaker's ancestors immigrated to the United States—generations including the speaker and her mother. That Ohio is personified as "generous" suggests that the speaker feels a certain gratitude towards the land itself for offering her family such beauty and bounty—making it harder to justify cutting down the walnut tree.

LINES 26-29

What my mother ...
... our fathers' backyard.

The speaker goes on to explain that she and her mother know that to cut down the walnut tree would mean something bigger—it would create an "emptiness" in their backyard, which is also their "fathers' backyard." In other words, to cut the tree would dishonor the memory and wishes of the preceding generations of their family, whose hard work is in large part why the daughter and mother have their house in the first place. It's quite possible, too, that the walnut tree itself was planted in the backyard by someone from one of these earlier generations.

Ultimately, then, the walnut tree symbolically stands as a testimony to the work of those who came before, and acknowledges the debt that the present owes to the past. This, the poem strongly implies, is far more important than money. That's why the speaker and her mother would "crawl with shame" in the empty space the tree would leave behind; they'd never be able to get over the fact that they severed this link with past. The diacope in line 29—"our own and our fathers' backyard"—suggests that the house belongs not just to those who live in it, but to the family's heritage more generally.

Also note how the speaker bluntly states that she and her mother "know" that they'd "crawl with shame" if they cut the tree down. There is no hemming and hawing here, no weighing pros and cons. This section represents the moment of greatest certainty in the poem. What came before was a debate; this is a kind of deeply-felt knowledge.

LINES 30-35

So the black ...
... of the mortgage.

The simple word at the start of line 30—"So"—suggests that life largely remains the same. While it's implied that the speaker and her mother will never actually sell the tree, that doesn't make their problems go away; the walnut tree keeps swinging and posing the same threat to the physical integrity of the house, while the two women have to keep finding the money to pay the mortgage.

While it might have been tempting a few lines back to consider the poem a celebration of the American Dream—the idea that anyone can come to the United States and, if they work hard enough, carve out a successful life for themselves—perhaps it's more accurate to call the image in the poem's end one of American *Reality*. That is, the poem strikes a tone relatively free from idealized thinking or nostalgia; there's no neat, satisfying conclusion to the speakers' problems. The mortgage is a real and weighty dilemma that hasn't suddenly gone away, the diacope of "month" in the second-to-last line suggesting the way that financial difficulty rears its ugly head on a regular

basis.

The section also makes use of alliteration and consonance to suggest both the beauty of the tree *and* its imposing physical presence:

> So the black walnut tree
> swings through another year
> of sun and leaping winds,
> of leaves and bounding fruit,

The sibilance lends the section a slightly menacing tone that evokes the sound of the howling wind and rain of a storm that is yet to arrive.

Finally, the enjambment between "whip-" and "crack" across lines 34 and 35 makes the phrase all the more violent. The poem—which ends on the word "mortgage"—makes no pretense about the women's problems being over, instead showing that they intend to go on surviving, like their family before them—and like the black walnut tree, which still casts its fearsome and beautiful shadow over the house.

SYMBOLS

THE BLACK WALNUT TREE

The black walnut tree symbolizes the link between the past and present. The poem implies that it was planted by the speaker's ancestors, who were no strangers to cultivating "leaves and vines and orchards" (all related to trees), and accordingly stands as a testament to their hard work.

The tree's roots thus come to represent the familial roots laid down all those years ago, when those preceding generations travelled across the Atlantic to settle in the U.S. The fact that the tree's roots have grown into cellar drains demonstrates both the practical problems the tree has created *and* the way in which it is a fundamental part of the house's story—the family's story.

It's the latter of these that wins out in the end, with the speaker and her mother deciding that the symbolic value of the tree—the story that it tells, and the link it provides with past—outweighs the temptation to cash in and sell.

The tree is symbolic in other, related ways as well. Its hardiness and strength reflect the hard work of the speaker's ancestors, meaning that to cut down the tree would be dishonor that work and sacrifice. Finally, the tree also speaks to nature's fearsome power, and it's ability to at once nourish and destroy human lives.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-8
- Line 11
- Lines 12-15
- Lines 26-35

FARMING

While the tree itself symbolizes the link between the speaker and her ancestors, the poem also speaks more widely about the relationship between human beings and the natural world. In particular, the poem explores how people and place are intimately linked through agriculture. Farming or working the land in the poem represents the deep bond between human beings and nature, and how this connection can be a source of resiliency.

The speaker's ancestors planted "leaves and vines and orchards" to help them survive in their new land, and in doing so laid the groundwork for future generations to blossom. For the speaker's family, cultivating the *land* was one and the same as cultivating *life*.

That's why the speaker selects a "trowel" as the object to best represent the instinctive emotion she and her mother share. Both women want to honor their ancestors—not to do so would cause them "shame"—and this feeling moves in them with the "sharp[ness] and quick[ness]" of a trowel (a small spade). In other words, the feeling is urgent and purposeful—just as the agricultural labor of their ancestors had to be.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-19:** "an edge / sharp and quick as a trowel / that wants us to dig and sow."
- **Lines 21-25:** "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."
- **Line 29:** "our own and our fathers' backyard."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is an important part of "The Black Walnut Tree," lending intensity to the speaker's words. As an example, take the alliteration in lines 6-7:

> Likely some storm anyway
> will churn down its dark boughs,

This quote comes as the speaker and her mother build a case for why they should sell the walnut tree. Not only would it pay off their mortgage, but it would also eliminate the risk that the

tree poses to the house: a storm could easily send its limbs crashing through the house. Anticipating the violence of this yet-to-arrive disaster, alliterating (and sibilant) /s/ sounds convey the wind and the rain, while the two hard /d/s have a heavy quality suggestive of the weight and might of the tree.

Soon after this moment, the speaker notes how she and her mother:

> [...] talk
> slowly, two women trying
> in a difficult time to be wise.

The chattering /t/ sound reflects all this talk. The /t/ sound is also found in the word "tree" itself, of course, perhaps works as a kind of subconscious echo, nagging at the reader.

Another important moment of alliteration appears in lines 16 and 17 as poem makes the turn from the argument *in favor* of cutting down the walnut tree to the more convincing one *against* doing so:

> But something brighter than money
> moves in our blood [...]

This alliteration sounds bright and loud, evoking the way that, despite the practical reasons for cutting down the tree, something deeper calls the two women in the opposite direction. The strong /b/ sounds here literally surround the /m/ alliteration of "money" and "moves," subtly reflecting how this "something" (a reference to respect for the past and the speaker's heritage) is more powerful than financial concerns.

Later, strong alliteration again appears when the speaker recounts a dream she has about preceding generations working the fields of Ohio: "fathers," "filling," fields," and "fresh" all share the initial /f/ sound, creating a sense of natural abundance and beauty that reflects the "generous" land; it sounds as if the lines themselves are overgrown with beautiful sounds.

Finally, the poem returns to the sibilant /s/ sound in its final few lines:

> So the black walnut tree
> swings through another year
> of sun [...]

This reminds the reader that the storm mentioned in line 6 remains a threat, even though the two women have decided to keep the tree. Then, to make clear that the financial danger hasn't gone away either, as "month" and "mortgage" alliterate heavily in the last two lines.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My mother"
- **Line 6:** "some storm"
- **Line 7:** "down," "dark"
- **Line 8:** "talk"
- **Line 9:** "two," "trying"
- **Line 10:** "time to"
- **Line 13:** "getting"
- **Line 15:** "gather"
- **Line 16:** "But," "brighter," "money"
- **Line 17:** "moves," "blood"
- **Line 19:** "sow"
- **Line 20:** "So," "don't do"
- **Line 22:** "fathers"
- **Line 23:** "filling," "fields"
- **Line 24:** "fresh"
- **Line 26:** "my mother"
- **Line 30:** "So"
- **Line 31:** "swings"
- **Line 32:** "sun," "leaping"
- **Line 33:** "leaves"
- **Line 34:** "month," "month"
- **Line 35:** "mortgage"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is a subtle presence throughout "The Black Walnut Tree," adding gentle musicality and drawing attention to specific moments in the poem.

Assonance often appears strongly when the speaker directly refers to the black walnut tree itself and the threat it poses to the house. In lines 7-8, the poem uses heavy, round vowel sounds to help convey the tree's weight and sheer physical presence—and, as such, to evoke the risk of the tree crashing through the speaker's home:

> will churn down its dark boughs,
> smashing the house. [...]

A similar effect is achieved in lines 13 to 15, where short /eh/ and long /ee/ sounds weave throughout the lines, along with the consonance of /v/ and /r/ sounds:

> [...] the leaves are getting heavier
> every year, and the fruit
> harder to gather away.

Try reading this section out loud and notice how it takes effort, the repeated sounds heavy and cumbersome. This helps the reader get a sense of the arduous, unending labor created by the tree; just to maintain the tree takes considerable effort.

Earlier in the poem, in lines 9-10, assonance of the long /i/ sound reflects the careful, thoughtful effort the speaker and her mother put towards this dilemma:

slowly, two women trying
in a difficult time to be wise.

Finally, assonance can connect certain words in the poem. For example, the short /eh/ of "fresh and generous Ohio" draws readers' attention to the sense of abundance and promise that the land held for the speaker's ancestors. Finally, the long /ay/ of "shame" and "made" in lines 27-28 directly ties the speaker's potential "shame" to her own actions; were she and her mother to cut down the tree, they themselves would be directly responsible for—will have "made"—a shameful situation.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "down," "boughs"
- **Line 8:** "house"
- **Line 9:** "trying"
- **Line 10:** "time," "wise"
- **Line 11:** "drains"
- **Line 12:** "say," "replies"
- **Line 13:** "leaves," "getting heavier"
- **Line 14:** "every year"
- **Line 15:** "harder," "gather"
- **Line 19:** "sow"
- **Line 20:** "So"
- **Line 24:** "fresh," "generous"
- **Line 27:** "shame"
- **Line 28:** "made"
- **Line 29:** "fathers' backyard"
- **Line 32:** "leaping"
- **Line 33:** "leaves"

CAESURA

Caesura is used here and there throughout "The Black Walnut Tree." This is a byproduct of the poem's form; the poem makes use of casual free verse, with phrases frequently spilling across line breaks (enjambment) and then coming to rest in the middle of later lines, creating pauses.

Take, for example, the full-stop caesura in line 8:

smashing the house. We talk

This full stop creates a heavy pause in the line that, in turn, makes the imagined storm seem all the more dramatic and frightening. In the very next line, the comma after "slowly" reflects that slowness—literally slowing down the line and evoking the sound of debate and deliberation. This mirrors the way that the speaker and her mother weigh the reasons why they should get rid of the tree.

Later, in line 17, the dash in the middle of the line marks an important change in direction, as the speaker switches focus to why her and mother *shouldn't* get rid of the tree:

But something brighter than money
moves in our blood—an edge

The speaker takes the time to describe that "something" in more detail, lending it a sharp edge that cuts into the poem's momentum—and into the arguments for selling the tree.

Finally, in the poem's penultimate line, two caesurae help convey the way that the women's financial difficulties haven't suddenly gone away:

and, month after month, the whip-
crack of the mortgage.

The caesurae here create a sense of ongoing difficulty, ensuring that the poem doesn't end on an overly sentimental note (reiterating that keeping the tree hasn't magically solved all the women's difficulties).

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "house. We"
- **Line 9:** "slowly, two"
- **Line 12:** "say, and"
- **Line 14:** "year, and"
- **Line 17:** "blood—an"
- **Line 20:** "talk, but"
- **Line 21:** "anything. That"
- **Line 34:** "and, month," "month, the"

CONSONANCE

"The Black Walnut Tree" is full of consonance. Sometimes this simply makes phrases sound more beautiful, while other times the poem's consonance works to intensify the poem's imagery. For example, take a look at lines 6 to 8:

Likely some storm anyway
will churn down its dark boughs,
smashing the house.

Here, sibilance conjures the sound of wind and rain as the speaker imagines the disaster that *could* happen. The consonance of /n/, /d/, and /m/ sounds imbues the lines with more intensity, suggesting the way that nature's fearsome power lies in wait.

In lines 11-15 the speaker and her mother discuss the constant (and laborious) work required to maintain the tree and to fix the problems it causes:

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.

The /v/, /r/, and hard /g/ sounds throughout these lines make this work seem cumbersome and frustrating.

Later, when the speaker describes a dream she has of preceding generations working the fields of Ohio, consonance verges on euphony—the /m/, /v/, and /z/ sounds adding a deep, humming resonance that balances the gentle /f/ and /l/ sounds :

[...] 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.

The sounds highlighted above heighten this section's beauty, helping create an idealized and dreamy picture of the past.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My mother"
- **Line 2:** "sell"
- **Line 3:** "black walnut tree"
- **Line 4:** "to," "lumberman"
- **Line 6:** "some storm," "anyway"
- **Line 7:** "churn down," "boughs"
- **Line 8:** "smashing," "house," "talk"
- **Line 9:** "two," "trying"
- **Line 10:** "difficult time to"
- **Line 11:** "Roots," "in," "cellar drains"
- **Line 12:** "replies"
- **Line 13:** "leaves," "are," "heavier"
- **Line 14:** "every," "year"
- **Line 15:** "harder," "gather"
- **Line 16:** "But," "brighter," "than money"
- **Line 17:** "moves," "blood"
- **Line 18:** "trowel"
- **Line 19:** "that wants," " us to," "sow"
- **Line 20:** "So," "talk," "don't do"
- **Line 21:** "That night," "dream"
- **Line 22:** "my," "fathers," "Bohemia"
- **Line 23:** "filling," "blue fields"
- **Line 24:** "of fresh," "and generous"
- **Line 25:** "leaves and vines and orchards"
- **Line 26:** "my mother"
- **Line 27:** "shame"
- **Line 28:** "emptiness," "we'd made"
- **Line 30:** "So," "black walnut tree"
- **Line 31:** "swings," "another"
- **Line 32:** "sun," " and leaping winds"
- **Line 33:** "leaves," " and bounding"
- **Lines 34-34:** "month / month"
- **Line 35:** "crack," "mortgage"

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stopping is used to powerful effect in "The Black Walnut Tree." The poem has no steady form and lines are frequently and unpredictably enjambed. This makes the end-stopped lines all the more striking and allows them to add dramatic weight to the end of various sentences.

The first end-stop comes at the end of line 1, where a colon serves as a clear introduction into the "debate" that the speaker and her mother are having about whether to sell the black walnut tree.

Another striking end-stop appears in line 5, with the period after the word "mortgage." The poem has flowed smoothly up until this moment, and the sudden, unavoidable pause gives the reader a sense of the burden the mortgage poses. This effect is echoed by the final line of the poem, which also ends with "mortgage" and a full stop—reminding the reader that, though they decide not to sell the tree, the two women's financial difficulties haven't magically disappeared.

Other end-stops in the poem also convey a sense of difficulty and effort. Take line 10:

in a difficult time to be wise.

The hard end-stop reflects the speaker and mother's attempts to carefully and thoughtfully—"slowly"—consider all sides of the issue at hand. It lends a somberness to the poem in this moment. Another full stop appears at the end of line 15, after the speaker describes the difficulty of maintaining the tree:

harder to gather away.

The period here allows no room for debate; it's simply a fact that the tree causes the women problems. The end-stop in line 29 has a similar effect:

in our own and our fathers' backyard.

There is no other way about it, the period implies; to cut down the tree would be to dishonor the past and the speaker's heritage.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "debate:"
- **Line 4:** "lumberman,"
- **Line 5:** "mortgage."
- **Line 7:** "boughs,"
- **Line 10:** "wise."
- **Line 11:** "drains,"
- **Line 15:** "away."
- **Line 19:** "sow."
- **Line 25:** "orchards."

- **Line 29:** "backyard."
- **Line 32:** "winds,"
- **Line 33:** "fruit,"
- **Line 35:** "mortgage."

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used throughout "The Black Walnut Tree." Frequent enjambment pushes the poem's debate forward and adds to the conversational, thoughtful tone as the speaker's arguments sprawl down the page.

Sometimes enjambment is used to evoke a line's content as well. For example, the break between line 8 and 9—"We talk / slowly"—makes this "talk" itself seem slow, separating the word from its modifier. A similar thing happens with the break between "fruit" at the end of line 14 and "harder" at the start of line 15, which makes the act of cleaning up after the tree seem frustrating and laborious. This technique also occurs in the poem's last two lines, with the enjambment of "whip-/crack" demonstrating how the mortgage continues to be a very real, tangible problem in the lives of the two women, its effect felt across the white space of the line break.

Enjambment can also quicken the poem's pace at points and suggest a kind of freedom. This is the case when the speaker dreams of preceding generations working the fields of Ohio. The entirety of this description—lines 21-25—is enjambed:

> 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.

The enjambment here gives the dream a lightness and beauty that contrast with the heaviness of ongoing financial difficulties.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "sell / the"
- **Lines 3-4:** "tree / to"
- **Lines 6-7:** "anyway / will"
- **Lines 8-9:** "talk / slowly"
- **Lines 9-10:** "trying / in"
- **Lines 12-13:** "replies / that"
- **Lines 13-14:** "heavier / every"
- **Lines 14-15:** "fruit / harder"
- **Lines 16-17:** "money / moves "
- **Lines 17-18:** "edge / sharp"
- **Lines 18-19:** "trowel / that"
- **Lines 20-21:** "do / anything"
- **Lines 21-22:** "dream / of"
- **Lines 22-23:** "Bohemia / filling"
- **Lines 23-24:** "fields / of "
- **Lines 24-25:** "Ohio / with"
- **Lines 26-27:** "know / is"
- **Lines 27-28:** "shame / in"
- **Lines 28-29:** "made / in"
- **Lines 30-31:** "tree / swings"
- **Lines 31-32:** "year / of"

METAPHOR

The first metaphor in the poem appears in line 16. Here, the speaker moves from practical reasons why she and her mother *should* sell the tree to more philosophical reasons for why they *shouldn't*:

> But something brighter than money
> moves in our blood—an edge
> sharp and quick as a trowel
> that wants us to dig and sow.

The metaphor describes the feeling that the two women shouldn't sell as a kind of "edge" that moves through their "blood" and is "brighter" (more attractive, but also more virtuous) than money. There is nothing *literally* moving through their "blood," of course, which instead is symbolic of family, heritage, and instinctual knowledge. In other words, the speaker feels "something" deep in her bones, in her soul, with an "edge / sharp and quick as a trowel," or shovel.

This simile fleshes out the metaphor, the sense of sharpness and quickness implying just how acutely the speaker feels this "something" in her blood: it is sharp, bright, clear. The idea of the "trowel," or shovel, wanting the speaker to do anything is another metaphor, and more specifically a moment of personification. This links the mother and daughter's sense of loyalty to preceding generations who had to work the land in order to make a life for themselves in the U.S.

Altogether, the figurative language here is a way of describing this deeply-rooted but hard-to-define belief that selling the tree would be a kind of betrayal to the speaker's heritage.

The poem's other metaphor comes at the end, when the monthly mortgage payments that the two women have to meet are described as "the whip-crack." This metaphor is more straightforward, and characterizes the mortgage as something painful and fearsome.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-19:** "But something brighter than money / moves in our blood—an edge / sharp and quick as a trowel / that wants us to dig and sow."
- **Lines 34-35:** "the whip- / crack of the mortgage."

REPETITION

"The Black Walnut Tree" makes use of a few different types of repetition. Line 25, for example, uses polysyndeton as it describes the speaker's dream:

> with leaves **and** vines **and** orchards.

The repeated "and" suggests natural abundance and bountiful growth—exactly what the speaker's preceding generations cultivated in the "blue fields" of Ohio.

The speaker also uses diacope in the poem. The first example appears in line 29, in which the speaker describes that, were they to sell the tree, she and her mother "crawl with shame" in the empty space of "**our** own and **our** fathers' backyard." The repetition of "our" here suggests continuity between past and present, drawing a link between the speaker and her mother and their preceding generations of "fathers."

Diacope appears again in the poem's second-to-last line as the speaker describes how the "whip- / crack of the mortgage" falls "**month** after **month**." This repetition gives the reader a sense of the regularity of the mortgage demands, how it rears its ugly head every month without fail.

Finally, anaphora and parallelism appear lines 32 and 33, in which the speaker describes "another year" during which the black walnut tree keeps its place in the backyard (after the two women decide to keep it). The tree:

> swings through another year
> **of** sun **and** leaping winds,
> **of** leaves **and** bounding fruit,

Notice how lines 32 and 33 have the same structure, even as the specific examples from nature change (i.e., "leaves" is swapped in for "sun" and "leaping winds" becomes "bounding fruit"). The repetitive nature of these lines conveys a sense of constancy even as time passes; more winds will threaten to slam the tree into the house, more leaves will grow, more fruit will fall and remain "hard[] to gather away." The natural imagery here symbolically evokes new generations as well—the leaves and fruit perhaps suggesting new growths on the family tree and, it follows, the way that the speaker's own children may inherent the tree and its problems.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 25:** "with leaves and vines and orchards."
- **Line 29:** "our own and our fathers' backyard"
- **Lines 32-33:** "of sun and leaping winds, / of leaves and bounding fruit,"
- **Line 34:** "month after month"

SIMILE

There is one simile in the poem, which is in fact folded within another example of figurative language (a metaphor). In lines 16-19, the speaker describes the intuitive feeling that stops her and mother from selling the black walnut tree:

> But something brighter than money
> moves in our blood—**an edge**
> **sharp and quick as a trowel**
> **that wants us to dig and sow.**

Essentially, the speaker states that some things are more important than money, and that she and mother have a feeling deep inside that pushes them to honor the memory of the generations of family that came before. This feeling, described metaphorically as "edge" that is "brighter than money," is as "sharp and quick as a trowel."

A trowel is a handheld farming tool, like a small spade that can also be used for smoothing earth. This trowel, which is also personified here, "wants" the women to keep the tree as a way of allowing their roots—their family heritage and links to the past—to flourish. This is doubly effective because the women's preceding generations worked hard on the land, which helped them gain a foothold in their new country.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-19:** "an edge / sharp and quick as a trowel / that wants us to dig and sow."

VOCABULARY

Black walnut tree (Line 3, Line 30) - The black walnut tree, a.k.a *jugulans nigra*, is a type of tree native to North America whose wood is often used for building furniture.

Lumberman (Line 4) - Someone who cuts down trees and splits them into logs.

Churn (Lines 6-7) - To move about vigorously together.

Trowel (Line 18) - A small handheld shovel.

Sow (Line 19) - To scatter seeds in the earth for cultivation.

Bohemia (Line 22) - An area of central Europe in what is now known as Czech Republic.

Bounding (Line 33) - Meant here in the sense of "rebounding"; the tree's heavy fruit bounces off the ground as it falls.

Whip-crack (Lines 34-35) - The sound made by a whip.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Black Walnut Tree" is a free verse poem that doesn't adhere to a conventional poetic form. The most striking thing about the form is the way it unfolds visually on the page: it consists of 35 short lines, with no stanza breaks at all. Accordingly, the poem bears a clear resemblance to the sturdy trunk of a tree.

Though the poem doesn't have stanzas, it does have two distinct sections. As the first line of the poem makes clear, there is a kind of debate going on. The speaker and her mother are deciding whether to sell the walnut tree. Lines 1 to 15 ("My mother and I [...] to gather away") essentially lay out the arguments for selling the tree, while lines 16 to 35 ("But something brighter [...] crack of the mortgage") lay out the arguments against doing so.

By the end of the poem, it's the argument *against* selling the tree that wins out, because it appeals to something more profound than the practical and sensible reasons to sell. Ultimately, not much changes in the poem in terms of the speaker's material circumstances. But through this debate, she and her mother come to appreciate the value of family connection, and how the tree represents a link between the past and the present.

METER

"The Black Walnut Tree" is a poem written in free verse, meaning it does not follow a regular meter. Oliver keeps her lines short and fragmented, relying on enjambment to construct longer phrases and sentences. In part, these short lines help show the way that the speaker and her mother are struggling to come to a decision about whether to sell the black walnut tree. It's almost as if they are making a list of pros and cons, flipping between wanting to sell and wanting to preserve the tree. The visual layout is also long and relatively thin. This cleverly makes the poem resemble a tree trunk, with the lack of stanza breaks also contributing to this effect.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Black Walnut Tree" is a free verse poem and doesn't have a rhyme scheme. At times it reads almost like prose as the speaker and her mother "debate" about whether to sell the tree. A neat rhyme scheme would probably feel too ordered and artificial for a poem that relies on a casual, conversational tone to make its point.

SPEAKER

The speaker is a woman (made clear in line 9's reference to herself and her mother as "two women") who lives with her mother in Ohio. The speaker's ancestors emigrated to the United States from central Europe ("Bohemia") and worked the land as farmers, growing "orchards" (of which the black walnut tree was perhaps once a part). It's also clear that the speaker is currently facing financial difficulties, with the pressure of paying off her house making her wonder whether it's worth selling the black walnut tree and using the proceeds to pay off her mortgage.

Clearly, the speaker and her mother are close—and, together, they feel a sense of loyalty to the generations who came before them. These ancestors had to work hard to build a life in their new country, and the speaker feels like this is something that must be honored—even if it means ongoing financial difficulty. The speaker doesn't romanticize this decision, making it clear at the end of the poem that its consequences mean the ongoing monthly "whip-crack of the mortgage."

The poem is usually read as being autobiographical, with its context taken from the poet Mary Oliver's own life.

SETTING

"The Black Walnut Tree" takes place in contemporary Ohio. It is written entirely in the present-tense, and is centered around the home in which the speaker and her mother live. Their backyard is dominated by a black walnut tree; the tree stands tall and sturdy, suggesting both the beauty and fearsome power of nature. Like the mortgage, the tree poses a threat to the house: its "dark boughs" could crash into it during a storm.

The poem's setting also widens to consider the past, as the speaker dreams about her ancestors emigrating to the United States as farmers. The speaker envisions the "fields" her ancestors work as being "fresh and generous," suggesting a respect for an appreciation of nature.

By the end of the poem, nothing about the setting itself has changed; the speaker points out that the tree still stands, threatening to crash into the house and creating lots of work for the speaker and her mother, while the mortgage continues to hang over their heads.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Mary Oliver, who died in 2019, was one of America's most popular (and best-selling) contemporary poets, and the author of over 30 collections. This poem was first published in her fourth full collection, *Twelve Moons* (1979), which was followed by her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *American Primitive*. This poem is typical in its free verse approach not just of Oliver's own work, but of the overall trend in the 1970s in America poetry.

Oliver's poetry often explores the relationship between humankind and nature, both on the personal and communal level. Oliver herself grew up in Ohio and subsequently lived in New England, and both areas feature heavily in her work.

In this way, Oliver's poetry has much in common with the 18th-century Romanticism—which included writers like William Wordsworth, John Keats, and William Blake. However, while Romantic poets sometimes idealized and romanticized nature, Oliver's work tends to be more down-to-earth. Indeed, in this poem there is a clear desire *not* to sentimentalize the natural world (combined with a deep respect for nature).

Some of the themes in Oliver's work can also be traced to American poets like Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau. For Whitman, nature and the individual were deeply connected, with grass often representing personal and spiritual growth (see "Song of Myself no. 6"). Thoreau felt that humanity had a responsibility to the natural world, and is considered by many as a forefather of the green movement. An attitude that seems to combine Whitman's awe and Thoreau's respect shows up throughout much of Oliver's poetry.

Trees specifically feature in numerous poems as well. Readers may wish to compare "The Black Walnut Tree" with "Birches" by Oliver's fellow American poet Robert Frost. As in this poem, the trees in "Birches" represent a living link between the present and the past.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Black Walnut Tree" doesn't deal much in historical specifics, though references to lumbermen, mortgages, drains, and preceding generations of family make situate it in the contemporary era. The poem is generally considered autobiographical, at least in part. Mary Oliver grew up in Ohio, and its nature features prominently in her poetry (in 1972 she released *The River Styx, Ohio, and Other Poems*).

The star of the poem—the tree itself—is a valuable (living) object. Walnut wood is of a desirable density, color, and durability for furniture, which is why selling such a large tree could make a big difference to the family's finances. Ultimately, though, the tree itself is a kind of history, its roots linking the past with seasonal fruit of the present.

In deciding to keep the tree in the backyard, the two women think about preceding generations of their family and the speaker dreams of her "fathers out of Bohemia." This is an area in central Europe that falls within what is now known as the Czech Republic. Many Czech Americans are descended from immigrants who came to the U.S. in the 19th and 20th centuries, though some generations arrived even earlier. There are nearly one-and-a-half million Americans of at least partial Czech descent. Of the states, Ohio has the seventh largest Czech American population.

Twelve Moons, the collection in which this poem was first published, came out in 1979. The late '70s in America were a time of considerable social upheaval. It was also a time of considerable international tension, including the Iran hostage crisis and the ongoing complexities of the Cold War. In general, however, Oliver's poetry notably shuts out the specifics of the contemporary world—the mortgage being the exception here—and prefers to focus on the more enduring qualities of nature.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Tree Itself — Learn more about black walnut trees. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkq9UwopUQs)
- The Poem Out Loud — A reading and interesting analysis of the poem by The Daily Poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeCLiT1u1SQ)
- More Poems and Biography — A valuable resource on Mary Oliver from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/mary-oliver)
- On Being Mary Oliver — A rare and insightful interview with the poet. (https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-listening-to-the-world-jan2019/)
- Trees in Poetry — A great compilation of poems with trees as their main subject. (https://poets.org/text/poems-about-trees?page=3)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*The Black Walnut Tree*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 12 Jun 2020. Web. 24 Aug 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*The Black Walnut Tree*." LitCharts LLC, June 12, 2020. Retrieved August 24, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/mary-oliver/the-black-walnut-tree.