The Call to Mindfulness

The author of *The Summer Day*, Mary Oliver, suffered from a challenging childhood due to her abusive father. In the midst of such difficulty, Oliver found solace and happiness in the woods where she would seek shelter and write poems. Her connection with nature and curiosity over the natural world helped her discover some sort of secular spirituality which is the central theme for the majority of her poems. *The Summer Day* is no exception. It discusses the purpose of life through the exploration of the natural world through the speaker’s lens and her resulting reflections. In this essay, I will argue that Oliver effectively uses questions in her poem to advance the idea of mindfulness. Mindfulness, as defined by Merriam-Webster is the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis. To support this argument, I will highlight how Oliver surfaces the idea of mindfulness to readers and explain what it is without explicitly stating the term. Next, I will explore how Oliver presents the reason and why to be more mindful of one's living. Finally, I will examine the subtle way she influences readers to look inward and practice mindfulness.

Oliver introduces the introspective and thought-provoking nature of mindfulness with questions that are directly addressed to readers. The speaker abruptly switches from describing her interaction with nature to a second-person voice asking readers, “Tell me, what else should I have done?” (line 16). The speaker repeats the form of the question with another direct address to the
reader, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” (line 18-19). The inclusion of “you” and “your” in the latter question gives the effect that the proximity between the speaker and the reader is being reduced and the direct address is clearer and more evocative. The repetition of “tell me” complements this and they collectively force readers to form opinions and think critically about the speaker’s purposefulness in her interaction with nature as well as how that speaks to their own personal life. As such, through these questions, readers are looking inwardly and begin turning their thoughts as well as attention to themselves. This in essence, is mindfulness - the heightened awareness of one’s thoughts. As shown, readers are introduced to its idea without it being distinctly defined with the use of questions.

Building on what mindfulness is, Oliver gives readers a reason to be more mindful about their daily living. The speaker discusses the inevitability of death and ephemeral nature of our various pursuits with a question asking readers “doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?” (line 17). The use of a rhetorical question and leaving “everything” undefined prompts readers to contemplate and think deeply about the transitory things in their life. It could be their daily activities, their life goals, relationships, etc. To accentuate the weight of this existential concept, a heavy undertone is created through the speaker's lament that the passing away of things comes “too soon”. Moreover, this question has consonance on the /s/ and /t/ sounds. This creates a whispering effect and adds to the atmosphere of solemnness, thus elevating the poignancy of the message behind the question. As such, these provide the question a hard hitting effect and challenges the reader to be more attentive to transient things in their life. In relation to the following question, it suggests to readers that they should treasure the fleeting time that they have alive and be intentional in their thoughts and actions. As such, through this question, Oliver presents a thought-provoking question and urges readers to pause and ponder about their spending of time
and outlook on life. Oliver hence provides readers the why to mindfulness in a very convincing manner and gets them to think about it deeply.

Finally, Oliver demonstrates how mindfulness is being practiced more precisely through an illustration. This is expressed with the question, “Who made the grasshopper” (line 3), which served as a lead-in to the speaker's detailed personification of a grasshopper. The question is open-ended and to whom it is being addressed to is unknown as well. This creates a puzzling and thought-provoking effect which complements the nature of the question which is oddly specific and niche. The ponder over creation of a grasshopper is typically not thought of often. Furthermore, prior to this question, the speaker asks, “Who made this world” (line 1), which creates a spiritual and allegorical quality at the onset of the poem. Readers are hence urged to similarly ponder about such questions, be more attentive to themselves and be aware of their surroundings just like how the speaker’s thoughts spiral into the romanticized description of a grasshopper from asking, “Who made the grasshopper” (line 3). Once again, through the use of questions, readers undergo the process of mindfulness but now in more detail as the reader follows the thought process of the speaker.

In summary, I have illustrated how Oliver presents what mindfulness is, followed by providing a reason to practice it, and finally how it is done through an illustration. A challenge to my argument that Oliver intended to advance the idea of mindfulness could be that the speaker, in expressing her thoughts about the futility of life and thereafter finding pleasure in unproductive activities, is showcasing the vanity of life and questioning the reader’s strive for worldly things. However, by looking more into Oliver’s background and other poems, we understand that she embraces the idea of a higher being and a spiritual state. Her intention is also to help others think
deeply and discover meaning in their lives rather than having an absurdist outlook towards life.

Regardless, the poem is a reflective one and is nonetheless thought-provoking.

(967 Words)
Works cited: