Before you answer, think about it: What does *cute* really mean? Can you be cute and still be taken seriously? still be strong? still be respected? In this essay, Mary Oliver has a few words to say about what happens when we label something *cute*.

**DEBATE** With a group of classmates, jot down what comes to mind when you think of something cute. Would you want to be described this way? Form two teams and square off to settle the question of whether or not *cute* is a compliment.
TEXT ANALYSIS: TONE
A writer’s tone, or attitude toward a subject, can subtly sneak up on you as you read or boldly hit you over the head in the first paragraph. By noticing a writer’s choice of words and details, you can detect and analyze his or her tone. Mary Oliver begins this essay by declaring, “Nothing in the forest is charming.” Her blunt statement immediately challenges a common perception of the forest and establishes her tone. As you read “A Few Words,” note striking words, details, and images that Oliver uses, and consider the tone they convey.

READING SKILL: PARAPHRASE
To understand difficult passages or sentences, it is sometimes helpful to paraphrase, or restate the writer’s ideas in your own words. When you paraphrase, be sure to

• restate both the main idea and any important details
• use your own words, which may be simpler than those in the original text

As you read, paraphrase this essay’s difficult passages in a chart like the one shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passage</th>
<th>My Paraphrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Gardens are charming, and man-made grottos, and there is a tranquility about some scenes of husbandry and agriculture that is charming—orderly rows of vegetation, or lazy herds, or the stalks of harvest lashed and leaning together.” (lines 1–4)</td>
<td>Man-made elements of nature, like gardens and grottos, are pleasant. Some farm scenes, like orderly rows of crops, tame animals, and harvested produce, look peaceful and calm.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT
Mary Oliver uses these words to make her case about the perils of cuteness. To see how many you already know, choose the word that makes sense in each phrase.

WORD LIST
deftness

diminutive

stalk

valorous

1. a _______ of wheat standing tall in the field
2. the _______ of a quarterback eluding tacklers
3. a _______ teddy bear among larger toys
4. _______ action in the face of danger

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
Nothing in the forest is charming. Gardens are charming, and man-made grottos, and there is a tranquility about some scenes of husbandry and agriculture that is charming—orderly rows of vegetation, or lazy herds, or the stalks of harvest lashed and leaning together.

And nothing in the forest is cute. The dog fox is not cute, nor the little foxes. I watch them as they run up and down the dune. One is carrying the soiled wing of a gull; the others grab onto it and pull. They fly in and out of the blond grasses, their small teeth snapping. They are not adorable, or charming, or cute.

The owl is not cute. The milk snake is not cute, nor the spider in its web, nor the striped bass. Neither is the skunk cute, and its name is not “Flower.” Nor is there a rabbit in the forest whose name is “Thumper,” who is cute.

Toys are cute. But animals are not toys. Neither are trees, rivers, oceans, swamps, the Alps, the mockingbird singing all night in the bower of thorn, the snapping turtle, or the purple-fleshed mushroom.

Such words—“cute,” “charming,” “adorable”—miss the mark, for what is perceived of in this way is stripped of dignity, and authority. What is cute is entertainment, and replaceable. The words lead us and we follow: what is cute is diminutive, it is powerless, it is capturable, it is trainable, it is ours. It is all a mistake. At our feet are the ferns—savage and resolute they rose, when the race of man was nowhere and altogether unlikely ever to be at all, in the terrifying shallows of the first unnamed and unnamable oceans. We find them pretty, delicate, and charming, and carry them home to our gardens.

Thus we manage to put ourselves in the masterly way—if nature is full of a hundred thousand things adorable and charming, diminutive and powerless, then who is in the position of power? We are! We are the parents, and the

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1. man-made grottos (grō’tōz): artificial caves created for coolness and pleasure.
2. husbandry (hūz’band-rē): farming.
governors. The notion facilitates a view of the world as playground and laboratory, which is a meager view surely. And it is disingenuous, for it seems so harmless, so responsible. But it is neither.

For it makes impossible the other view of nature, which is of a realm both sacred and intricate, as well as powerful, of which we are no more than a single part. Nature, the total of all of us, is the wheel that drives our world; those who ride it willingly might yet catch a glimpse of a dazzling, even a spiritual restfulness, while those who are unwilling simply to hang on, who insist that the world must be piloted by man for his own benefit, will be dragged around and around all the same, gathering dust but no joy.

Humans or tigers, tigers or tiger lilies—note their differences and still how alike they are! Don't we all, a few summers, stand here, and face the sea and, with whatever physical and intellectual **deftness** we can muster, improve our state—and then, silently, fall back into the grass, death's green cloud? What is cute or charming as it rises, as it swoons? Life is Niagara, or nothing. I would not be the overlord of a single blade of grass, that I might be its sister. I put my face close to the lily, where it stands just above the grass, and give it a good greeting from the stem of my heart. We live, I am sure of this, in the same country, in the same household, and our burning comes from the same lamp. We are all wild, **valorous**, amazing. We are, none of us, cute.

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**GRAMMAR AND STYLE**
Reread lines 24–29. Notice how Oliver uses a variety of **interrogative**, **exclamatory**, and **declarative sentences** to express her views on human arrogance.

**PARAPHRASE**
What is Oliver saying about human attitudes toward nature in lines 32–36? Paraphrase this sentence, breaking it down into several shorter sentences if necessary.

**deftness** (děft’nēs) *n.* the quality of quickness and skillfulness

**valorous** (vāl’ōr-ōs) *adj.* brave

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**Analyze Visuals**
Compare your reaction to these photographs with your reaction to the one on page 863. In your opinion, do these photos illustrate Oliver's message better than the one on the preceding page? Explain your answer.
Comprehension

1. Recall How does Oliver describe the foxes at the beginning of the essay?

2. Recall List three other animals or plants the author discusses.

3. Clarify In Oliver’s view, if we see nature as made up of cute, powerless animals, then who is in a position of power?

Text Analysis

4. Draw Conclusions Reread the essay’s last line on page 864. Has “A Few Words” changed your opinion about what it means to label something cute? Do you think cute can ever be a compliment? Explain, citing lines from the essay you agree or disagree with.

5. Analyze Tone Describe Oliver’s overall tone in this essay. As a reader, what can you tell about her attitude toward nature? Explain, citing evidence from the essay to support your analysis.

6. Paraphrase Review the paraphrasing chart you created as you read. Using your chart, summarize the central idea of this essay in your own words.

7. Examine Author’s Style Oliver is most widely known for her poetry. In what way might this selection be described as poetic? In a chart like the one shown, record examples of the poetic elements Oliver uses in this essay. Use your completed chart to explain whether you think “A Few Words” is more like poetry or more like prose.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poetic Element</th>
<th>Examples from the Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alliteration</td>
<td>“At our feet are the ferns…” (line 20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagery</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Text Criticism

8. Critical Interpretations Critics have praised Oliver’s quest to, in the words of Holly Prado of the L.A. Times Book Review, “understand both the wonder and pain of nature.” In your opinion, how well does Oliver explain both the beautiful and the not-so-beautiful aspects of the natural world? Support your answer with evidence from the selection.

Is “CUTE” a compliment?

Is being “cute” respectable? Is being called “cute” offensive?
Vocabulary in Context

VOCABULARY PRACTICE

In which situation might you use each vocabulary word?

1. diminutive: (a) describing a miniature poodle, (b) listing the pros and cons of a school committee’s proposal, (c) explaining how to draw trees
2. stalk: (a) explaining how to apply paint, (b) describing a field of corn, (c) listing the reasons you like bungee jumping
3. valorous: (a) telling about a peaceful day in the country, (b) describing how the hero of a movie saved the day, (c) detailing how to lay a brick sidewalk
4. deftness: (a) watching leaves fall in a windstorm, (b) describing how a runner broke away from the pack to win, (c) choosing a birthday card for your brother

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

- appreciate  - attribute  - indicate  - unique  - vary

According to Mary Oliver, how does Nature in its natural environment vary from nature in a man-made environment? Write a paragraph or two comparing and contrasting those two environments. Use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your response.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: HOMONYMS

Homonyms are words that have the same pronunciation and often the same spelling but different meanings. For example, the vocabulary word stalk, which means “a stem or main axis of a plant,” looks and sounds just like the word stalk, meaning “to move threateningly or menacingly.” Because they are pronounced and spelled the same way, homonyms can be confusing. The context of the sentence or passage can usually help you determine which of a set of homonyms is being used. However, sometimes it’s difficult to figure out the meaning of a homonym from its context. In such cases, check a dictionary.

PRACTICE Identify the homonyms described by each pair of definitions. If you’re stumped, figure out which word just one of the definitions describes. Then use a dictionary to find out if that word has any homonyms.

1. to move a boat forward with oars/a line of people or objects
2. place where a dead person is buried/very serious or solemn
3. a type of something/friendly and considerate
4. the skin of an animal/to conceal or keep secret
5. to intend to do something/unkind
6. belonging to me/an underground cavern from which gold is extracted
Language

◆ **GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Vary Sentence Types**

Reread the Grammar and Style note on page 864. Oliver believes that some people have a very condescending view of nature. To express her outrage at this perception, she uses a variety of sentence types that allow her emotions to shine through. Here, Oliver enlists imperative, interrogative, and declarative sentences to get her point across:

*Humans or tigers, tigers or tiger lilies—note their differences and still how alike they are! Don’t we all, a few summers, stand here, and face the sea and, with whatever physical and intellectual deftness we can muster, improve our state—and then, silently, fall back into the grass, death’s green cloud? What is cute or charming as it rises, as it swoons? Life is Niagara, or nothing.*

(lines 37–41)

Notice how the revisions in blue employ sentence types that more accurately reflect the emotions of the writer, making the statements more powerful. Revise your response to the prompt below by varying your sentence types.

**STUDENT MODEL**

*I don’t think we should refer to people as “cute.” It belittles them, and it doesn’t take into account their achievements.*

*I think we should give people credit for something more worthwhile, like hard work.*

**READING-WRITING CONNECTION**

Increase your understanding of “A Few Words” by responding to this prompt. Then use the revising tip to improve your writing.

**WRITING PROMPT**

Extended Constructed Response: Opinion

Oliver makes the case that we do nature a disservice when we label it *cute*. Can this apply to calling a person *cute*, as well? Write a three-to-five-paragraph response explaining whether or not you think this label can be harmful to humans. Use evidence from the text to support your opinion.

**REVISING TIP**

Review your explanation. Were you able to use a variety of sentence types to express your feelings about the topic? If not, revise your response.