

## Reflection on the Fragility of Life in Louise Gluck's "The Wild Iris"

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### **Abstract**

Most poets tend to elaborate on aspects of life like death, mortality, and fragility of life in relation to aspects of nature through the use of certain symbols and images, and Louise Gluck is not an exception. She tackles fragility of human life by comparing it with that of the iris. "The wild iris" which is published in 1992 reflects on a variety of themes such as death, rebirth, transformation, and the fragility of life. The flower is poetically personified as the speaker, vividly embodied to tell the story. Irises, like humans, are certainly fading. From the very beginning, the poet introduced to the scene of imminent death. However, the iris gives a sense of hope when it comes to life again. It is through the flower's experience and endurance that readers realize the essence of life and the significance of their existence. The speaker's idea of life is like that of the iris; transitory but it represents a natural cycle of a spectacular cosmic order. The speaker's admission of decay is a matter of controversy. Gluck seeks eternity,

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representing the process of death and life as a cycle of growth and decline, then rebirth in afterlife. To achieve this, the poet keeps her voice to a minimum. Glück adopts a simple language and a spare poetic tone, accompanied with allegory and symbolism to reflect the speaker's fragility.

**Keywords:** Louise Glück, Fragility of Life, *The Wild Iris*, Death, Rebirth,

### خلاصة البحث

يميل معظم الشعراء الى التطرق الى جوانب الحياة مثل الموت والفناء ووهن الوجود عن طريق ربطها بالجوانب الموجودة في الطبيعة من خلال استخدام الرموز والصور الشعرية , ولويس غليك ليست استثناء من ذلك . ناقشت الشاعرة فكرة وهن الحياة بمقارنتها بحياة السوسنة البرية. وردت هذه القصيدة ضمن المجموعة الشعرية التي حازت على جائزة نوبل, وكانت تحمل نفس الاسم . حيث تناولت قصيدة "السوسنة البرية", التي نُشرت عام ١٩٩٢, باقة متنوعة من الموضوعات مثل: الموت، والبعث، والتحول، وضعف الوجود. وقد تجسدت الزهرة شعرياً لتمثل الشخص الذي يتحدث ويحكي لنا القصة بوضوح. ويبدو من خلال الاستعارات المجازية كيف تخللت رائحة الموت كل ألبيات الشعرية عند غليك. حيث تتعرض القصيدة منذ البداية لرسم المشهد الظاهري للموت. ومع ذلك، تمنحنا السوسنة الأمل عندما يتعلق الأمر بالحياة من جديد. ويمكن للقراء، من خلال تجربة الموت التي تعالجها الزهرة، أن يدركوا جوهر الحياة وأهمية وجودهم فيها. وقد عملت بنية القصيدة وموسيقاها المصحوبة بالصور المدهشة على خلق هذا الشعور. كما ساهم السياق اللغوي والمحسنات البديعية داخل قصيدة "السوسنة البرية"، في عرض فكرة الموضوع بوضوح. فزهور السوسن، مثل البشر، محكومة بالفناء. ومن هنا كان التشابه بين السوسنة ومن يتحدث عن الحياة، من حيث مضمون الفكرة: فالحياة فانية عابرة، غير أنها تمثل الدوران الطبيعي للنظام الكوني المذهل. إن إقرار المتحدث بفكرة الفناء والزوال أمر مثير للجدل. فالشاعرة، لويس غليك، تسعى إلى الخلود، حيث تمثل لها عملية الموت والحياة دورة النماء والانحلال وتجدد الخلق في العالم الآخر. ولكي يتحقق ذلك، التزمت الشاعرة بنبرة الصوت الضئيل، واعتمدت لغةً بسيطةً ونبرةً شعريّةً خافتةً، مصحوبة بالاستعارة والرمزية لتعكس مدى الضعف الذي ينتاب المتحدث.

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الكلمات المفتاحية: لويز غليك، البنية، وهن الحياة، السوسنة البرية، الموت، الولادة من جديد

### Introduction

Louise Elisabeth Gluck, a poet and an essayist, was born in 1943 in New York City and died in 2023. she is the fourth woman who awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in the past decade. She is regarded as one of the most gifted poets. Gluck's poetry is characterized by technical precision, compassion, and isolation, death, and family relations. (Anonymous editor,2021., N.P.)

Gluck is regarded as an autobiographical poet. Her poetry often sheds light on aspects of trauma, desire, and nature. Childhood and strained relationships with parents and siblings are predominant motifs in her poetry. Her earlier poetry shows a persona grappling with consequences of disappointment of love and existential misery while her late poetry explores the agony of the self and aging. She views aging as something unescapable it is like slow death. (Anonymous editor,2021., N.P.)

There are many sources which stand behind the grief and suffering in Gluck's poetry these include divorce, the death of parents, siblings, the fear of a house fire, and the uncertainty about having children. (Morris, 2006, 101)

Louise Gluck's personal experiences help her to find an outlet for her own emotions. She portrays an idealized, natural scene. Her stand, however, seems quite different from that of Romantics she looks at things more seriously,

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depicting an iris that is fragile and dying. The poet is depicting life cycles literally, symbolically, and spiritually. In their conversation with Louise Gluck, Charlie V. et al. (2024) stated that:

During her writing career, which spans over seven decades, she has drawn from mythology, personal grief, and the natural world in order to examine loss of innocence, trauma, mortality, and transformation. (P.4)

For most critics and academicians, Gluck started her literary career as a lyric poet. However, most of her later verses are featured with dark tone and stark word diction. In this respect, Craig Morgan Teicher (2017) comments that "Gluck has become more economic on using words, adding that her "words [in later poems] are always scarce, hard won, and not to be wasted." (Teicher, 2017, N.P.)

Gluck got a lot of awards and literary titles. Her verses include themes of love and loss, nature and humanity, and spirituality and faith. The poems capture the beauty of classics and offer originality as well. Most Critics have the opinion that there are some traces of ancient legends, parables, and Greek mythology in her literary works. She has been also influenced by some poets and writers such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Robert Lowell, and Emily Dickinson, and others. Elaborating on this feature in Gluck's verses, Gargaillo comments:

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"Like Lowell, Gluck makes the difficulty of speech one of her chief subjects; she takes the "failed fragments" other poets might prefer to conceal, and instead arranges and displays them." (Gargaillo, 2017, N.P.)

Gluck published around eleven books of poetry and some essays. Some of these famous books are *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985), *Ararat* (1990), for which she received the Library of Congress 's Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry. *Meadowlands* (1997), *The Seven Ages* (2001), *Averno* (2006). Her first publication appeared in the *Mademoiselle* magazine. Then, she wrote in several literary magazines and newspapers. Her first collection of poems, *Firstborn*, published in 1968. Louise Gluck's collection of *The Wild Iris* won the Nobel Prize in Literature (2020). She also published group of essays including *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry* (1994) which won the PEN/ and American Originality. (Poem hunter.com- The World's Poetry Archive, 2004, P. 1)

Gluck's short narrative poems rely heavily on the use of enjambment and everyday speech. It is also characterized as having no rhyme scheme as well as meter. Gluck's style often changes drawing on "surrealism, imagism, confessionalism, and objectivism." In her poetry also, she was able to speak through the use of other voices of mythological as well as invented characters, God, and flowers .... ect. She claims that "the poem, no matter how charged its

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content, will not survive on content but through voice." (Rimas Uzgiris, 2020, P. 91)

The poet experienced a period of stagnation in which she did not write for two years, after this period she wrote *The Wild Iris* in just eight weeks. Her work is recognized for her technical mastery, the distinct voices in her poems, and her sensitivity and insight. The main concern of her work includes family dynamics, existential anguish, the search for self, and the natural world. She won the Nobel Prize in Literature for her unique poetic voice that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal. Her poetic language is straightforward, and relatable, adding to the strength of the speakers' voices. (Ribeiro. Cooper ed. 2023)

In *The Wild Iris* which marks great structural development in her poetry, Gluck concerns her struggle to proclaim the individuality of her voice and vision through maintaining a conversation with the creative force. (Morris, 2006, P. 191). In this volume, Gluck introduced three characters God, the poet herself, and the flower. She complained the absence of God. She claimed that God has abandoned his children from the day of their exile from Eden. This means that God had left them without heavenly plan. (Cyril Wong Yit Mun, 2008, P.35)

### 2. Analysis of "The Wild Iris"(year)

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"The Wild Iris" is the titular poem of the volume written by Gluck in 1992 under the same name. It is a sequence of poems representing iris which is a kind of flowers, a gardener who serves as a representation for humans in general, and God. The major themes that recur through this poem are the fragility of life, mortality, pain and suffering, and the fleeting beauty of the natural world. (Lichart.com)

*The wild Iris* is a contemplation about the association between God and humans on one hand and human and nature on the other. Thus, it shows how irises view themselves and their relations with human beings; how human's strife with their spirits and principles about God, and God's attitudes towards human beings. The setting of the poem is in the garden. The garden here is a metaphorical reference to Eden. In "The wild Iris" Gluck used three voices in the poem, these are human voice which is represented by the poet, the voice of nature which is represented by the iris, and the voice of God. The flowers and God often address humans directly. The poet wants the reader to see God in a new light. In this case, she speaks to God directly in a tone sometimes nostalgic, other times doubtful, sometimes annoyed and regretful. (Schneider, N.D.1, 2)

"The Wild Iris" is a twenty-three-line poem divided into unequal stanzas. Gluck used a free verse style of writing in which she did not utilize a fixed metrical rhythm or rhyme scheme. The iris's and the gardener's voices are outstanding

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voices in the poem. The alternation between the voices makes a dialogue between flowers and human gardener as well as causing an argument about how fragile their lives are. (Un academy. Com)

"The Wild Iris" begins and ends with the same voice. That is of the personified flower. Through the poem, there is alteration of voices which create an account in which the poet tries to make sense of her ideas about God. The poet introduced themes of finding someone's voice as well as rebirth. It starts with the wild iris speaks to human beings in the character of the poet herself. It asserts that everything in nature is part of natural cycle of death and life. When this happens, these things try to find some expressions to assert their eternity just as the poet does through writing poetry "Returns from oblivion returns to find a voice..." (Gluck, 2013, P. 245). When humans pass away their souls will not return to earth just like the flowers which come back to life after death. Thus, in her search to find meaning for human existence, Gluck comes to terms with the conflict between two competing views of eternity:

the traditional Judeo-Christian view that claims that humans only have one life and that only the spirit is eternal, and the imagined flower's view of eternity as one of constant rebirth and repetition (the spirit returns to God after death).

(Choudhari, Dr, Chouohan, 2022, 1181, 1182)



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The other difference between the flowers and human beings is their voice.

The voice of the flower is an ecstatic and selfless surrender to being a part of the living world, whereas the voice of a human being is constantly and consciously negotiating with the world and only occasionally collapses the distance between world and self. (Choudhari, Dr, Chouohan, 2022, 1181, 1182)

The main theme of this poem is death. Whereas humans tend to think of death as an absolute ending to life, the speaker shows a completely different view through the perspective of the flower. Instead of being the end of life, it is the beginning for a new life. The speaker has personally experienced death as one part of a larger cycle of transformation. After a period of being buried in the dark earth, they eventually pushed back up to the surface and "return[ed] from oblivion". Death is thus a form of rebirth, which may make it easier for humans to accept with peacefulness. (Spark notes. Com)

The poem meditatively explores the true meaning of being fragile in which the poet adopts the voice of a flower, crafting remarkable metaphors to make a connection between the natural world and her own human entity. The poet draws upon her life experiences. That's why; "The Wild Iris" and some other verses can be critically looked at as personal confessions. Daniel Morris (2006) notes that:

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flowers become a language of mourning", adding  
that "this iris useful for both commemoration  
and competition among mourners to determine  
the ownership  
of nature as a meaningful system of symbolism.  
(P.6)

From the very beginning, Gluck expresses her surrender and acceptance of the idea of loss and confusion, causing fragility and suffering. She addresses the reader "At the end of my suffering / there was a door." (Gluck, p. 245). Thus, the "door" here is a symbol for hope. It refers to the way for survival and everlasting life after death. It symbolizes happiness and peace of the soul. The poet is completely aware of the meaning of life and death. She appeals to the reader's sympathy to listen to her agony. In her essay, "The Use of Voice in Louise Gluck's Poetry," Myra Schneider observes that "the perceptions, questions and feelings [in Gluck's plant poems] are integral to the nature of the speaker" (Schneider, N.D. P. 1).

The poem maintains fragility and death as its contemplative tone. The poet asks readers to contemplate the fleeting moments of life. She tackles the inevitability of perishing souls, destined to depart, however long and prosperous their lives are. That reflects the profound significance of life and death. The rebirth of seeds and their transformation into flowers, though buried beneath the ground, deepens readers' understanding of how new things are created while

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enduring suffering. In the poet's collection, *Poems: 1962-2020* (2013), Gluck states through the voice of the flower "At the end of my suffering / there was a door." (Gluck, 2013, p. 245). She is concerned with creating something from suffering. This transformation occurs when the iris experiencing the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. In an interview with the Academy of Achievement, Gluck has stated that her main reason for writing poetry is "to discover meaning and make something out of painful circumstances." (Ribeiro. Cooper ed., 2023, N.P.)

In the second stanza, Gluck calls on humans' attention "Hear me out: that which you call death / I remember." (Gluck, p. 245). Through this simple as well as friendly way of speaking, the iris claims that she remembers what humans call "death." This indicates that elements of death lie everywhere but its perception is different from that of humans. The poet used enjambment after the word "death" which proposes the fact that it is not the end; that something new will come after that's why in a weak voice, the poet asks the reader to "hear" while she is taking passage from underground to realize rebirth. (Ribeiro. Cooper ed., 2023, N.P.)

The third stanza draws a physical scene through the use of auditory imagery. The poet describes noises in the natural world "Overhead, noises, branches of pine shifting, then nothing." (Gluck, 2013, P.245). The iris remembers hearing sounds above the soil until each sound worn out and all it knew was the sun

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shining dimly. The movement of the branches because of the wind "Then nothing" refers to imminent death. (Emma Baldwin, 2020, N.P.)

In the fourth stanza, the poet introduces a fearful image of people buried underground "It is terrible to survive / as consciousness / buried in the dark earth" (Gluck, 2013, P. 245). This gloomy image of being buried alive evokes the sense of isolation. The burial of the flower underground is a life producing process which is a form of rebirth. (Emma Baldwin, 2020). The flower declares that being underground alone and conscious was "terrible." It conveys to human beings that eventually she was able to escape humanity's worse anxiety through rebirth. The fear of human of being alone and not able to speak is clear in the poem. This "fear of being a soul not able to speak" (Gluck, 2013, P. 245) because communication is necessary for survival. (Ribeiro. Cooper ed., 2023, N.P.)

Then, the fear of being not able to speak has come to an end "ending abruptly" which signifies death and immediately followed by rebirth when the irises grow and breaks the surface "the stiff earth / bending a little." From this, one can conclude that death leads back to life. The poet tackles themes recovering a voice, and of rebirth.

You who do not remember  
 Passage from the other world  
 I tell you I could speak again: whatever  
 returns from oblivion returns to find a voice  
 (Gluck, 2013, P 245)

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In the above extract, the flower seems to address the reader. The iris claims that all creatures in nature go through this cycle of life and death. This idea of recurrence extends to human beings. After their death, flowers come back again to life, but when a humans die their bodies will never come back to life. So the iris's voice refers to selfless surrender to participate in the living world. But the humans' voice is always negotiating with the world and hardly collapses the distance between the self and the world. (Cyril Wong Yit Mun, 2008, P 36).

The iris has done its role perfectly when she introduces the central idea of the poem "whatever returns from oblivion, returns to find a voice." (Gluck, 2013, P. 245). Thus, finding a voice is a metaphor for self-creation. Like Gluck who was able to create her own voice as well as finding meaning for her life through writing poetry, the iris finds it voice through its rebirth. (Ribeiro. Cooper ed. 2023, N.P.)

In the poem's final line "from the center of my life came / a great fountain, deep blue / shadows on azure seawater" (Cluck, 2013, P. 245). The speaker experiences what it means to die and comes back to life again. The voice of the speaker tells human beings that this fountain of water comes from the "center" of their life. It is like the purification of souls after death, which ends with everlasting joy and pleasure. Thus "a great fountain" implies hope for another life and rebirth; it is a new sort of life that springs outwards from the "center" of

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the poet's life. In this case, suffering could be considered as one of the features of the fragile life of all creatures in the universe including human beings since it deepens humans' understanding of the essence of their existence and the significance of their life experiences. The water is a metaphor for continuity of life. Thus, the line above portrays the moment that "this flower/speaker regains life once more." (Emma Baldwin, 2020, N.P.). While the blue color is always associated with sadness and depression here "Deep blue" signifies beauty and abundance as it is related to the color of petals of the flower. The ocean is often depicted a wild force, which is an appropriate metaphor for this speaker. It is a "Wild" Iris, after all which can survive all sufferings and flourish again with blue petals. (Ribeiro. Cooper ed. 2023, N.P.)

The poem emphasizes the impact of nature cycles on all living things, making them all exposed to fragility (humans or non-humans.) This might cause suffering. In his introduction to the essay *"The Cycle of Seasons: An Analysis of Louise Gluck's Selected Poems,"* Nirupama Kujur (2023) writes that:

Climate, weather and the change of seasons  
influence much of our everyday engagements.  
Weather can be both an accommodating and  
destructive force for people and their property.  
(P.174).

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Gluck's use of language in "The Wild Iris" suggests fragility and mortality.

Morris argues that:

she expresses reservations about her enactment of identity in such an impersonal form as language that nature, erotic desire, and the nuances of material existence disappear into the ethereal realm of abstraction. (Morris, 2006, P.9).

Gluck's investment of nature imagery in "The Wild Iris" contrasts life with death. It also deepens readers' understanding of how growth and decay alternate in a cycle to convey mortality and rebirth. In his article, *"Louise Gluck's Sacred Invitation: a Reflection on Nature and the Voice of God in The Wild Iris,"* Jonathan Cooper (2024) comments on Gluck's poems noting that the natural cycles of growth and decline serves as a true expression God's voice. (Cooper, 2024, N.P.).

Gluck's subtle use of minimalist language evokes a state of fragility and vividly creates images of life short span. The poet allegorically reduces her voice, personifying an iris to speak instead. She has adopted alternative voices to express her intention to break away from her own reality and find reunion with God. (Morris, 2006, PP. 178, 179).

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The poet concludes his poem with a lesson for humans that there is always hope for a new beginning just as what happened with iris. Metaphorically speaking, the iris's rebirth too is considered as a metaphor for mental as well as emotional rebirth and not only a physical one. (Un academy. Com)

### Conclusion

Gluck is an American poet who has won a lot of prizes and received many awards and titles. Through the use of certain symbols, images, and metaphors the poet sheds light on many aspects which are predominant in humans' life. These include mortality, rebirth, and fragility. Through the image of the iris, the poet introduces a lesson for his readers about the inevitability of death. The role of language was overwhelming in demonstrating this theme. It reflects the elements of fragility of life through minimalism, natural symbolism, and existential tone. It has become clear that the poet has utilized language in a way to convey the idea of fragility of life and its impermanence. Through the employment of devices of imagery, multiple voices, and Gluck has dealt with the major themes, creating a balance between such issues as life, death, suffering, and renewal.



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