The Mystery Study Guide

The Mystery by Louise Glück

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Introduction

To appreciate fully the meaning of and drive behind Louise Glück's "The Mystery," it is helpful to read the entire collection, *Vita Nova*, in which this poem is included. Published in 1999, *Vita Nova*, which translates into "new life," explores the poet's emergence from the despair and loneliness that plagued her for years after her husband left her. Her previous collection, *Meadowlands* (1996), recounted the deterioration of her marriage and *Vita Nova* picks up where that book left off: Glück's life after divorce, drawing from a mixture of allusions to distraught lovers in Greek mythology and to her own plight as a rejected, sometimes self-pitying, woman. But "The Mystery" can be read and enjoyed as a single poem as well, and it stands on its own as an uplifting testimony to spiritual, emotional, and intellectual rebirth.

Perhaps uncharacteristically for Glück, this poem's extended metaphor is based on mystery writer Rex Stout's series of novels and short stories featuring the renowned detective Nero Wolfe. The rotund, sedentary, and brilliant detective is known for his love of food and orchids as much as his uncanny knack for solving crimes. Glück uses the idea of mystery to describe her rise from the bitter depths of sadness and abandonment, likening the process to one of a person who has emerged from the dark to become "a creature of light." In essence, she is able to find resolution for at least some of her emotional pain and in doing so she has "acquired in some measure / the genius of the master"□in this case, Nero Wolfe.

Author Biography

Louise Glück was born in New York City in 1943 to well-educated and well-to-do parents. Her mother attended Wellesley College, and her father was a successful businessman of Hungarian descent. One of the most profound events of Glück's life happened before she was even born: the death of her older sister, the family's first child. Although Glück never knew her sister, the tragedy of the girl's death inspired themes of grief and loss that pervade much of the poet's work even today.

As a teenager, Glück developed anorexia, and, when her struggle with the condition worsened, her parents withdrew her from her last year in high school to begin sessions of psychoanalysis. The therapy lasted seven years. According to Glück, the sessions not only helped her to overcome anorexia but also taught her to organize her own thoughts with more discipline and rigor. She used her newly acquired thought processing to create poetry, believing that method and control were beneficial in communicating both emotionally and intellectually.

A year after psychoanalysis, Glück enrolled in a poetry workshop at Columbia University where she worked closely with poet and teacher Stanley Kunitz. Glück acknowledges that Kunitz□named the poet laureate of the United States in 2000 at the age of ninety-five□has been a major influence throughout her career. Kunitz received numerous awards over his own lengthy life, including the prestigious Bollingen Prize, awarded every two years by the Yale University Library to an American poet for the best book of recently published poetry, or for lifetime achievement in poetry. Fittingly, Glück received the Bollingen Prize in 2001 for her book *Vita Nova*, which includes the poem "The Mystery."

While her sister's death and her own struggle with anorexia left lifelong imprints on Glück's mind and work, probably the most significant influence in her later life was the break-up of her marriage. With personal loss as a central theme, Glück has produced eight volumes of poetry and a collection of essays discussing the theoretical aspects of poetry. Besides the Bollingen Prize, she has received an Academy of American Poets Prize, a Guggenheim fellowship, the Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and a Pulitzer Prize, among others. Although Glück never earned a college degree, she has been teaching at universities since 1970. Currently, she makes her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and teaches at Williams College.

Poem Text

I became a creature of light.
I sat in a driveway in California;
the roses were hydrant-color; a baby
rolled by in its yellow stroller, making
bubbling fishlike sounds.

I sat in a folding chair
reading Nero Wolfe for the twentieth time,
a mystery that has become restful.
I know who the innocent are; I have acquired in
some measure
the genius of the master, in whose supple mind
time moves in two directions: backward
from the act to the motive
and forward to just resolution.

Fearless heart, never tremble again:
the only shadow is the narrow palm's
that cannot enclose you absolutely.
Not like the shadows of the east.

My life took me many places,
many of them very dark.
It took me without my volition,
pushing me from behind,
from one world to another, like
the fishlike baby.
And it was all entirely arbitrary,

without discernible form.
The passionate threats and questions,
the old search for justice,
must have been entirely deluded.

And yet I saw amazing things.
I became almost radiant at the end;
I carried my book everywhere,
like an eager student
clinging to these simple mysteries

so that I might silence in myself
the last accusations:

Who are you and what is your purpose?

Plot Summary

Line 1

The first line of Glück's "The Mystery" foretells the poem's outcome. After taking the reader through the trying recollections of depression and loss, the speaker survives the dark side of her life to become "a creature of light." This line would work just as well as a last line, for it serves as the resolution to the speaker's—Glück's, actually— problem.

Lines 2-5

Glück acknowledges that she wrote all the poems collected in *Vita Nova* at a rapid pace, completing a draft of the entire manuscript in only three weeks. She has said that they were written in hotel rooms and elevators, on airplanes, and while she was visiting friends in California. Apparently, "The Mystery" was written in her friend's "driveway in California" where yellow roses bloom nearby. The first stanza is full of references to the bright color, which represents the "light" she feels she has entered into. California is known as the "Golden State," the flowers she sees match the color of bright red fire hydrants, and a baby rolls by in its yellow stroller. The mention of the baby that makes "bubbling fishlike sounds" (as normal babies do) sets up a metaphor later in the poem when Glück compares her own situation to that of a baby in a stroller.

Lines 6-8

Line 6 parallels line 2, but it narrows down the description of where the poet is sitting: "in a folding chair" in the driveway, reading a mystery novel. The fact that she is "reading Nero Wolfe for the twentieth time" is ironic in that one does not usually read the same mystery over and over. After all, the excitement of a "whodunit" is over when the reader knows who committed the crime and how. But that is precisely *why* Glück keeps poring over the book—the mystery has become comforting, or "restful," to her.

Lines 9-11

In these lines, the poet tells why the book is restful. After reading it so many times, she obviously knows "who the innocent are," and she even feels that she has picked up some of the savvy detective's ability to deduce a solution from the available evidence. Her own mind is nearly as "supple," or agile, as that of "the master" because it, too, can envision both the past and the future—in other words, move "in two directions." Note here that Glück does not say she knows who the guilty is (or are), but the innocent. This is another ironic twist since the average reader is more likely to say, "I know who did it now," emphasizing the criminal instead of the victim(s). Innocence plays a bigger role in the poet's emergence from the dark, as she will describe later in the poem.

Lines 12-13

On one hand, these two lines simply refer to the way a good detective solves a crime. His or her mind must be able to move "backward / from the act to the motive" to understand what made the criminal commit the crime in the first place. Then, the mind needs to move "forward to just resolution" to bring the case to a close. On the other hand, these lines represent Glück's own mind thinking back on why ("the motive") her husband left her ("the act") and then resolving to look to the future ("forward") and leave the past behind.

Lines 14-17

In this stanza, Glück directly addresses her own heart, telling it never to be afraid again. Playing off the idea of becoming "a creature of light," she tells her heart that the only thing that may now bring darkness is the "shadow" of a "narrow [palm]" trying to squeeze it. But she assures her heart that the shadow□most likely her exhusband's□ cannot "enclose you absolutely." The "shadows of the east," meaning the eastern United States, where she and her husband lived and where their marriage ended, had apparently been strong enough to enclose her heart in complete darkness, but she no longer has that fear.

Lines 18-19

These two lines imply a helplessness on the speaker's part, based on the way line 18 is worded. Notice that she does not say, "I went many places in my life," but, instead, speaks of her life as though it is an entity separate from herself: "My *life* took *me* many places" (italics added). She then claims that those places were "very dark," reaffirming the notion that she has now come forth into the light.

Lines 20-23

These lines make up the metaphor referred to earlier regarding the baby in the stroller. Still viewing her life as a separate, free-willed being, she claims that it "took me without my volition"□that is, without her own conscious choice or decision. She compares her life to the person pushing the baby in the yellow stroller. Here, her life is the one "pushing me from behind, / from one world to another," and she is the "fishlike baby" who has no control over where it is going.

Lines 24-25

Lines 24 and 25 seem almost accusatory, as the poet claims her past life pushed her around in an "entirely arbitrary" fashion with no apparent plan or "form" to follow.

Lines 26-28

These three lines again imply the "mystery" metaphor, but here the "threats and questions," "search for justice," and series of delusions that one typically finds in a good detective story are part of the make-up of Glück's former marriage and relationship with her husband. Apparently, *she* was the one who felt the need to search for justice in all that transpired between them, for the end of the poem implies that even though she was the victim in their eventual divorce, she benefited from it as well.

Lines 29-30

Lines 29 and 30 allude to some of the benefits. Her life□or her husband, perhaps□may have pushed her around willy-nilly, but she "saw amazing things" along the way, becoming "almost radiant" toward the end of her journey through marriage, divorce, depression, and, finally, acceptance of it all. Glück again refers to brightness and light, using the word "radiant" to describe her new life, or "vita nova."

Lines 31-33

Referring back to the Nero Wolfe novel, the speaker claims that she carried the book everywhere, "like an eager student." Apparently, she finds the "simple mysteries" comforting□thus, the need for "clinging" to them□because they are much easier to grasp than the puzzle that real life often becomes.

Lines 34-36

Glück ends the poem by revealing her reason for "clinging to these simple mysteries": understanding the simpler riddles, or even crimes, makes it easier for her to stop accusing herself of doing something wrong in her marriage, to stop blaming herself for its failure, and perhaps for the state of depression she fell into afterwards. Line 36 is typical of Glück's style of writing poetry, for she often includes a series of questions and answers as lines or full stanzas in a poem. Generally, the questions and answers represent an inner dialogue, or self-examination, as a means of understanding her emotions and thoughts. The final line of "The Mystery" implies that she feels a need to identify the person she now is and to find a purpose for her new existence as a "creature of light."

Themes

Irony and the "New Life"

In the late thirteenth century, a young Dante Alighieri fell in love. Though he would later be best known as the author of *The Divine Comedy*, he first wrote an account of the woman he loved (but never really knew) in his verse collection, *La Vita Nuova*, or *The New Life*. Though "Beatrice" appears in both books, *La Vita Nuova* describes the course of Dante's intense love for her, his premonition of her death in a dream, her actual death, and his commitment to eulogizing her life in his writing. Historical accounts claim that Dante's romance from afar with Beatrice and the manner in which he presented his lofty idealism in verse influenced love poetry for centuries to come. The phrase "vita nuova" was used by many Italians in the middle ages to imply a new commitment to love and romance. As "The Mystery" suggests, Glück may have borrowed Dante's book title for her own collection, but she left his sentiment on romantic love far behind.

The twentieth-century female American poet puts an ironic twist on the term "new life." Here, a revived, or resurrected, life appears out of the ashes of romance gone wrong. Glück recalls marriage, love, and heartbreak as "the shadows of the east" and describes many of the "places" that romantic life took her as "very dark." She compares a woman in love to a "fishlike baby," sitting helplessly in a stroller with no control over his or her destination. She concludes that her old ideals about love and happiness must have been mere delusions, creating mysteries and puzzles in her personal life that kept her in the dark. Then, the poet emerges into her "vita nova." After finally accepting that her husband is out of her life for good, she trades in romance for more practical emotions, and for the ability to solve a love problem the way a detective solves a crime□with clear thinking, cold reasoning, and rationale. Instead of new life emanating from the thrill of a new relationship, the idea here is that it can begin from the end of a bad one. While it is true that Glück's and Dante's themes are polar opposites, the shared title seems to work for both.

Questions and Answers

In many of Glück's poems, the speaker□ usually Glück herself□attempts to find a resolution to a problem through a mental dialogue with herself. The process of asking a question and then answering it stimulates the mind into thinking more carefully about an issue, forcing at least partial settlement through introspection. This theme is particularly relevant to Glück because the method it describes has helped her overcome some of the personal despair and periods of depression that followed the break-up of her marriage. By employing the Nero Wolfe metaphor and some detective lingo in "The Mystery," Glück suggests that even a problem as emotionally upsetting and personally sensitive as the end of a romantic relationship can be worked through by using deductive reasoning. She does not, however, imply that the process leads to a perfect resolution or a complete change of heart regarding such a tender matter. Sometimes

the best solution is an unfinished one, allowing gradual change that seems more realistic than an abrupt turnabout of emotions. In this way, the poet's "vita nova" does not become a volatile burden, but simply a new way of looking at old concerns.

"The Mystery" includes only two questions and they do not come until the end of the poem. In the final line, Glück asks, "*Who are you and what is your purpose?"* These are questions that she asks of herself, and she attempts to answer them with the rest of the poem, before the reader even realizes what the questions are. At first, it may seem strange and out of context for the poet to ask these questions of herself. Does she not already know who she is and what her "purpose" is? Perhaps the best answer is, at this point in her life, maybe not. For years, Glück identified herself as a married woman, secure in a relationship that she thought would last a lifetime. When that relationship was cut short, against her will, her identity was forced to change. In trying to come to terms with that, she goes through different phases of self-identification. Apparently, there was a time in the beginning when "the shadows of the east" caused her heart to "tremble," as she struggled to deal with the loss. There was a time when she could identify with a baby being pushed around in a stroller, helpless and at the mercy of the one pushing. Later, she is "an eager student," learning the ways of sound reasoning and problem solving from a master detective. Finally, she calls herself "a creature of light," having used her new knowledge to find a way out of the darkness of depression and loneliness. By asking the point-blank questions of herself, then, she had to find answers□perhaps not the final ones, but at least some that provide resolution for a while.

Style

Poets who write in contemporary free verse have fairly free rein in the way they choose to put words on paper. Without restrictions on line length, meter, rhyme, or rhythm, this style of poetry lends itself to more individual manipulation than any other style. Glück is considered one of the best at using casual, easily read, straightforward language in her poetry□a simple style, though not an unsophisticated one. In a review of *Vita Nova* for the *Chicago Review*, critic Steven Monte says that:

Glück's verse entices the reader with stylistic effects
familiar to anyone who has leafed through one of her
books: pointed rhetorical questions ... short sentences
whose punch resides in the line breaks . . . rhetorical
afterthoughts warding off melodrama .. . and an evenkeeled,
expository tone punctured by defensiveness and accusation.

Monte's points are demonstrated in "The Mystery" in the rhetorical questions. No answers are expected, but Glück offers some anyway, at the end of the poem and in the rhetorical afterthought of line 29, "And yet I saw amazing things." This line keeps the previous descriptions of bad times and sad emotions from dipping into sentimentality, or pathos. Note the "even-keeled expository tone" of the lines that begin with the word "I": "I became a creature of light," "I sat in a driveway," "I sat in a folding chair," "I know who the innocent are," "I became almost radiant at the end," "I carried my book everywhere." The meaning of each line is clear and the expression is simple, yet interesting. This is what has made Glück's style so attractive to both scholars and general readers. She writes what people can understand and, often, relate to. What scholars appreciate most is that the readability of her poems is usually deceptive, cleverly masking a profound thought or intriguing idea. Without picking up on every innuendo or every allusion, however, anyone can still follow a Glück poem, aided by her free-verse style that resembles casual conversation as much as pure poetry.

Historical Context

The greatest source of Glück's inspiration derives from personal loss□whether that loss is through death, separation, or divorce. While little is written about the specifics of her own marital problems and eventual break-up, her poetry is filled with tinges of rejection, anger, and bitterness, especially those poems written prior to *Vita Nova*. Her "new life" apparently did not begin until the late 1990s, but the culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when she first started writing and publishing poetry, saw a softening of the strictness of the expected behavior of the American family and of women in particular.

After the surge in marriages and childbirth following World War II, commonly called the Baby Boom era, society took a turn toward liberation and individual freedom, as opposed to the constraints of settling into a monogamous relationship, raising a family, and living life according to traditional gender roles. The high value placed on personal freedom was aided by a growing U.S. economy and by the fact that women had the opportunity to support themselves instead of being provided for by a husband. The availability of birth control and female emancipation also contributed to women not having to marry and form traditional nuclear family structures. As women became more common in the workforce, many of them gravitated away from the traditional "female jobs" as secretaries, nurses, and grade school teachers and into positions geared more toward business and advancement within a company. As a result, both men and women found themselves more committed to their employers than to each other, and the typical family life of previous decades began to fade. So, too, did the number of people getting married at a young age and the number of couples who remained married. For many, being single again simply seemed more attractive.

Today, approximately one marriage out of two will end in divorce. This has been the trend for the past two decades, making the end of a marriage as common as the beginning of one. The old stigma placed on children of divorced parents is unheard of now since as many kids come from broken homes (or from parents who never married in the first place) as are raised in so-called traditional families. Divorce is common in movies and television shows, including children's programming, and it has become more accepted in religious sects, even those in which divorcing a spouse was formerly denounced, if not forbidden.

The increase in the divorce rate has also meant an increase in the poverty rate for women. Even women with professional careers suffer financial burdens after divorce settlements that often stipulate no alimony and little child support. Unemployed women or women with low-paying jobs suffer the most. While many divorced women may feel they have been treated unfairly and blame exhusbands for their economic hardships, the introduction of the no-fault divorce in the 1960s and the more recent fad of signing prenuptial agreements are perhaps the true root of many inequities in settlements.

During the conservative movements in America in the 1980s and in the late 1990s, society experienced a shift back toward old-fashioned family values, and the marriage rate seemed to increase. Numbers can be deceiving, however, because many of those

marriages were actually second or third times around for the men and women involved, and the divorce rate for people who remarry is even higher than the rate for first marriages. In other words, the "newlyweds" of the conservative years had already contributed to divorce statistics, and in their new marriages, the cards were stacked against them from the outset. Statistics, of course, can also err on the side of pessimism, and undoubtedly thousands of happily remarried couples would be willing to attest to it.

Not all youthful women during the 1960s and 1970s celebrated their freedom to remain single and pursue a career as well as a variety of personal relationships. Some, like Glück, opted for matrimony and made plans to spend the rest of their lives with one man. And when the poet's marriage ended sometime around the publication of *Meadowlands* in 1996, she did not initially respond with newfound strength and a determination to carry on with her life in the best way possible. Like many women and men who endure the break-up of a marriage, she felt lost, betrayed, frustrated, and unneeded, eventually slipping into a state of depression. By the time she wrote the poems for *Vita Nova* a few years later, average Americans were still divorcing as often as they were marrying, and the number of Internet web sites dedicated to information surviving divorce rivaled the self-help sections of major bookstores. Glück's recent work indicates that she will survive, too. Marriage and divorce trends will likely continue to seesaw throughout the coming decades, but it is doubtful that American society will ever return to a culture in which broken homes, unwed motherhood, and living single are given much notice, much less frowned upon.

Critical Overview

Louise Glück's work has been well received by critics since the outset of her career. Perhaps to her advantage and to her disadvantage, she has often been compared to such masters of confessional poetry as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. While it may be flattering to be placed among this famous (or infamous) company, the trappings of the confessional genre can be as harmful as it is helpful to a writer's career. Poets who are labeled confessional are often criticized for too much self-exposure and too much relation about extremely personal matters. In her book *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet*, critic Elizabeth Dodd says that "Like Plath and Sexton, [Glück] writes with angry bitterness about female sexual or romantic experience in a world where women remain primarily powerless." That may be the case for many of Glück's poems, but those in *Vita Nova*, including "The Mystery," describe a woman pulling herself up from a failed relationship and dark experiences. Glück also often alludes to mythological figures and events from legends as metaphors for her own life or contemporary life in general. This has been another saving grace for her otherwise confessional work, and it has helped maintain a balance between negative and positive criticism. In *The Muse of Abandonment*, critic Lee Upton writes that "the self in Glück is placed in relation to a larger mythological backdrop but is not overwhelmed by this competing narrative. [It] is used to dignify the self, particularly the female self, which might otherwise be domesticated or trivialized." Thus, in the eyes of some critics, Glück's work tends to supercede that of typical confessional poets. In all, the critical response has been more favorable than unfavorable, particularly toward the later collections. Writing for the *Library Journal*, reviewer Ellen Kaufman sums up the general critical reception to Glück's work: "Abstract without being vague, personal without being maudlin, Glück's exquisitely crafted work continues to astound. For all poetry collections."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill contends that Glück's poem begins with an alluring scene and unaffected language but quickly falters into self-pity and sentimentality, robbing the poem of its effectiveness.

The first two stanzas of "The Mystery" draw the reader in with both the scene they describe and the method of their presentation. Glück's simple, declarative sentences ("I became a creature of light," "I sat in a driveway in California," "I sat in a folding chair," and so forth) belie the complexity of emotions that the speaker actually feels. In these first two stanzas, those emotions are held nicely in check by the dry candor, soft tone, and unadorned language with which the poet conveys them. If only she had maintained that control and that honesty throughout the work, it would have been a much stronger poem, carrying high-quality writing from start to finish. As is, however, it drops quickly off the ledge of good poetry into the abyss of cheap sentiment, never regaining its initial foothold.

Whether or not it is fair to place Glück solidly among the ranks of confessional poets is at least debatable□some scholars would not think of placing her anywhere else□but "The Mystery" is a good example of why it may be dubious labeling. The first third of this poem does not bear out the typical drama of personal exposure and the misery of psychological deterioration that most often make up a confessional poem. Instead, it is almost *minimalist*, presenting only the information necessary to let the reader know what is going on. It is as though the poet is operating like the fictional detective she apparently admires, laying out evidence and introducing "just the facts."

The straightforward narrative should not be mistaken for boring recitation or dull description. Rather, the story is intriguing. A woman sits in a likely uncomfortable chair in a bland, at best, location reading a book she has already read nineteen times. Just the setting itself arouses curiosity. The odd situation is made more complex by the glimpse the reader is given into the inner workings of the poet's mind. Glück finds deductive reasoning "restful," claiming that "time moves in two directions" as she ponders both the Nero Wolfe mystery and the mystery of her own life. This is how the poem should continue□soft in tone yet compelling in its intellectual evaluation, personal enough to be accessible yet impersonal enough not to be pathetic. Unfortunately, one needs to savor the poem up to this point because the rest is hardly palatable.

Beginning with the third stanza, Glück falters into complaint and self-pity. The line "Fearless heart, never tremble again" reads as though the poet has suddenly slipped into the Romantic Age, speaking to her own organ of sentimentality and, thereby, drawing upon the most cliché of addresses. The notion of a despairing woman's heart falling under the "shadow" of her lost love's "narrow palm" is trite, imploring the reader to feel as sorry for her as she feels for herself. But the moaning does not end there. While the language of the next stanza at least returns to the twentieth century, the subject remains self-pity, with helplessness thrown in for more dramatic effect. In

saying, "My life took me many places, / many of them very dark," Glück implies that *she* was not in control of where her life "took" her. Instead, she went from place to place, or from event to event, "without [her] volition," as though she was unable to make a conscious decision regarding her own life. Lest the reader should still not quite get the point, Glück emphasizes her total helplessness by comparing herself to a baby in a stroller, being pushed "from behind," completely at the mercy of powers other than her own. Or so it seems to the poet, if to no one else.

Not all confessional poets, including Glück, resort to the shallow tune of self-pity in the majority of their work. Most can make their points and let their feelings be known by relating personal events and thoughts with simple, unaffected language and even brutal honesty. Honesty, brutal or otherwise, is preferable to triteness and literary sap. Toward the end of "The Mystery," Glück attempts to regain some composure by watering down the pathos with a sudden change of attitude. She claims abruptly, "And yet I saw amazing things." Instead of comparing herself to a "fishlike baby," she calls herself "an eager student"— a much more compelling description than one that attempts to evoke pity. But the poet does not reveal what "amazing things" she saw, only that they relate metaphorically to Nero Wolfe mystery stories and literally to the puzzles she has encountered in her personal life. This declaration is intriguing, but it is not enough to save the poem. Glück still alludes to her position as "clinging" and to her sentiment as selfaccusatory. She seems to *try* to overcome her own helplessness in the end and, yet, she is also still figuring out who she is and what her "purpose" is. The reader, then, is left with the sense that the poet's vulnerability and feebleness are still very much intact and that she is not particularly determined to put them aside. Here, a psychologist's notion of "learned helplessness" is all too attractive to the poet, perhaps gaining her the attention she feels she needs.

The genre of confessional poetry is a delicate one in regard to what constitutes good and bad ex- amples of this type of verse. On one hand, critics need to keep in mind that the very nature of confessional writing is just that—to *confess* something, and that generally means something personal. With that in mind, is it fair to attack a poet who has had the guts (or gall) to expose deeply personal thoughts, many of which are controversial, embarrassing, sexual, or even shameful? Perhaps the answer lies in looking at the flip side to subject matter: style. Subject matter is only as good as its presentation. Poets can address feelings of helplessness and vulnerability without using the language and images of self-pity. The first two stanzas of "The Mystery," for instance, portray a melancholy scene, one in which the speaker offers straightforward description of her setting that may make the reader feel sorrow or sadness *without being told to*. That's the key. Good presentation paints a vivid picture for the reader to consider and respond to as the writer desires, *if* the picture is not muddied with pathos and sentimentality.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "The Mystery," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Blevins is an essayist and poet who has taught at Hollins University, Sweet Briar College, and in the Virginia Community College System. In this essay, Blevins contends that there is an unfortunate gap between Glück's rhetorical and poetic arguments in her poem.

There is sometimes a noticeable gap between what a poet states to be the truth and what her language indicates to be the truth. This gap has to do with the ability of language to communicate feeling through rhythm and music and can be either an intentional strategy or the result of an actual disconnection between thought and feeling. In some poems, this gap creates ambiguity or irony or both: if a poem tries to express an idea or feeling that its language does not support or *impose*, the reader might experience the pleasure of irony, which is the pleasure of the jolt of a collision of opposites. Such a gap between what a poem *says* it says and what a poem's language *implies* it says might also suggest that the poet means not necessarily what she says, but *more* than she says. This strategy can contribute to a poem's ambiguity, or its ability to live in two opposing worlds simultaneously. Yet, sometimes, a gap between what a poet says and what her language implies she *means* can undermine a poem's power since it suggests that what the mind *thinks* is not exactly what the heart *feels*.

"The Mystery" comes toward the end of Louise Glück's eighth book, *Vita Nova*. *Vita Nova* is a sequence about "the painful reconstruction of the self after divorce," as the American poet and critic Kate Daniels says in her 1999 commentary in the *Southern Review*. While much of *Vita Nova* describes the speaker's grief in the wake of the loss of love□a grief she admits in "Aubade," saying she "thought [she] couldn't survive"□many poems in *Vita Nova* try to get at the new life suggested in the book's title by attempting to move away from this emotion toward an expression of pleasure in having survived a seemingly fatal emotion. In the book's last poem (which, like the book's first poem, is called "Vita Nova"), the speaker says, " I thought my life was over and my heart was broken. / Then I moved to Cambridge." Thus concludes Glück's sequence: the speaker, adopting a variety of mythical personas, moves from the unbearable to something like a state of wonder at having lived through the unbearable. Glück's overuse of the declarative sentence and paucity of image and music are more useful to her articulation of the numbness of grief than to her articulation of being "a creature of light" in "The Mystery." That is, there is a gap in "The Mystery" between Glück's rhetorical and poetic arguments that is neither ironic nor pleasantly ambiguous.

First, the poem's structure undermines its rhetorical claim by concentrating too much on the cause of the speaker's grief, rather than on the "light" that comes in its wake. "The Mystery" moves forward by way of a series of loose associations. In the first stanza, the speaker describes herself as "a creature of light," reinforcing this declarative or discursive idea with images of light-colored objects. In the poem's third and forth lines, the poet states, for example, that "the roses [in California] were hydrant-color" and that a "baby rolled by in its yellow stroller." This opening suggests that the speaker has moved away from "the world [that] . . . shattered" in the poem "Formaggio," for just one

example: the light-colored images suggest that the speaker has begun to step into the new life that is the book's pledge. As the poem progresses, Glück moves backward from this notion of vibrant light to a memory of "the very dark" "places" her life took her, and in so doing undermines the poem's main premise.

The speaker tells us in the second stanza that she "sat in a folding chair / reading Nero Wolfe for the twentieth time." This confession suggests that the speaker is occupied with distracting herself, rather than with embracing the new life that is hers to claim. She says that the mystery "has become restful," and then makes an abstract statement about the nature of the innocent that can apply to both the characters in the Nero Wolfe mystery and in *Vita Nova* itself. This focus on the unnamed innocent, and on the idea that "time moves . . . backward / from the act to the motive / and forward to just resolution" might be meant to describe the shape of "The Mystery" itself, but it serves only to point to the idea that someone is innocent and someone is guilty□a notably dark sentiment. In the third stanza, the speaker shifts in point of view, addressing herself when she says: "Fearless heart, never tremble again." This turning point seems promising at first since it suggests that the speaker has realized that her sorrow will no longer attempt to destroy her. But the images that follow□if they can be called images□are far too vague to be convincing. Those images about "the only shadow in the narrow palm's / that cannot enclose you absolutely" that are not "like the shadows of the east" are extremely obscure□they are private references that Glück does not bother to make public.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker says that life is always "pushing from behind, / from one world to another." Again, this image is promising, since it implies that we are moving from grief to another emotional state. The speaker claims in stanza four that this movement "from one world to another, like the fishlike baby" is formless and "entirely arbitrary." Although it's possible that the world is formless and arbitrary, the image of the baby counters this argument, since a baby is a fairly reliable "form" of nature. In other words, stanza four is illogical: it makes a discursive statement that its ornamental image plainly negates.

In stanza five, the speaker realizes that "the passionate threats and questions, / the old search for justice, / must have been entirely deluded." What does it mean to suggest that threats and questions and a search for justice are deluded? Wouldn't it be more accurate to say that the person who makes the threats and asks the questions and searches for justice is deluded? Doesn't the speaker's unwillingness to implicate herself imply that she is unwilling to face the truth that her journey in *Vita Nova* is supposed to supply? While these lines suggest that a change has taken place in the speaker□that she's able to stand with the world by thinking the past is arbitrary and unjust, rather than reasonable and fair□their declarative nature undermine the energy that such a realization would imply. In other words, in addition to its lack of logic, stanza five is too abstract and too lacking in music to be compelling. It reads more like philosophy than poetry.

In the poem's sixth stanza, the speaker returns to the poem's initial premise, saying that she "became almost radiant at the end. . . . clinging to these simple mysteries / so that

[she] might silence in [herself] the last accusations," which she tells us in the poem's final stanza is the universal question, "Who are you and what is your purpose"? That is, the structure of the "The Mystery" is a spiral: it moves from the end result of being "a creature of light" backwards to the formless and arbitrary darkness of grief, then forward again to being "radiant at the end" and wishing at last to "silence . . . the last accusations." It begins and ends in the idea that the speaker is "a creature of light" □looking at the darkness of grief from the survivor's point of view. A spiral's very shape suggests a predominate middle, while the speaker claims that the "light" at the beginning and ending of her poem is her focus. That is, the poem's shape or structure undermines its claim.

"The Mystery" is made up of nine declarative sentences, one imperative sentence, and one question that begins as a declarative sentence. The declarative sentence can help poets achieve something like an "authority of voice," since it is by nature emphatic. That is, people who make statements sound confident. "I became a creature of light," ending on a period, is far more emphatic□ far more sure of itself□than "I became a creature of light"? It is also important to note that the declarative sentence, when it is used unsparingly, is very flat□it allows for very little musical inflection and intonation. Glück's use of the declarative sentence in "The Mystery" is not as effective as it is in some of the other poems in *Vita Nova* partly because the statements Glück makes in this poem are not supported or reinforced by images or music, and partly because the statements, as we have seen, are slightly illogical. The effectiveness of images to reinforce statements can be seen in the poem's first stanza, where the poem's only true images reside. The speaker's claim that she became "a creature of light" is reinforced, in other words, with images of "hydrant-color" roses and the "yellow stroller." The claims later stanzas make are not reinforced in this way. As seen in stanza four, the speaker commands herself "never [to] tremble again," but there are no images or music to help us believe that this command will be heard. Although the imperative sentence in this stanza is very emphatic, and though that tone is reinforced by a predominance of end-stopped lines, the stanza's vagueness□its lack of clarity□undermines the command's emphatic tone, suggesting again that the speaker is not as convinced of her emotional state as the poem claims. It's also worth noting that the empathic nature of the declarative and imperative sentences undermine the muted music in this stanza and in others: the repeated /w/ sounds in "shadow," "narrow," and "shadow," in other words, are hard to hear because of how very flat a series of declarative or imperative, end-stopped lines will sound.

Praising the Greek poet Sappho's "Seizure"in a recent issue of *The American Poetry Review*,the American poet and critic Joe Wenderoth remarks:

In poetic speech, the subject has always implicitly
suffered a blow, and this blow has opened up a chasm
between herself and the loved scene; while it in some
sense represents a dramatic impotence, this chasm
nevertheless births a new power□or, it is perhaps
better said, causes a new deployment of the same
power. Instead of residing in an ability to make her

way *through* the world, the poet's power is shifted
toward an ability to stand *in*, to stand *with*, the world,
which no longer offers a *through*.

It is interesting to note that Glück also has a poem called "Seizure" in *Vita Nova* and that it is placed in the book right before "The Mystery." Glück's "Seizure" ends: "And yes, I was alone; / how could I not be?" and so gets at a fundamental truth the loss of love should teach, which is that we are never lost as long as we are alive. In so doing, it reveals that in some poems in *Vita Nova*, Glück does communicate that her power has "shifted toward an ability to stand in, to stand with, the world." Yet Glück's "Seizure," like Sappho's, uses a complex of images from the natural world and varied sentence type to counter the heavy weight of this lesson with the beauty of exuberant, rather than flat, language. The same can be said for the final "Vita Nova" in Glück's book. Although the last lines□"I thought my life was over and my heart was broken. / Then I moved to Cambridge"□ are as declarative as many lines in "The Mystery," they are countered in the poem with the speedy excitement in lines like, "Blizzard, / Daddy needs you; Daddy's heart is empty, / not because he's leaving Mommy but because / the kind of love he wants Mommy / doesn't have, Mommy's / too ironic□Mommy wouldn't do the rhumba in the driveway."

"The Mystery" may attempt to capture the uncertainty of a person trying to forge a new life from the jagged remains of the old, but its very uncertainty, the lack of resolve or reckoning in the poem's language, obscure any sense that the speaker has progressed into this "new life." The poem crumbles under the weight of its own flat tone and lack of music, and the reader is left feeling that the poem is an unfinished work□that the speaker is more interested in convincing herself that she need "never tremble again" than she is in showing the reader any insight into the human psyche's ability to overcome the loss of love.

Source: Adrian Blevins, Critical Essay on "The Mystery," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

In 1989, the Lannan Foundation, in association with Metropolitan Pictures and EZTV, produced a videotape simply titled *Louise Glück.* The tape runs sixty minutes and includes a reading by the poet at the Los Angeles Theatre Center and an interview with her by Lewis MacAdams.

In 1991, the Lannan Foundation produced a sixty-minute videotape of fifteen major poets reading and discussing their work. The tape is titled *Where Poems Come From* and includes Louise Glück, Joy Harjo, Philip Levine, and Allen Ginsberg, among others.

Topics for Further Study

In "The Mystery," Glück spends the fourth and fifth stanzas describing her "dark" past and her sense that she was like a baby in a stroller being shoved from place to place. But then she abruptly claims, "And yet I saw amazing things." What "amazing things" do you think she saw and how could they offset the obvious misery she felt as well?

Most people's lives have been touched by divorce, either in their own family, or in one they are close to. Consider how your own life, or that of someone close to you, has been affected by the break-up of a marriage and write an essay on how the people involved survived it. You do not need to identify people specifically□only describe their methods of coping and how you may or may not have handled it differently.

Think of a situation in which you have used inner dialogue as a means for solving an emotional dilemma. Glück claims that asking herself questions and then answering them helps her to gain a better understanding of her feelings. Do you believe this technique has worked for you as well? Why or why not?

There is a "sad joke" among literary circles that the lives of confessional poets, both male and female, follow a similar pattern: alcoholism, depression, and suicide. Research the confessional poets and write an essay on the possible connection between a high rate of suicide and this genre of poetry. Who are some of the bestknown confessional poets? Do they seem to follow this self-destructive pattern? Is this reflected in their poetry?

What Do I Read Next?

Louise Glück edited the edition of the popular series *The Best American Poetry 1993* . She selected poems by thirty poets whose work had not appeared in the series previously, as well as poems by seasoned veterans. John Ashbery, Billy Collins, Tess Gallagher, Denise Levertov, and Gjertrud Schnackenberg were among her choices.

One of the most well known confessional poets, Anne Sexton was plagued with mental illness most of her life, eventually committing suicide in 1974. Diane Wood Middlebrook's 1991 account of her life and suicide, entitled *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, is a comprehensive look at Sexton from a variety of angles: confessional poet, depressed woman, therapy patient, and elusive wife and mother.

Rex Stout's mysteries, featuring the eccentric detective Nero Wolfe and his sidekick Archie Goodwin, are some of the most popular tales of that genre. Stout wrote for over four decades, beginning in the 1930s, and his "golden" period is considered by mystery fans to be the early 1960s. Three big sellers from this period include *Too Many Clients* (1960), *A Right to Die* (1964), and *The Doorbell Rang* (1965).

While there are many versions of Dante Alighieri's *Vita Nuova*, a recent translation by Mark Musa, published in 2000, is one of the most readable for students not already familiar with the work. *Vita Nuova* is a collection of thirty-one poems set alongside a prose narrative celebrating and pondering the subject of love. Musa's translation includes a critical introduction and explanatory notes.

Further Study

Glück, Louise, *The First Four Books of Poetry*, Ecco Press, 1995.

This collection of the complete texts from four of Glück's early books provides a good overview of the poet's continuing themes and style. These poems provide the reader with an interesting background to Glück's more recent work.

□, *Meadowlands*, Ecco Press, 1996.

Most scholars and critics acknowledge that Glück's *Vita Nova* picks up where *Meadowlands* left off. The poems in this collection explore the deterioration of the poet's marriage, and comparing them to the ones in *Vita Nova* gives the reader a stronger sense of how far Glück has come in her effort to build a "new life."

□, *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry*, Ecco Press, 1994.

In this collection of sixteen essays, Glück explores her own work and the theories behind its creation, as well as the work of other poets. In the "Author's Note" at the beginning of the book, Glück claims, "I wrote these essays as I would poems; I wrote from what I know, trying to undermine the known with intelligent questions. Like poems, they have been my education."

Phillips, Robert S., *The Confessional Poets*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1973.

More than a quarter of a century has passed since Phillips published this comprehensive look at America's most renowned confessional poets, but he wrote it during the heyday of this genre's popularity. In it, he provides a history of confessional poetry, the critical reviews it received, and his own take on a style of writing that so many readers have found both intriguing and disturbing.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

Night. Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the Criticism subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on Winesburg, Ohio. Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition, Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. Richard Wright: Wearing the Mask, in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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