

Existential and Psychological aspects in the select works of Louise Gluck

Anusha Alex * and Vidya Dass,

Department of English, Rathnavel Subramaniam College of Arts and Science, Sulur, Bharathiyar University, Coimbatore-641402.

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Abstract

This research paper explores the existential and psychological dimensions in the selected poetic works of Louise Gluck, focusing on the collections *The Seven Ages and Averno*. The study examines how Gluck's poetry reflects the struggles of human existence, including themes of ageing, identity, isolation and the search for meaning. Through the poems "The seven ages" and "Fable", the paper investigates the poet's engagement with existential philosophy, particularly her reflections on mortality, transformation, and the human condition. Gluck's use of allegory and myth reveals a profound awareness of the fragility of life and the complexities of selfhood.

The paper also analyses the psychological aspects of Gluck's writing by focusing on the poems "Averno" and "Persephone the Wanderer". These works illustrate deep emotional trauma, inner conflict, and the lasting impact of personal and collective loss. The myth of Persephone is reimagined to reflect contemporary concerns about identity, memory and psychological endurance. The study highlights how Gluck's poetry gives voice to internal suffering and healing through lyrical expression, demonstrating her distinctive blend of personal experience and mythic characters to explore the human psyche.

Index Terms-Existential and Psychological aspects

Objectives of the Study

- To analyse the existential themes present in Louise Gluck's poetry, particularly in *The Seven Ages* and *Averno*.
- To explore the psychological dimensions in Gluck's work, focusing on trauma, identity, and inner conflict.
- To examine how Gluck reinterprets mythological narratives such as the story of Persephone as vehicles for expressing contemporary psychological and existential concerns.
- To investigate the relationship between poetic language and her philosophical and emotional insights.
- To contextualise Gluck's poetry within broader philosophical frameworks such as existentialism and psychoanalysis, and evaluate how these frameworks enhance the understanding of her work.

Methodology of the Study: Close reading of selected poems from Gluck's *The Seven Ages and Averno* and the application of existential philosophy and use of psychoanalytic theory.

Keywords: Existentialism; Psychological trauma; Identity; Myth; Mortality; Transformation

1. Introduction

"Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the best minds" (Shelly 504). Poetry is one of life's universal and principal arts and dates back to human history. Despite its universality, it is a unique product of the human

* Corresponding author: Anusha Alex

imagination. Poetry spreads its viewpoint to its surroundings through rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and other literary devices. The feelings and inspiration within a poet is often conveyed through poetic modes such as image, metaphor, and symbol. The word 'poetry' comes from the Greek word "poiesis", which means making or formation. Poetry is unique to each particular culture and genre and responds to the characteristics of the poet's language in the modern world. Poets often adopt forms, styles, and techniques from diverse cultures and languages. Poets and poetry have contributed to the evolution of each language and its linguistic, expressive, and utilitarian qualities.

Although poetry took different forms and styles, it consistently maintained specific characteristics that bound together various poetic patterns. The 20th century witnessed numerous changes in the poetic arena, particularly in American poetry, which was marked by experimentation and fragmentation and a redefinition of poetic form and subject matter. Poets such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot were pioneers of these changes. Poets abandoned traditional structures and introduced free verse and complex allusions. Poets began introducing philosophical, psychological, and confessional themes through their writings. Louise Glück is a well-known contemporary Jewish-American poet. She has authored twelve poetry collections and essays titled *Proofs and Theories & American Originality*. She won prizes like the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Bollingen Prize, and the Wallace Stevens Award from the Academy of American Poets. She underwent anorexia (psychological imbalance) at the age of adolescence, and as a result of that, she was under psychoanalysis treatment for seven years. Her important works include *First Born* (1968), *The House on Marshland* (1975), *Descending Figure* (1980), *The Triumph of Achilles* (1984), *Ararat* (1990), and *The Wild Iris* (1992), *Meadowlands* (1997), *Vita Nova* (1999), *The Seven Ages* (2001), *Averno* (2006), *A Village Life* (2009), *Faithful and Virtuous Night* (2014). She is a passionate, committed teacher and a valued mentor for younger Yale and Boston University poets. She firmly attaches herself to the tradition of lyric poetry in English. Her eleven volumes of poems have deliberately extended the reach or triumph of her art, developing new strategies of syntax and lineation. Her subjects often seem personal or autobiographical: childhood, marriage, divorce, family relationships, and solitary inner life. Glück is often described as an autobiographical poet. Her work is known for its emotional intensity and for frequently drawing on mythology or natural imagery to meditate on personal experiences and contemporary life.

Thematically, Glück's poems have illuminated aspects of trauma, desire, and nature. In doing so, they have become known for frank expressions of sadness and isolation. Scholars also studied her talent in connecting classical myth and persona. Glück's poems are rhythmic and seek to create beauty through their words. In this article, the researcher aims to analyze the selected poetic collections of Louise Glück: *The Seven Ages*, and *Averno* to explore the postmodern elements, including existential and psychological elements in her poems. To study the existential aspects of Glück's poetry, the researcher selected two poems, 'The Seven Ages' and 'Fables' from the collection *The Seven Ages*, and to know about the psychological aspects, the poet focuses on 'Averno' and 'Persephone the Wanderer' from the collection *Averno*.

2. Existentialism

Existentialism is a 20th century philosophical theory, proposed by Jean Paul Sartre. According to this theory, individual human existence and freedom of choice are most important, and man should design his destiny in a hostile world. The influence of existentialism can be seen in modern and postmodern poetry. Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre are the leading proponents of the theory of existentialism. The idea of existentialism was popularised during World War II. Two world wars have shattered the mid-twentieth century European society. People lost faith in the existing religion and order. Through their writings and ideas, philosophers like Camus and Sartre could make people believe that they are the only artists of their own lives. Existentialist ideas are exhibited through the performance of absurd drama. According to this theory, the world is a place of pain and challenges, and everyone is not treated equally.

3. Existential views in Glück's poetry

In many of Louis Glück's poems, we see the elements of existentialism and the existential aspects of life, such as death, loneliness, and pain. She paid greater attention to the simple aspects of life, such as childhood memories, teenage struggles, and married life. Additionally, she uses biblical and mythological figures and characters to convey the diverse aspects of existential life situations.

The poem *Seven Ages* is taken from the collection *The Seven Ages* by Louise Glück. *The Seven Ages* (2001) is a collection of poems highlighting a person's old age and death. Most of the poems in this collection are set in the days of summer. When writing *The Seven Ages* and *Averno* (2006), the poet arrives at a late stage in her life, and she chooses to enter the realm of allegory while confronting her morality, which differs from that of her earlier works. Old Age is a time when

people are worried about many things. However, Louise Gluck happily accepts these facts and urges us to try our best to make what is impossible in our lives possible.

Joanne Feit Diehl, a professor of English at the University of California and a famous scholar and critic, is of the opinion that *The Seven Ages* has leapt to a new, unexpected cave or eyrie on some cliff wall from which the poet can overlook the spectacle of human life. Gluck recalls beautiful moments from her past life, and she connects them to the events of the world around her.

The Seven Ages is the ninth poetry collection by Louise Glück, published in 2001. The title of this collection is taken from the famous romantic comedy *As You Like It*, written by William Shakespeare. It is about the seven stages of a man's life from infancy to second childhood or old age. The reference to rebirth in Jacques' monologue helps thematize the notion of rebirth central to Glück's poetic journey. But in this case, the rebirth into second childhood is ironized, as she regards her entry into old Age as anything but second childhood in *The Seven Ages*. Old Age, for her, is an occasion for deeper and profound questioning about the meaning and purpose of existence. The book emphasizes an all-encompassing vision of a lifelong, universal struggle to find meaning and beauty in life. The following lines from *Fable* in the collection *The Seven Ages* exemplify her notion of existence.

"Then I looked down and saw

the world I was entering, that would be my home.

And I turned to my companion and said, Where are we?

And he replied, *Nirvana*.

And I said again, But the light will give us no peace" (Gluck 77).

The idea of existentialism, proposed by Martin Heidegger, is implied in these lines. Martin Heidegger wrote *Being and Time* in 1927, which is a masterpiece in the field of existential literature. In his book, he introduced the term 'Dasein', which means "being there". Dasein is an entity that, in its very being, comports itself understandingly toward that being. The poet's realization of the world is similar to Martin Heidegger's notion of 'Dasein'. 'Dasein' is a largely involuntary state of being engaged in the world (Heidegger 4). The poem speaks to the fact that we did not choose to be born, as it also addresses how being born into existence would give us no peace or sense of closure in discovering a fundamental purpose for our existence. The reference to 'Nirvana' also spells the speaker's mocking rejection of the Buddhist concept of enlightenment and emancipation from desire. In Buddhism, nirvana is a state of freedom, characterised by the cessation of suffering, craving, and the dissolution of self, symbolising the ultimate aim of Buddhist practice. "There is no fire like passion, no crime like hatred, no sorrow like separation, no sickness like hunger, and no joy like the joy of liberation. Health is the greatest gift, contentment the greatest wealth, faithfulness the best relationship, and Nirvana the highest bliss"(Dhammapada 202-203). The speaker here suggests that as long as one is conscious and alive, one will never be free from the desire to be alive, and never to experience 'nirvana': any experience of 'Nirvana' will only be a brief illusion.

Gluck cannot find any solace in religion or a superhuman power. The repetition of the title *Fable* in her poems across different collections also emphasizes how the allegorical journey that the spirit has taken in *The Seven Ages* is an edifying fable about the human condition. Fables are often told through anthropomorphised, non-human characters. In this case, the plot of this *Fable* centres on the journey of a bodiless spirit as it is born, then as it takes on the form of the poet, through whom it learns the hard lessons of life without principles. To be alive is to have no peace after all and to enjoy no closure to the large, existential questions made clear by life and art, a point she has adamantly made known in this and previous collections. It is a point she has chosen to end the book *The Seven Ages*.

"The weather grew mild, and the snow melted

spring overtook it.

And then summer. And time stopped

because we stopped waiting.

And summer lasted. It lasted

because we were happy". (Gluck 78)

These are lines from the last poem, *Fable*, in which the flower reveals to the poet that living in the present is to experience eternity, a form of perfection after all. The poet is finally learning to enjoy her existence and giving up her wait for absolute meanings. The spirit/poet has concisely created a poetic retrospective of all her central concerns from the earlier books to demonstrate how much she had to go through and learn from to achieve her present state of contentment.

4. Psychological Views in Gluck's Poetry

Many of Gluck's poems are closely tied to her psychological inner self. Here, the researchers mainly focus on two poems in the collection *Averno*. The poem *The Averno* is a wonderful retelling of the story of Persephone, the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, the goddess of agriculture in Greek mythology and Hades is the god of the underworld. The difficult relationship between a mother, *Demeter*, and daughter *Persephone*, and the pain of a mother who lost her daughter. The psychological state of a broken person will be a moving one. The title of the first poem of the collection, *Averno*, is *October*. It begins like this.

"Summer after summer has ended,

balm after violence:

it does me no good

to be good to me now;

violence has changed me

you can't touch my body now

It has changed once, it has hardened,

don't ask it to respond again" (Gluck 2).

As seen in the above extract, even the balm of summer can bring the speaker no peace; the speaker's body no longer responds to the relief that another season brings, given that winter is traumatic and winter will recur, trauma has become a part of the speaker's mind. The mind's voice, expressed here through the temporalized space of the lyric, is the voice of shock that is possibly talking to itself as a desperate process of recovery, futile as such a process might be in the end. It is a universal voice of terror here of someone uncertain of whether she would ever move on again from her traumatic experience. Time is stagnant for a victim of Trauma. Life is meaningless to her, as dramatized by the apostrophic sense of lines like "Summer after summer has ended / it does me no good and You hear this voice? This is my mind's voice," (Gluck 2). where the present evokes a painfully extended present without end, which is an accurate way of describing how a part of the trauma victim's mind is living in a temporal mode that does not allow the victim to move on completely from the difficult past, this past will always haunt her memory in the present. Regardless of who is speaking in the poem, the speaker has endured Trauma, so much so that even when winter is over and bits of green are showing again through the ice on the ground, the speaker cannot help but realize that death is not so bad after all I think

I can remember

being dead. Many times, in winter,

I approached Zeus, Tell me, I would ask him,

how can I endure the earth?

And he would say,

in a short time you will be here again.

And in the time between

you will forget everything: (Gluck 80)

In *Averno*, by the end of the book, the poem titled 'Persephone the Wanderer' perhaps Demeter does experience a kind of death too whenever her daughter is taken from her and winter consumes the earth since she is the goddess of the earth's fertility and of the harvest, by way of an emotional numbness and frozen immobility. But the sudden introduction of 'I' in the poem (before Demeter is described in the third person) hints at the possibility that it is also Persephone speaking at this point, her daughter speaking from the dead in a timeless present made possible by the poem's lyric mode. Simultaneously, it could also be the poet speaking, or anyone who has ever asked her or his God of any religion. "How can I endure the earth"? (Gluck 80).

Averno, however, seems to end with no absolute relief for either the characters in the book or the reader, as Zeus only tells the ambiguous you in the final poem, 'Persephone the Wanderer', that death, at the very least, can be a form of release from the heartache and the disappointment; there must be some comfort for us to be found in knowing this. But for the poet, who has found the capacity to enjoy her existence in *The Seven Ages*, she has decided to stay on course with an individual perspective on uncertainty; by the end of *The Seven Ages* and into *Averno*, Glück is determined not to arrive at happiness or certainty as a final destination, but to bravely endure and keep on a continual, personal voyage of rigorous, poetic questioning and doubt.

5. Conclusion

Louise Glück, the most distinctive poet of her age, is known for her unmistakable poetic voice. Through her style and echoing ideas, she stands above the poets of the time. She could make poetry the best medium for expressing her feelings and viewing life with confidence and love. Psychological and existential aspects in literature are two important fields of study in modern literature. She could beautifully convey her ideas through her lines. Through her simple and straightforward language, she opened a new chapter in postmodern American literature.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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