

Research Article**Nature as Panacea: A Study of Louise Glück's "The Wild Iris"****N. Kanaka Maha Lakshmi¹, Dr. G. Chenna Reddy²**¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Acharya Nagarjuna Univeristy²Professor, Department of English, Acharya Nagarjuna Univeristy**Corresponding Author: N. Kanaka Maha Lakshmi****Abstract**

Nature usually constitutes the physical world, and landscapes that represent the beauty, power, and sometimes the unpredictability of the natural environment. But nature is not just confined to the physical environment, external scenery or material surroundings; it is the sustaining energy that shapes, nurtures, and perpetuates existence itself. Acclaimed contemporary poet and Nobel laureate, Louise Glück wrote 13 poetry anthologies. "The Wild Iris" is the sixth one. This article aims to study the pivotal role of nature in this anthology. Nature acts as a pedagogue and panacea, providing consolation to humanity in enduring difficulties in their lives. It studies and projects the remedial, restorative and revelatory aspects of nature. Glück, by rendering voice to flowers and the garden elements, reimagine nature as a spiritual guide and corrective force. The study argues that in poems such as "The Wild Iris," "Snowdrops," "Scilla," "Violets," "Field Flowers," and "Daisies", nature functions as a panacea by offering renewal, humility, continuity, and metaphysical insight to suffering humanity. The paper also analyses selected Glück's poems by means of ecocritical perspectives and highlights the interconnectedness of the natural environment and humanity.

Keywords: Nature, Consolation, Ecocriticism, Panacea, The Wild Iris.**Introduction**

Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.
She has a world of ready wealth,
Our minds and hearts to bless—
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

(Wordsworth and Coleridge)

From ancient literature to modern poetry Nature served as a source of consolation and spiritual regeneration in poetry. Classical literature viewed nature as a harmonious and divine associate. Classical poet Virgil described pastoral landscapes as a space offering peace in his Eclogues. Around the world, in the Chinese "Book of Songs" and Japanese Haiku, nature is revered and represented as the seasonal changes. And in the Indian context, "The Vedas" view nature as a sacred living entity that is intertwined with the cosmic order of the world. They even worship nature as a divine being. Coming to the English literature, works like "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" depicted the natural cycles in medieval times. Moving forward to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where Pastoral poetry flourished in works such as Sydney's "Arcadia," Spencer's "The Shepherd's Calendar", etc. And in the Romantic Age, poets

such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Keats expressed profound devotion to nature. Rural poetry was the fashion of the day, and nature occupied a chief place in literature. These romantic poets perceived nature as a living thing that provides spiritual support for humanity. It is mirrored in Wordsworth's description of nature as "The nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/ Of all my moral being," in his "Tintern Abbey." Whereas in the Victorian and modern ages, the role of nature receded comparatively due to the Industrial Revolution and the two World Wars, where human lives revolved around machines, and they suffered from war trauma, alienation, etc

The aftermath of the post-war period witnessed rapid technological development. This high-tech growth accelerated the pace of human life. To fit in this new digital age, humans have gradually distanced themselves from the natural world. They paid no heed to the bleeding environment surrounded by the so-called advanced gadgets. This negligence towards the environment led to the depletion. To create awareness through literature, various disciplines such as Ecocriticism, Green Studies, and Environmentalism emerged.

As stated earlier, Ecocriticism is a recent literary theory. This has provided a new critical approach to view existing literary texts from an ecological point of view and re-examined them based on this perspective. For the first time, William Rueckert used the term "Ecocriticism" in his work "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. For him, Ecocriticism meant "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature." Later in 1996, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm defined Ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and environment" in their work "The Ecocriticism Reader". (Glotfelty and Fromm)

In simple terms, Ecocriticism is the study of literature and ecology from an interdisciplinary point of view. It helps in analysing literary texts that represent environmental concerns and assess how literature treats the subject of nature. Ecocriticism addresses various environmental concerns such as pollution, exploitation and degradation of natural resources, extinction of species, and aids in creating ecological awareness. A landmark moment in the development of ecocriticism came with the establishment of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment) in the United States of America in 1992.

American Nature Poetry

It is in the colonial era that Poetry began as a literary form in the United States. In the beginning of their poetic journey, American writers were largely influenced by the British literary canon. They inherited, imitated, and adapted English literary movements before they developed their independent national voice. It is apparent in the works of colonial and early national writers like Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor, who predominantly wrote devotional and purely Puritan poetry. With the emergence of the Transcendental movement in the nineteenth-century US, Ralph Waldo Emerson's call for an original American voice in literature led to the development of a distinct identity for American poetry. This particular intellectual movement manifests a decisive shift toward nature as a central subject. Thus, it laid the foundation for the rise of American nature poetry.

Transcendental writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau articulated a divine vision of nature and the moral insights it offers to humanity in their works. In "Walden", Thoreau asks, "Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?" In questioning as such, Thoreau is advocating for humanity about the inherent unity between the human and non-human. (Thoreau 138). Continuing this conception, Walt Whitman celebrates cosmic interconnectedness in his works, and Emily Dickinson portrays nature as both an intimate and metaphysical entity. Advancing to the Modern age, we can observe that nature was a principal aspect in the poems of Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens. Frost presented rural landscapes as spaces for contemplation, and Stevens

explored the philosophical tension between imagination and the natural world. In the contemporary age, Gary Snyder, who is described as “poet laureate of deep ecology”, centred his works on ecological interdependence and environmental ethics. Mary Oliver and Louise Glück further deepen this tradition by granting agency and voice to Nature.

Louise Glück as a Nature Poet

Louise Glück explored various themes in her poetry, such as mortality, suffering, loss, trauma, failed relationships, spiritual doubt, desire, identity, myth, and isolation, etc. Along with them, nature is a predominant theme in her works, namely in “The House of Marshland,” “Ararat,” “The Wild Iris,” “Meadowlands,” “Averno,” and “A Village Life.” Nature is the setting for many of her poems, especially in her most popular and Pulitzer-winning poetry collection, “The Wild Iris”, where the poems take place in a garden, and the flowers have intelligence and possess an emotive voice. Author and Critic Daniel Morris, in his work “The Poetry of Louise Glück- A Thematic Introduction”, points out that The House on Marshland is concerned with nature, and it can be read as a romantic revival of nature poetry. In her “Ararat,” Glück transforms flowers into symbols conveying mourning. She used flowers to express grief, negotiate it, and even to challenge the grieving individuals. These floral images not just commemorate grief but compete with grieving individuals to determine nature as a meaningful system of symbolism. In the critical work “On Louise Glück: Change What You See,” the author and critic Alan Williamson opines that in Glück’s works, Nature is not just regarded critically and embraced, but it can also sometimes suggest the divine. It is apparent in her poem “Celestial Music”, where the speaker states that “when you love the world, you hear celestial music” or in “The Wild Iris”, where the deity/ divine speaker speaks through the weather changes, as in poems “End of Winter”, “Retreating Wind”, “Midsummer”, “End of Summer”, etc.

The Wild Iris by Louise Glück

“The Wild Iris” by Louise Glück is her sixth anthology, published in 1992. For which Glück received the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 and the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America. “The Wild Iris” examines various themes such as mortality, transience, mutability, and the cyclical nature of human life. And Nature is the dominant theme in this collection. Glück, rather than limiting nature just to a background, makes it the central speaker. This poetry collection is a tripartite dialogue between flowers, a gardener-poet, and a divine figure in a garden setting. Of the fifty-four poems, one-third are by a flower/ natural speaker. Even the god poems are spoken from the voice of natural elements/ occurrences such as wind, light, snow, twilight, darkness, sunset, etc.

Nature as Panacea in Louise Glück’s “The Wild Iris”

This paper analyses a few selected poems from “The Wild Iris” anthology from an ecocritical perspective. Glück gives voice to non-human speakers, subverting the anthropocentric view of the human world. The garden setting itself becomes an evident ecological message.

The titular poem The Wild Iris presents the intellectual knowledge of rebirth and resurrection. In the poem, the wild iris narrates its experience of passing through death. It assures that death is not the end, but just a passage and that it again leads to a new beginning. It tells “At the end of my suffering, / there was a door.” The image of the “door” suggests transition rather than termination. It assures that death is not the end, but just a passage and that it again leads to a new beginning. Glück writes

a soul and unable
to speak, ending abruptly, the stiff earth
bending a little. And what I took to be
birds darting in low shrubs

(Glück 245)

She describes how the situation is underneath the “stiff earth” – it is conscious but unable to speak, the feeling of being buried alive. This resonates with human experiences at the time of crisis, where they feel overwhelmed, voiceless, and immobilised by adversity. But Iris’s journey exemplifies the truth that life returns to normalcy once this difficult phase passes. The wild iris guarantees that life returns to humanity just as it got it. It assures humanity telling “I tell you I could speak again: whatever /returns from oblivion returns/ to find a voice” Glück highlights the cyclical nature of life in this poem. She presents death as an element of transformation rather than a termination. By imparting this knowledge, the flower speaker, the Wild Iris, contributes in uplifting the human spirit immersed in desolation.

In the poem “Snowdrops”, a tiny little flower is the speaker. It is addressing humans. It begins with a question: “Do you know what I was, how I lived? You know/ what despair is; then/ winter should have meaning for you.” It shares its encounter with despair and how it came safely out of its trap. It says that if at all humans had that knowledge, then a harsh, bitter cold winter serves a purpose in their life. Here, winter represents the stagnation or freezing of life on earth, and this alludes to the human’s emotional numbness caused by the extreme pain, thus leading to despair. Sinking deeply into the earth, Snowdrops didn’t expect to live beyond this winter. But then it survived because snowdrops didn’t yield, risked its life, held on to hope and kept fighting until its last breath. And miraculously, it survived. It regained its life when spring approached, renewing life on earth. Now, the trivial natural speaker preaches humanity to take risks. Its message goes like

after so long how to open again
in the cold light
of earliest spring—
afraid, yes, but among you again
crying yes risk joy
in the raw wind of the new world.

(Glück 250)

Snowdrops agrees that this journey is fearful and frightening, but also affirms humanity that it’s worthwhile to surpass this and reclaim the invaluable life. It concludes that humans should take risks in times of adversity and overcome them. Both the poems “The Wild Iris” and “Snowdrops” recall Wordsworth’s faith in nature’s restorative power. It is clearly understood that for both Wordsworth and Glück, nature offers not an escape but endurance. In his poem Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, Wordsworth writes, “Nature never did betray/ The heart that loved her.”

In “Scillas”, the Scilla flower criticises humans for their preference for individual identity “I”. It says, “Not I, you idiot, not self, but we, we- waves”. It advises humanity to broaden their inclusivity and mock them for valuing their individual voices, and conveys its opinion that the isolated individual voice of humans is equal to nothing. It is expressed as “when to be one thing/ is to be next to nothing?”

Scilla shifts its attention towards humans, starting at the sky to witness the god’s sign in the form of an echo of his voice. This human desire for the divine sign is seen as a meaningless thing, and Scilla criticises human dependency on the divine calls. Scilla says that all humans are alike- solitary, standing above them only in the physical sense and obsessed with planning and controlling their lives. Scillas calls this silly because it believes that life is predestined or determined by external forces, and all the living beings are puppets dancing to the precomposed tunes. They exemplify this attitude when they say-

..... You are all the same to us,
solitary, standing above us, planning
your silly lives; you go
where you are sent, like all the things,

where the wind plants you, (Glück 257)

Glück clearly conveys Nature's superior intellectuality – where it tells humans that life's obstacles are not entirely the result of conscious choice, rather, they are shaped by forces beyond human agency, such as time, chance, environment, and larger natural rhythms. This aids humans in relativising the burden of self-blame and also reminds them that they are part of a broader ecological system where contingency and interdependence govern all beings. Thereby, Glück destabilises the anthropocentric hierarchy.

In the poem "Violets", Violets, a class of flowers, are collectively speaking to humanity and mockingly call them "dear suffering master". They point out the contrast between human grief and their grief. Violets claim that all living beings share the same conditions and humans are not uniquely forsaken to suffer more. They say that humans suffer more intensely because of their limited knowledge about the nature of the soul. Due to this, ignorant humans fear loss and tend to be utterly overwhelmed by grief and existential uncertainty. As described by violets

who would teach you, though
you kneel and weep,
clasping your great hands,
in all your greatness knowing
nothing of the soul's nature,
which is never to die. (Glück 263)

Though humans are physically superior compared to tiny, fragile violets, they are spiritually or philosophically inferior to the violets because they do not understand "the soul's nature. It is reflected when Violets do not weep like humans. They exist in harmony with the natural cycle of life and death and instinctively accept the inherent truths of existence. In the knowledge parameters, violets occupy the higher state. Violets teach humans that the soul's true nature is immortal. By using phrases such as "dear suffering master" and "poor sad god," Louise Glück deliberately inverts conventional hierarchies.

In "Field Flowers", Louise Glück presents a collective non-human voice of the field flowers. They critique humanity's obsession with eternal life and transcendence. The field flowers question human arrogance and anthropocentric pride, as "..... Certainly/ you don't look at us, don't listen to us," "I'm talking/ to you, you staring through/ bars of high grass shaking." Here, Glück illustrates that humans overlook the wisdom and beauty of earthly existence in their fascination with heaven. Unlike humans, the flowers embrace mortality and change. They value the unpredictability and vitality of life on earth. Through this gentle satirical poem, Glück exposes humanity's spiritual restlessness and reasons for contentment in the exquisite, natural, ever-transforming earth rather than in abstract dreams of Heaven. It is expressed in these poetic lines:

"your gaze rising over the clear heads
of the wild buttercups into what? Your poor
idea of heaven: absence
of change. Better than earth?" (Glück 270)

This idea to live contentedly on earth rather than aspiring to reach heaven closely echoes Robert Frost's affirmation of earthly experience over escapist longing in "Birches". He writes, "Earth's the right place for love:/ I don't know where it's likely to go better." (Robert Frost) Here, the human speaker wants to reach heaven by climbing the tall birches, but he ultimately chooses to return to earth. Whereas in "Field Flowers", Glück's natural speaker instructs humanity. Here, Nature assumes the role of guide and moral authority. Though both poets affirm earthly existence, Frost presents it as a human realisation, and Glück presents it as an ecological lesson delivered by nature itself.

In the poem *Daisies*, the daisies are the ironic observers of modern humanity's technological obsession. They sharply express their anger toward humanity by saying, "Go ahead: say what you're thinking. The garden/ is not the real world. Machines/ are the real world" Using her flower speaker, Glück contrasts a vibrant, exquisite, and life-affirming vision of the garden with the lifeless, mechanical presence of "machines" in the poem. Through this stark opposition, she critiques the modern world that privileges technological shine over ecological vitality. It is perceived that the *Daisies* are acutely aware of humanity's hesitation to engage with the natural world. They sense that it is because in this machine-dominated modern society, attentiveness to nature is often dismissed as irrational, outdated, and those who go against this are ostracised.

In the lines: "..... And the mind/ wants to shine, plainly, as/ machines shine, and not/grow deep, as, for example, roots." Glück incorporates an ecological message through the symbolic contrast between "Shine" and "roots". The word "Shine" signifies surface intellectuality, productivity, and technological achievement, while the word "roots" represents depth, continuity, and ecological embeddedness. In doing so, Glück critiques a culture that values superficial brilliance over organic growth and inner sustenance. Thereby, Glück advocates a return to rooted, interconnected existence within the natural world.

The human figure standing "at the meadow's border" in the poem embodies modern society's alienation from nature. It is implicit that the border is both physical and psychological. It is psychological when the modern man hesitates before entering the meadows, he fears the consequence of being "laughed at". Glück states this clearly in these lines

The longer you stand at the edge,
the more nervous you seem. No one wants to hear
impressions of the natural world: you will be
laughed at again; scorn will be piled on you. (Glück 281)

Humans are naturally drawn to nature, which heals them. So, they risk ridicule and social rejection to approach the meadow in the early morning solitude. Glück clearly exposes humanity's unresolved longing for connection and reconnection with nature through this poem.

Conclusion

In "The Wild Iris", Louise Glück transforms the non- human flowers/ natural elements into a human entity by giving them a voice to speak, mind to think, and intellectuality to instruct, preach and critique humans. Glück criticises humans' anthropocentric view and technological arrogance. Through her flower speakers, Glück exposes human ignorance, spiritual anxiety and ecological alienation. In Glück's poetry, Nature emerges as a panacea to which humans instinctively turn in times of difficulty. Nature offers endurance in despair. It consoles the troubled human mind by sharing its wisdom drawn from its own cycles of adversity. Nature encourages humans to take risks to rise above obstacles and persist even in the absence of divine signs. It preaches humanity to accept the harsh truth of mortality, the cyclical nature of existence, rather than advocating escape to heaven. Nature urges humanity to find contentment in the present. Thereby offering such solutions for human impediments, nature rightly acts as a Panacea. Glück also reminds us of the profound interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world. Glück attempts to inspire humanity to care for the environment. The garden setting of this poetry collection itself serves as an ecological message drawing humanity's attention towards the environment.

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