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# Human-Nature Connection: Eco-ethical Reading of Louise Gluck's *The Wild Iris*

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## Abstract

*Relationship connotes a power relation of one reaping the benefits at the expense of the other; where connection demands mutual respect and benefits on both sides. In a transactional and utilitarian view, nature has been conceptualized as a source on which humanity consumes. However, ecofeminists believe that there is another way possible that offers mutual coexistence and respect. This brings us to understand nature is neither a source nor only a victim; it is an entity that deserves ethical behavior from human beings. This paper finds a sense of such ethicality in Louise Gluck's poetry collection 'The Wild Iris' (1992) where her use of images reinvents human-nature connectivity through humanity's realization of its mortality and the natural world's infinite spiritual renewal and potential for regeneration. Reading her poetry from an ecofeminism perspective by applying the insights of Val Plumwood, this paper claims that environmental ethics is a profit-loss calculation, thus representing humanity's relationship to nature, where eco-ethical reading demands subtle ways of forging interconnection between humans and nature.*

## Keywords

Relationship, Connection, Ecofeminism, Eco-ethical

## Introduction

Louis Gluck's poetry, *The Wild Iris* (1992), explores identity, solitude, and introspection within humanity and its existential anxiety. Through a critique of human hubris and proclivity to the destruction of nature, Gluck engages with the theme of interconnectedness between the natural environment and human beings as an antidote to correct it. As ecofeminism "asserts the fundamental interconnectedness of all life" Gluck's ecofeminist text seeks a mutual connection between humans and all the living organisms (Gaard 2). While reading Gluck's poetry from the perspective of ecofeminism, this paper finds that the poet stresses that the pleasing relationships between humans and non-humans do not operate on the binary basis of self and other but rather on the solid foundation of connection and mutuality. The political reading of Gluck's poems may reveal that relationship will mean transactional give and take between nature and humans whereas connectedness will mean a more equitable and ethical relation between these two organisms: human and nature resulting in mutual respect and coexistence. This paper argues that nature and humans enjoy a happy, balanced, and sustainable life not by maintaining a relationship but by forging an interconnection between them. The paper is a qualitative and interpretative text-based research, and it uses the theoretical insights of ecofeminist critic Val Plumwood who advocates for the "ethical responsibility" of humans in forging interconnectedness between humans and nature.

Gluck's poetry has appealed to critics from across the fields representing diverse, often opposed communities of interpretations. While awarding the Nobel Prize in 2020, the judges remarked that Gluck has an "unmistakable poetic voice that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal." Indeed, her voice expresses the hope and promise of the regeneration of all humans. This theme of universality represents a unique voice in contemporary poetry. Ira Sadoff traces the version of Romanticism in Gluck's poetry, especially the versions of Keats and Dickinson. She notes, "Gluck's particular versions of the Romantic sublime pursues both the Keatsian ecstasy of the heightened moment and Dickinson's darker, more annihilating flight from the material world" (82). William V. Davis on the other hand observes the implied vision of apocalypticism in Gluck's poetry. He points out a debate between the divine and the human character. In the discussion, there is no possibility of any resurrection beyond the human realm. He notes, "The dominant dialogue, however, is carried on

between the divine and human protagonist/antagonist . . . . The 'debate' alone centers on the impossibility of any resurrection beyond the human, earthly realm—as in a garden" (48). Different from all the above critics, Brian Glasser interprets that Gluck's The Wild Iris constructs/implies readers who are mentally depressed. Glasser states, "[Her poems] demonstrate the way a depressed implied reader leads the speaker of the poems to a moment of transformation" (201). According to Glasser, this depressed implied reader in turn leads the speaker of the poems towards transformation.

Daniel Morris highlights the myriad of Gluck's thematic treatment stressing that her poetry offers the readers an opportunity to enjoy a range of thematic uses of the "persona poem to blunt confessionalism" (1). Morris calls it a "heteroglossic text" for carrying multiple themes such as spirituality, love, creativity, loss, death, nature, and so on (191). Morris depicts that the source of her themes, characters, and motifs comes from the "Biblical creation myths" (4). However, her purpose is not religious; it is spiritual. The myth comes to articulate and manifest the pain of consciousness that stems from the experiences of pain and suffering which she assigns to different speakers in her poems. Another feature of her poetry is the celebration of motherhood as a never-ending source of regeneration. The recurring maternal figure, in her poetry, is either imagined as a flower, rescuer, or goddess. In certain instances, they appear indifferent to the loss of children such as in 'The Drowned Children' or else are represented as the source of the children's suffocation such as in The Triumph of Achilles (1985). Morris further explains that *The Wild Iris* recalls "the nature lyrics from The House on Marshland" but displaces the monologue perspective of the traditional lyric form" (7). Gluck employs three kinds of voices: of the flowers, of nature, representing god, and of the author.

This way, different critics have read Gluck's poetry from dissimilar perspectives, but human-nature interconnection is yet to be done. Although Morris has touched upon the voice of nature, his research does not focus much on human-nature mutuality. Thus this article attempts to do that.

**An Ethical Connection between Humans and Nature**

As said above, Gluck's poetry engages three speakers. The third one is an authorial persona, the poet or a commentator on the things around. In fourteen flower poems,

flowers "speak to" the poet, about their situation, aspirations, and desires.

The second speaker speaks about the anxiety of a creator. It may be a poet-gardener expressing anxieties, or despair, it often criticizes the poet too. What the flower says may be considered an externalization of the poet's mood, attitude, misgiving, or concern in which the voice of divinity critiques the speaker—and humanity in general—for the frivolous nature of human endeavors, as well as for the unreasonable desire for immortality or rebirth.

Gluck uses a dual strategy in *The Wild Iris*: first, her speakers are the objects from the natural world and her subject matter is domesticity. It appears that her speakers are the natural version of human beings. By blending the outer world of nature with domesticity, she proposes a renewed connection between humans and nature that rejects the transactional relationship: human beings are the primary benefactor of the natural world even at the latter's expense. Her verse reverses this relationship and emphasizes the interconnectedness.

A renewed connection appears when the third speaker criticizes humans for their avarice, hubris, and self-centeredness. Gluck uses different personas to establish a new connection between humans and nature: the bond appears like a tendon between the creator and creation, man and nature, and artist and art. In the title poem, *The Wild Iris* and other poems—Trillium", "Lamium" or "Snowdrop"—Gluck employs a flower as a speaker. In other poems like "Scillia," "The Hawthorn Tree" and "Ipomea", the speaker is a tree, bush, or grass. Gluck equates the human and natural world as subjective entities: nature and humans have their existential concerns; pain and problems. Moreover, these poems are about nature and God; creator and creation as observed from a domestic location. Moreover, Gluck talks about her love for domestic life, in her acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize: "Always domestic life soothed me and teaching excited me, unnerved me. Always I liked the day to end among people."

In *Snowdrops* a seed buried underground all along the winter is a speaker and it asks a rhetorical question: "Do you know what I was, how I lived?" (1). The speaker's world is excluded, John Hutton Landis states, "with a strenuous sense of exclusion" (141). The persona becomes an excluded self and her role becomes a routine issue and message of survival. The speaker dissociates herself from the surroundings, where

spring is in full bloom and the speaker remembers: "I did not expect to survive" because the "earth [was] suppressing me" 4-5). The plight of the seed appears so painful that it "didn't expect / to waken again, to feel / in damp earth /. . . [and] respond again" (5-8). This desire to respond again is, in Val Plumwood's terms, "the treatment of nature in . . . ethical terms" (2). Plumwood emphasizes that "Western culture has treated the human/nature relation as a dualism." This ethical dilemma, she argues, "explains many of the problematic features of the West's treatment of nature which underlie the environmental crisis, especially the Western construction of human identity outside nature" (2). Gluck uses her poetry to resonate with Plumwood's insights. In her poetry, this dualism runs deep.

The inner and the external worlds are described in opposite imagery; the resolution of the opposite will be the goal to achieve. The visual beauty of the surroundings comes as a direct contrast to her inner self which is dark and sad. The external world of freedom and joy is contrasted with the world of domesticity by employing the images of the inner and outer world. The inner world is dark and psychological where the outer world is brighter and vivid. The inner one is the human world, and the outer world is the world of nature.

One of the attributes in Gluck's poetry has been the depiction of nature as a subjective entity. However, "to be defined as 'nature' . . . is to be defined as passive," argues Plumwood for it is understood as "non-agent and non-subject" (4). However, in Gluk's poetry, nature is a speaking subject, it has a voice: the seed and the flowers speak their voice. To do that, she uses myths and stories of creation, and her speakers speak in hymns and songs. In one of the poems, "Martins," the speaker addresses the creator:

You want to know how I spend my time?

> I walk the front lawn, pretending
> to be weeding. You ought to know
> I'm never weeding, on my knee, pulling
> clumps of clover from the flower beds. (1-5).

The clover weed just does not accept that it is a thing to be dismissed as 'weed'; it has a larger significance in the whole structure of changing seasons where "sick trees" go first "turning brilliant yellow" yet the clover remains there. Gluck wants to check

this fragility and she "subjects herself to adversarial power regimes and a repetition of flight, ironic defense, denial, and prohibition" (Sadoff 87). "Snowdrops", another poem, captures this selfless sense through rhetorical question: "Do you know what I was, how I lived? / You know what despair is; then / Winter should have meaning for you" (1-3). Thus, the world of nature is not just passive and mute.

Human's world and nature's world are different. By rendering "a mode of existence completely different from human" Gluck creates a world of two existences. The other existence is the floral world, it has so much to teach to humanity. At least, it can teach the difference between the world of creators and protectors. A mother as the seed in "Snowdrops" can go to any length of pain to give birth. The world of plants is blue. In this poetic image, Gluck is silently asserting the value of the creator. Through the flower speaker, the poet in "Jacob's Ladder" talks about human problems:

> Trapped in the earth, wouldn't you too want to go
> to heaven?  I live
> in a lady's garden. Forgive me, lady;
> longing has taken my grace. (1-5)

The poet creates a contrast between garden and heaven; or more precisely between earth and heaven, and by implication between the human world and the world of nature. The images of earth and heaven are images of domesticity and outer world.

> I too desire
> knowledge of paradise—and now
> your grief, a naked stem
> reaching the porch window. (8-12).

The single flowering plant, Jacob's ladder's desire to reach out to the porch manifests the yearning to move out of the world of the human world and enjoy the "knowledge of paradise". Similarly, at the poem's end, the speaker addresses with sympathy that their tears are the tears of yearning. The speaker's open question "Wouldn't you too want to go to heaven?" (2) is more a request, or an exclamation of despair than a question. As Ira Sadoff argues, Gluck presents speakers "trapped by cultural roles and feeling of powerlessness" and she "relies on myth to reverse time, to comfort, and to stabilize a conflict" (87). The speaker in the poem "Clear Morning" shows culturally trapped

women, and she muses on:

> I've submitted to your preferences, observing patiently
> the things you love, speaking
> through vehicles only, in
> details of earth, as you prefer,
> tendrils of blue clematis, light
> of early evening—
> you would never accept
> a voice like mine, indifferent
> to the objects you busily name. (3-12)

Piotr Zazula argues that Gluck's lyrics are dedicated to God, the creator. She puts her words as: "The speaker is tired of communicating with people in the only language they can understand—the ones of signs. Too busy with naming material objects as they appear before them, human beings are unable to embrace God's grace" (172). However, the poem aims at the world of men and their desire for a submissive world. The speaker protests: "I've submitted to your preferences" (3) and despite such a dutiful act, the men have taken:

> "it is your right
> to dispute my meanings:
> I am prepared to force
> clarity upon you" (23-26).

The clear message is: it is enough now. And now is the time to "force clarity" upon you. The idea of forcing clarity demands the equal right. Since the speaker had submitted herself and despite that, the other has "cast it aside/. . . thinking matter could not absorb your gaze" (17-18). She has realized it is time to speak up against the world of discriminatory patriarchy.

The natural world becomes a site where death and decay work as a transformative and regenerative power. In the poem, "End of Winter" the anticipation is so high: "Over the still world, a bird calls/waking solitary among the black boughs" and the promise has been delivered: "You wanted to be born; I let you be born" (1-3). The creator is addressing the seed and his promise which he has fulfilled by letting it be born makes

a perfect ideal world where "all sound that means good-bye, good-bye// [is] the one continuous line/that binds us to each other" (21-23). In the poem "Clear Morning" the speaker, the creator speaks in clear language about the ways nature goes:

> And all this time
> I indulged your limitation, thinking
> you would cast it aside yourselves sooner or later,
> thinking matter could not absorb your gaze forever—
> obstacles of the clematis painting
> blue flowers on the porch window—
> I cannot go on
> restricting myself to images. (15-22)

Perhaps it is Gluck's way of depicting the human world with all its limitations. Yet it has hubris of superiority. Thus, the creator who appears to be talking to the butter-cup flowers, directly aims for the human world.

In "Retreating Wind," the speaker takes the role of divine voice that rebukes the human speaker for what He considers their unreasonable demand, their avarice for "the one gift / reserved for another creation" (13-14). The duality of the world—reserved for the other creation—is enough to talk about the human and nonhuman world. The speaker is too furious over the ever-increasing human avarice: "When I made you, I loved you. / Now I pity you" (1-2). The chiding goes on:

> I gave you every gift,
> Blue of the spring morning,
> time you didn't know how to use—
> you wanted more, the one gift
> reserved for another creation. (10-14)

The speaker's dialogue with the divine force— that speaks as a wind—is especially "prominent in her desire to set herself free from a domineering Jewish God, but only by invoking His covering powers, only by revealing her dependence on God as the object of her desires for recognition and rebirth through the apostrophic addresses to the "You," or "Dear Father" (Morris 189). The position the speaker creates is that of a creator Himself. The mother with the power of a garden is a creator. She replaces God's

providence with mothers. The division and reservation of gifts for one or the other vexes the speaker. She even does not realize that she is the other, for whom there are different kinds of gifts, and for others the gifts are different.

With the device of personification, Gluck grants a voice to a flower. Now the flower has a consciousness and feeling in it and displays an emotional range that includes the wish for transcendence—as well as an awareness of the gardener's paradoxical urge both to experience human love and to transcend her body. The use of this device suggests how freely Glück mixes immanent and transcendent conceptions of divinity. The flower's namesake recalls the ladder, with angels trafficking both up and down its rungs which evokes mythical undertones.

Other poems with flower speakers, such as "Scilla", mock the poet-gardener for fantasizing about an exclusive relationship with a personal God. The flowers believe that nature is all of the holiness, and that claim to uniqueness suggess the sin of pride:

> Not I, you idiot, not self, but we, we—waves
> of sky blue like
> a critique of heaven: why
> do you treasure your voice
> when to be one thing
> is to be next to nothing?
> Why do you look up? To hear
> an echo like the voice
> of god? You are all the same to us
> solitary, standing about us, planning
> your silly lives: you go
> where you are  sent, like all these things,
> where the wind plants you,
> once or another of you forever
> looking down and seeing some image
> of water, and hearing what? Waves,
> and over waves, birds singing. (1-17)

One of fourteen flower-speakers that appear throughout the volume, as if the wind

scattered them into various positions, Scilla, which speaks as if it were part of the chorus in a Greek tragic theater, represents a pagan perspective in which the spirits or gods are believed to inhabit places or things

In the title poem, *The Wild Iris* an iris flower is the speaker. The poem informs the reader that the speaker suffered a lot. Yet the suffering will eventually, the speaker believes, lead to "a door" (2) to the natural world. The speaker explains how she lived there. The seed of the flower that lived under the earth, still she could feel the happening: "Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting. / Then nothing. The weak sun / flickered over the dry surface (5-7). It is obvious that the speaker is not dead because she can feel what is going around overhead. In this sense, it is about her world. The knowledge of trees, which are pine, shows she has a good knowledge of the surroundings. Yet, it is overhead, which means it is just a feeling. The event takes place outside her realm. Hers is indoor, private just like a seed inside the earth. Gluck provides a reason for her inability to experience the outer world: "It is terrible to survive/as consciousness/ buried in the dark earth" (8-10). The seed, like consciousness, is a source from where "a great fountain" and the source "of my life" flows. Thus, the woman, the speaker, the seed come to be the same thing: bounded within limited space yet having unbounded potential.

The meaning of winter, in Gluck's poem, is death, however, it is not the "good-bye, good-bye" it is a promise for regeneration. For the speaker in the poem, death is not an end, it's a promise and possibility for another: "At the end of suffering/there is a door" is what the iris, the flower announces (1-2). Thus, Gluck's use of vivid images from the natural world comes to assert the boundless regeneration found in the women, in the garden, and in the "center of my life came/ a great foundation, deep blue / shadow on azure seawater" (21-231). The reference of center and azure can lead to the reproduction and its process. It is a reproduction that perpetuates the existence. In *The Wild Iris* the iris is personified and it assures human, human readers, that death is not the end of life. Death is a stepping stone for a mysterious transformation. Recounting its own experience of dying and then being reborn with a whole new voice, Iris informs that death is not wholly frightening. The poem dramatizes the sense of pain and fear of death.

The function of images in her poem, as Landis argues, "pervades objects, seasons, relationships, expectations" (140) of all sorts and takes the reader to a fantastic world of the green but poisonous field landscape. The result effect of such images becomes a shift, a new "paradigm most often initiated by the course of events, by human feelings." Such feelings and experiences of men's world and women's world are different. These worlds can be called, domesticity and independence. The former is represented as a garden, seed, and woman. The outer world comes as a skylight, fig trees, and branches overhead. Critics have dominantly marked these worlds and earth and heaven, and the world of men and God. An entire new reading of her poem results in a "dark, central fact against which the sensibility constructs its strategies of survival, it chastened remembering of Eden and of an innocence irretrievable but of momentous import" (140). After all, it goes down to survival. Landis further comments:

The Wild Iris coordinates an eclectic grab bag of multicultural resources. She transforms these resources into a series of meditative religious poems, in which (following Wordsworth) the main human speaker experiences intimations of immortality, not a profound overwhelming vision. The Wild Iris marks a structural advance in Glück's career, as the author transforms the sequential gathering of related lyrics into a polyphonic theater. (140)

*The Wild Iris* has three sets of poems, thus three sets of speakers: a flower and plants, a gardener, and a divine speaker. These three sets of speakers exploit different subject matters for example, the divine speaker talks about time, season, change, and weather. In the poem, "Whose speakers are flowers or plants," Reena Sastri argues "conspicuously stage their own coming into being" (192). These speakers' attempts are existential "to be heard and to be seen" (192). Such an attempt will liberate women from the boundary of garden and domesticity.

Gluck complicates or blurs issues of identity, especially that of God, in two different but complementary ways. For one thing, much of what He says in displeasure, disappointment, condescension, pity, and anger sounds remarkably human, sounds (in fact) like the kind of thing a gardener might say to, or think of, her garden or a parent might say to her children. He sounds, in other words, like Glück herself, the volume's human character. His words duplicate what she often says. What I call a shared voice

is best exemplified in the book's antepenultimate poem September Twilight, the last one spoken by a person, not a flower. It sounds primarily like the speech of a gardener, acknowledging with wearied frustration the end of her labors:

Pride of women as creators comes as a central argument in *The Wild Iris*. However, for critics like Plumwood, "women's inclusion in the sphere of nature has been a major tool in their [men's] oppression" (19). Contrary to this point, Gluck's speakers point to the necessity of connecting it. In another poem, "Scilla," the flower mocks the poet-gardener for over-romantic affection to the human world. And, it urges the readers to consider the holiness of the flower and garden. Not only holy, but the garden is also a unique space worthy of pride:

> Why do you look up? To hear
> an echo like the voice
> of god? You are all the same to us,
> solitary, standing above us, planning
> your silly lives. (7-11)

The concept of two worlds occurs in the direct address. The poem is addressed to others who are like the speaker looking heavenwards for some inspiration. But, such a search for something absent is readily downplayed: "You are all the same." Perhaps this is addressed to the other world, men's world, heaven, or outside garden. These others are silly, not aware of the female power, and planning their silly lives, where the true source of life rests in the women.

Nature's world becomes vivid in the poem, "Violets" where the speaker speaks about the hidden world:

> Because in our world
> something is always hidden,
> small and white,
> small and wheat you call
> pure, we do not grieve. (1-6).

The natural world is hidden, not with much detail. The world comes to the reader in the form of hidden images like white, small hands under "the hawthorn tree" (12). The speaker feels

in all your greatness knowing
nothing of the soul's nature
which is never to die: poor sad good
either you never have one
or you never lose one. (16-20).

The hidden world and hidden nature of the soul become one in the image of violets. This is also a message of survival. In total, the effect is a form of regeneration. Garden as an extension of the woman world, brings the message of coexistence. In other words, the world of humans becomes the world of nature or creation just like that of God.

**Conclusion**

After analyzing Louis Gluck's *The Wild Iris* from the ecofeminist perspective using the insights of Val Plumwood, this paper concludes that the promise of regeneration and renewal is possible only through an ethical connection between the world of nature and the world of men. It has been analyzed that Gluck uses three forms of addresses and speakers befitting to each address to stress the importance of the harmonious connection between humans and nature. This connection becomes necessary to counter the excessive greed and limitless rationality of the human world. With the clear and distinct images of these two worlds, Gluck gives a peregrination of the two worlds, their beauty and limitations. The meandering into these two worlds exposes readers to different experiences and thus forces them to rethink the existing relationship and nudge for a renewed connection with one another.

It is possible to understand the images of the human world as the world of domesticity as a woman's world where she is both creator and creation. Like nature, woman gives life, and bears pain and suffering in the winter to persevere the very power of regeneration. In this sense, the whole idea becomes all symbolic. However, like the iris flower from where the flow of life opens up and sustains, nature has that promise of regeneration all along. This is the spirit that Gluck's poetry carries. It is the spirit of hope, the promise of regeneration, and the need for ethical treatment of nature by humans. Emphasizing this spirit, this paper expects to open up a new avenue in the attitude of treating nature.

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