
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Awareness of Death in “Faithful and Virtuous Night”

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| ABSTRACT

“Faithful and Virtuous Night” is a collection of poems by modern American poet Louise Glück that won the American National Award in 2014. This paper uses these four poems as the main body of inquiry: “Faithful and Virtuous Night” (the title poem of the collection), “Cornwall,” “Afterword,” and “Midnight,” all of which use a fictionalized male painter as the narrator and use the painter’s voice to tell the reader about his life experiences. This paper intends to analyze the complex characterization of the male painter, focusing on the awareness of death embodied by the imagery (journey and color) in the collection of poems.

| KEYWORDS

“Faithful and Virtuous Night,” journey, color, Death Awareness.

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1. Introduction

Louise Glück was born in 1943 in New York City and died Oct. 13, 2023, at home. She attended Sarah Lawrence College and Columbia University. Considered by many to be one of the most talented contemporary American poets, Louise Glück was known for the precision, sensitivity, and insight into loneliness, family relationships, divorce, and death that characterized her poetry. Glück is the author of thirteen collections of poetry, including the collection “Faithful and Virtuous Night,” published in 2014, which won the National Book Award. The collection contains 24 poems that tell stories of emotion, love, and trauma with whimsical imagery. Unlike the other fragmented poems in the same collection, this paper takes as its subject of study four poems, “Faithful and Virtuous Night” (the title poem of the collection), “Cornwall,” “Afterword,” and “Midnight,” which have relevance in terms of content and are all expressed in the voice of a male painter.

In “Faithful and Virtuous Night” (if not specifically reminded, “Faithful and Virtuous Night” hereafter refers to the title poem in the collection), the male narrator draws from his memories of being a child, showing the reader that he reads a fairy tale book and an adventure novel with his brother, and then spends his birthday in the company of his aunt and brother, and draws with colored pencils that he received as a birthday present. At the same time, the male narrator’s account leads to the conclusion that his parents are dead, and he himself only begins to recall these events as an adult. The poem “Midnight” is told by the same male narrator, who, as the night deepens on his balcony, remembers a childhood voyage to the sea with his aunt and brother. The poem “Cornwall” is about the male narrator’s daily life as he grows up to become a painter, living in a rented house in the countryside and recalling the death of his parents at night. The poem “Afterword” is about the male narrator’s mental process as he paints a picture: first, he thinks of the tree that confronts his parents, then he thinks of himself as a child with a paintbrush, and finally, he thinks of his brother, and until the end of the poem the male narrator does not paint on the canvas. Together, these four poems make up the “Painter series” in the collection “Faithful and Virtuous Night,” portraying a male painter who is still trapped in his childhood shadow as an adult and highlighting the sense of mortality that Glück expresses through this.

2. Literature Review

While most foreign studies have focused on Glück's early poems, such as her collection "Wild Iris" in 1992, there have been fewer foreign studies on "Faithful and Virtuous Night." In "Lyric Separation: the Post-Lyric of Louise Glück," Korean scholar Kyungwon Yang explores how Louise Glück uses an emotionally strong and militant voice and how she opposes lyric poetry to tell the story of the title poem. (Yang, 2021) The paper's study of the title poem, "Faithful and Virtuous Night," has a different perspective than the lyric, but it also shows readers the metaphorical significance present in the title poem. However, as far as metaphorical and symbolic meanings are concerned, it is not enough to analyze the title poem only from this perspective.

Domestic studies have focused more on the historicization of the lyric structure in Glück's poetry (Yin, 2021), as well as the "garden" imagery that appears in *The Wild Iris* (Bao, 2021). Representative of this is scholar Zheng Chunxiao's study of poet Glück's poetic narrative, pointing out the fluid narrative system embodied in her writing process and writing form. (Zheng, 2021) Although there are fewer studies on "Faithful and Virtuous Night," both abroad and at home, the above studies show the diversity of perspectives in the study of Louise Glück's poetry, which provides certain reference and learning value for this study.

This paper intends to analyze from the perspective of symbolism. Symbolism is an artistic trend that emerged in Britain and several Western countries in the late 19th century, mainly in the fields of literature and art, etc. The name was first coined by the poet Jean Moreas when he published the Symbolist Manifesto in 1886. The Symbolists were artistically influenced by the subjective idealistic ideas of the English Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist poets Mallarmé and Baudelaire, as well as the musicians Wagner and Nietzsche. Symbolism was particularly prominent in language, especially in the use of metaphors and symbols. Through imagination, the symbolist poet creates an object that fully expresses subjectivity. This object, once the poet's imagination begins to act, process, or produce it, is no longer a pure object but a fusion of the objective and the subjective (Hong, 2010). For the Symbolists, this expression is more suggestive than explanatory, more implicit than uninhibited, and its works use a great deal of suggestion and imagery to metaphorically express the inner world of human beings.

3. A cyclical journey through life and death

The journey is a central element in Glück's collection of poems, "Faithful and Virtuous Night." In his review of Glück's "Faithful and Virtuous Night," the American poet and poetry critic Stephen Yenser stated that " 'journey' is one of several quasi-fictional elements that 'Faithful and Virtuous Night' possesses." In Stephen Yenser's opinion, "I never lost interest in the cyclical journey" is an overall assessment of the journey element in Glück's collection of poems. (Stephen, 2021) The poet Glück uses the first person point of view, "I," to convey her own sense of mortality to the reader as if in face-to-face conversation. It is worth noting that in the collection of poems, "Faithful and Virtuous Night," the four poems are in the order of "Faithful and Virtuous Night," "Cornwall," "Afterword," and "Midnight," which as a whole present a cyclical journey from life to death and from death to life.

The poem "Faithful and Virtuous Night" is centered around "my" childhood, and the "Constituent/memories of a large memory" reveals that it is all about one's own childhood. From the sixth stanza of "Faithful and Virtuous Night," it can be deduced that "I" (the narrator) had an elder brother, and that both of them were still young enough to share a room, and that the elder brother would read various adventure novels, one of which is the source of the title of this poem. The yellow imagery that occurs during this childhood is one of the few colors that is depicted positively, conveying to the reader the happy mood of the male narrator. As the poem describes, the yellow ball talked about in "My First Reader" possesses a simple, unadorned joy despite the fact that he could not read or write at that time. Then comes the appearance of the ceiling, imagery associated with parents, "staring at the ceiling—never/my favorite part of the room." (Glück, 2014) The narrator describes the ceiling as something as invisible as the sky, ethereal, and just as the narrator's "parents sitting on the white clouds in their white travel outfits." (Glück, 2014), an inference can be drawn that the narrator's parents may have passed away, and that, despite telling a story full of childlike innocence, the deathly imagery has already crept in.

The poem "Cornwall" tells of "my" experiences as an adult. "I" rented a house in the countryside, and when night came, "I cooked modest dinners for myself/by the light of candles." (Glück, 2014) But in the dead of night, "I" unconsciously think of my parents and how "the tree that confronted my parents/had become an abyss shaped like a tree, a black hole/expanding in the dirt" (Glück, 2014) to consume the narrator. The circular imagery of the "black hole," which is notable for its completeness and circularity, symbolizes the black hole of death that is now "expanding in the dirt" in the shape of a tree, implying that even underneath death is the soil of life. Yellow imagery is still noteworthy in this poem. At the beginning of "Cornwall," a ball dropped into the grass from a childhood game leads to "where it remains seductively/flashing and glinting" (Glück, 2014) which, once the male narrator realizes that this is only an illusion (or waits for the mist to dissipate), reveals that it is "simply field buttercups" (Gericke, 2014). The one ball found is "useless" and will no longer emit the same golden color as the small yellow flower. This means that the yellow ball in the eyes of the adult male has been covered by the mist and will not be able to glow with the vitality it once had. The color yellow should have shone like a light, but now it reveals death, decay, and misfortune.

In the poem "Afterword," the narrator still refers to "the tree that confronted my parents," but "Chaos was what I saw./My brush froze—I could not paint it./Darkness, silence: that was the feeling." (Glück, 2014) He feels the mist enveloping the entire stage (i.e., his life is buried in a huge shadow), and the only way to escape is to retreat and flee. While "my brush hand moved side to side/far from the canvas,/side to side, like a windshield wiper." (Glück, 2014), he remembers "his childish hand/confidently wielding the crayon—" (Glück, 2014) i.e., his childhood himself. Until the end, even though the mist that covered the whole stage cleared, "I" did not paint on the canvas.

The final poem, "Midnight", goes back to the beginning and is one of the four poems that describe childhood experiences most clearly. Unlike the other poems, which recall childhood events, "Midnight" is almost exclusively about his own happy memories. The poem opens with "I" was surrounded by darkness, and then the perspective shifts, "I was on my balcony./In my right hand I held a glass of Scotch/in which two ice cubes were melting." (Glück, 2014) This is a clear indication to the reader that "I" am an adult at this moment. The "I" in the flashback is hiking with my aunt and elder brother, "Below, the river sparkled." from the boat, and it seems that "everything glittered -- the stars, the bridge lights, the important/illuminated buildings" (Glück, 2014). All of these, from a child's point of view, are alive and vibrant, implying a desire for life. The "I" in these four poems continues to journey from childhood memories to adult experiences and back again, a moment where life and death reach a black-hole-like loop that becomes the pivotal point of a cyclical journey.

4. Awareness of Death in Black and White Imagery

In all four of Glück's poems, the night (or darkness) is invariably described. The main color of all four is wrapped in boundless darkness, and the male narrator is also in the darkness, suggesting his state of mind. The feeling that darkness brings to people is an oppressive, tense atmosphere, and the darker it is, the more it presses people to catch their breath. The narrator in "Faithful and Virtuous Night," who is still a young boy, puts himself in the darkness all the time. On his birthday, he is only concerned with the darkness outside. While his aunt lights the candles, he feels "Darkness overswept the land." Yet even so, the male narrator confesses bluntly that "I found the darkness comforting." (Glück, 18) His belief that the darkness reassures him is a reversal of the meaning of darkness itself. This reassurance collides with the restlessness that the male narrator talks about in "Faithful and Virtuous Night" that the daytime brings him:

Restless, are you restless?
Are you waiting for day to end for your brother to return to his book?
For night to return, faithful, virtuous,
repairing, briefly, the schism between
you and your parents?

This did not, of course, happen immediately. (Glück, 2014)

The restlessness that the day brings him bursts forth at night and then allows him to return to his comfort zone. However, he understands that "of course, happen immediately," which means the darkness won't mend the "schism" between him and his parents (i.e., the separation between life and death) because the fact of their death has already happened and his inner introspection is clouded by a complexity of emotions. He naively looks forward to the coming of the night but is clear-headed enough to realize that everything he does in this darkness is in vain and that the darkness, while swallowing up everything, will not be able to heal all the wounds as he expects it to.

The male narrator's understanding of the darkness follows along with the poem. "Midnight" begins with "At last the night surrounded me," placing the male narrator in a state of suspense and uncertainty, where he feels that "Silence had entered me./It was like the night, and my memories—they were like stars/in that they were fixed," (Glück, 2014) As an adult, the male narrator already knows that the only thing that night brought him was the endless pain of losing his parents, but in his own eyes as a child, "the night was warm," and it was the comfort zone where he could find solace. Darkness is like hemlock to him, and while he longs for the warmth of the night, he always feels a vague pain, which is the same as the feeling brought by the color white, except that the pain brought by night is hidden, chronic death, while the color white is visible and blinding.

In the four poems written by Glück, the appearance of white is like a blinding light or a pin in hand, which stands out among the dominant color (the darkness) and constantly stimulates the psychological defenses of the male narrator. The first appearance of white in "Faithful and Virtuous Night" is "my parents sitting on the white clouds in their white travel outfits" (Glück, 2014). and the twice-emphasized white color is meant to grab the reader's attention and create an association. The sudden appearance of white makes the reader aware of the death of the male narrator's parents and his own distaste for the ceiling or the "invisible things" like the sky, or, on a deeper level, the subconscious fear and dread of death. The reappearance of the color white is on the blank canvas

that the male narrator fails to paint until the end of "Afterword." When I am confronted with the word "fate," "Chaos was what I saw./My brush froze—I could not paint it"(Glück, 33). After being irritated by the white canvas, the male narrator inevitably remembers the night his parents passed away and then turns to escape: "My brush hand moved side to side/far from the canvas"(Glück, 34). The male narrator's fear of death strikes close to the heart, and after being stimulated by the white color possessed by the canvas, he begins to doubt himself, deny himself, and attempt to erase his existence in this white color. However, it is not to be, he realizes:

so that I was constantly
face-to-face with blankness, that
stepchild of the sublime,

which, it turns out,
has been both my subject and my medium. (Glück, 2014)

At this moment, the male narrator accepts the sting and emptiness symbolized by this white color. The darkness surrounds the male narrator everywhere, reassuring him, while he himself is like the "blank canvas" at the end of the poem "Afterword," even in the darkness, there is no escape from the mental torture of the blinding white light. His pain has risen from the level of bereavement to that of self-doubt and lack of confidence in life. The blank canvas has also become the uncertainty of the future, which is the poet Glück's reflection on death, presenting the fragility of life to the readers and prompting them to reflect on life and death.

At the same time, the two images of black and white together constitute the mood of mist, which envelops the life of the male narrator. In "Faithful and Virtuous Night," the mist appears as "Points of clarity in a mist, intermittently visible,/like a lighthouse whose one task/is to emit a signal"(Glück, 2014). The male narrator also follows up by talking about the significance of a lighthouse as a sign of direction, not a harbor of refuge. The mist, on the other hand, is a large shadow that looms over his life like death, as in the poem "Cornwall," the male narrator describes the surroundings he inhabits:

At the river's edge,
fog encircled the lights;
one could not, after a while, see the lights
but a strange radiance suffused the fog,
its source a mystery.

The night progressed. Fog
swirled over the lit bulbs. (Glück, 2014)

As mentioned earlier, the night is a reassuring comfort zone for the male narrator, but such a night is shrouded in fog, which accompanies him in this way. Like the fog in Eugene O'Neill's play "Long Day's Journey into Night," "the fog imagery looms large and is ubiquitous, symbolizing a barrier that separates man from the real world." (O'Neill, 2015) The male narrator seeks solace in the night despite being stung by it while at the same time being stimulated from time to time by the glimpses of white in his life, and with the combination of these two conditions, the fog continues to haunt his life. People are always afraid of death, and the fog is like the anxiety that the male narrator feels after escaping from death. This rejection of death is one of the most fundamental internal drives throughout the development of human society and culture. At the end of the poem "Afterword," the poem talks about "The mist had cleared" and ends with "*Shall I be raised from death*, the spirit asks./And the sun says yes./And the desert answers/your voice is sand scattered in wind."(Glück, 2014) The poet ponders whether death is really the end of humans, while at the same time, he feels that if he overcomes the fear of death, he will surely be reborn. Black and white not only puts the male narrator in the midst of death, forcing him to think about it but also suggests to the reader that death and life go hand in hand in a person's life and that the only way to a new life is to break the fear of death and overcome it.

5. Conclusion

The journey between life and death mentioned in this paper implies the growth of the male narrator, who compares his memories to his journey, shuttling between the real world and his memories and gradually blurring the border between life and death, creating a situation of life and death. The reversal of black and white allows the reader to see a kind of grotesque. After staying in a dark environment for a long time, any touch of white will turn into a piercing presence. And the black and white, just like life and death, are parallel. The fog and the yellow color keep appearing in the journey of life and death; it is more of a reflection that the male narrator is still shrouded by the fog of death in his adulthood, unable to get rid of death but struggling to overcome the fear of death. Based on this, this paper deeply analyzes the inner thoughts and grief of the male narrator in "Faithful and Virtuous

Night," which is different from the childlike innocence shown on its surface. The character of the male narrator is extremely complex. On the one hand, he longs for comfort in the darkness of the night, seeing it as his comfort zone and choosing to turn a blind eye to it despite being stung by the sobriety of his hidden self; on the other hand, he is trying as much as he can to escape from the white color that he encounters in his life, a constant stimulus to remember his past existence. The result of these two colors together is a death-like fog that haunts his life, and the tragedy of the male narrator's character is revealed here. Through the life of the male narrator, the poet Glück shows the readers the awareness of death that she wants to convey; she never stops thinking about death, hoping that the readers will also be able to align life and death to overcome the fear of death. After death, a new life will be waiting for them, and at the same time, it is almost like reaching the realm of life and death, as if it is a cyclic journey.

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