Formal Paper 2

**Flowers and God**

The pinnacle characteristic of Louise Gluck’s The Wild Iris is that its poems are written in the perspective of a flower or other plant. The relevance of this kind of perspective is Gluck’s ability to discuss or address human realities in an objective manor that would otherwise be discredited or less easily digested due the biased nature in which the reader would perceive her ideas. Speaking in a flower’s perspective gives Gluck the power to make impacting, meaningful remarks on human life. *Field Flowers* is a poem in The Wild Iris that is written from the perspective of the gardener, not of a flower, and displays some incredible truths about human character through raw emotion. The contrast between perspectives is interesting as most of the flowers seem to have less emotion and are more direct. The gardener’s reactions towards the still flower made me ask why is the gardener angry with the flower?

The poem begins with “What are you saying? That you want/ eternal life? Are your thoughts really/ as compelling as all that?” The gardener’s tone is insulting in these first phrases. The gardener describes wanting eternal life as a childish, immature desire. The speaker continues to rant through the poem, bombarding the flower with questions that delve deeper into discovering what the gardener’s own purpose is. The last lines read “Better than earth? How/ would you know, who are neither/ here nor there, standing in our midst?” With a final stab, the gardener effectively dissolves the flower’s voice, rendering its opinions out of place.

This anger and attempt to discredit the flower is itself out of place for a collection of poems told mainly in the perspective of flowers. *Field Flowers* is an address to the rest of the poems from the perspective of a human. The Wild Iris’s most powerful tool is its ability to comment objectively on human truths, and does so through the thoughts of various wild flowers. *Field Flowers* represents a human’s reaction to these claims. The anger expressed by the gardener towards the flower brings the gardener down to the flowers level, and therein artfully takes down the notion that human perspective is the end-all for poetry and life. Although the gardener tries to show superiority, her acts make her equal to the flower regardless of the gardener’s words. The emotional gardener is shocking as she tries to strip down the flowers’ credibility. Her attitude only undermines her efforts. Lines that depict her self-condemning argument are “Your poor/ idea of heaven: absence/ of change”. The gardener speaks to the flower as though it does not know what proper heaven is. This castigation, which is present throughout the poem, does not make the speaker seem wiser, but rather more foolish. Her anger towards the flower undermines her authority and reason. Though, if the gardener is on the same level as the flower can the would the gardener know a rich idea heaven? If she does, then the flower can have one just the same. Are the both capable of these types of thoughts, or are the both misguided? Is the gardener only suffering a crisis of self worth, or does her anger signify a lower level of lucid thoughts then the flower?

Throughout the poem, the speaker creates the same problem for herself. She is insulting without credibility or sympathy. Some lines read, “I’m talking/ to you, you staring through/ the bars of high grass shaking/ your little rattle”. The use of “you” in these lines is again insulting. They are meant to isolate the flower as specifically worthless. The interesting part of these lines is that the gardener almost expects the flower to respond, and of course the flower does not. She attempts to open up a dialogue with the flower. The speaker affectively puts herself at the flowers level, a level she portrays as low and uninformed, while the flower does not respond, but continues to speak its mind in the other poems. The gardener loses her credibility when she began yelling at the flower, and the flower’s wisdom seems great because it does not actively address, but instead comments upon human life. This silence, though, is similar to that of God’s in the gardener’s Matins prayers. In the Matins prayers, the speaker, a human, is generally displeased with her God’s silence. Therefor, it is possible that the speaker is also mad at the flower for acting like her God. She may think that the flower is putting herself at the same level as her God, which explains why the Gardener is so keen to pull the flower down by questioning the flowers ability to have ideas about super terrestrial maters. The gardener does not make herself seem above the flower, though she may be trying to bring the flower down to her own level, at least, to clarify its status as no better then anything else on earth.

Is the speaker then angry with the flower because it is commenting on human existence, its audacity for acting superior then the speaker, or is the speaker frustrated because of the similarities that her God and the flower share? In reality, it seems as though the gardener’s angry rebuttal to the flowers’ thoughts throughout The Wild Iris is a combination of all three factors. The gardener realizes the flower is commenting on human life and cannot speak to the flower directly, just as her God does. The gardener is angry because the flower is acting like God and God acts like the flower: judgmental yet silent. The gardener reacts to what the flowers are saying and is angry because they put themselves on the same level as her God. Not only does that put her beneath the flowers, but the flowers also puts God on their level, and do so in a way represented by their actions, not their words. Just the act of judging the human race is only reserved for God. In conclusion, the gardener is angry for putting herself and her God, someone she praises, below and equal to the flower, respectively. (The implications of this when taking into account that Gluck’s whole book is a judgment of human character can open up a whole discussion on whether or not humans are on God’s level as well)

Robert Peake wrote an article addressing the effects of Louise Gluck’s use of different perspectives in Ararat and The Wild Iris. Reflecting upon the success of using plants as a point of view himself, he surmised, “Somehow, hearing it as a poem about a flower, when in fact it is about so much more than just a flower, seems to break down the reader’s defenses.” The poetry in The Wild Iris is based of painful experiences, and hearing about them indirectly and incredibly selflessly gives Gluck the power to communicate her ideas on death and resurrection, themes found in The Wild Iris, and give the reader a window to her own feelings. The difference in perspective gives the poem more credibility. Peake goes on to describe how Gluck’s declarations of wisdom are incredibly effective, though a risky technique due to their non-poetic nature. He then back up their effectiveness by describing how Gluck then elaborates on her declarations with “lush imagery and metaphor”, which are balanced masterfully using the objective voice of a flower. Without the use of the foreign voice, these passages would not hold the eloquence they do, and could possibly become harsher, unrefined poems.