The Wild Iris

SUMMARY

When my suffering was over, I came to a door.

Listen to me: I remember going through the experience you call "death."

Up above me, I could hear little noises, like the sound of the pine trees moving in the wind. Then, there was nothing. Faint sunlight moved over the dried-out dirt.

It's an awful thing to still be conscious while you're buried underground.

Then my suffering ended: the part of death you're afraid of, being speechless but still conscious, stopped all of a sudden. I felt the tough ground around me starting to give, and I got the impression that there were little birds moving around in the nearby bushes.

Listen, you people who don't remember what it's like to come back from the dead: I'm telling you, I could talk again. Whatever comes back from death and nothingness discovers that it has a new ability to speak.

From right at the heart of my being, a huge fountain-like blossom shot up: as richly blue as a shadow on the waters of the sea.

THEMES

DEATH, REBIRTH, AND TRANSFORMATION

In "The Wild Iris," a personified iris assures its human readers that death isn't the end of life: in fact, death is just a step in a mysterious transformation. Recounting its own experience of dying—and then being reborn with a whole new "voice"—the iris discovers that, while death is frightening, it's also not infinite. In this poem, enduring the pain and fear of death is only the prelude to rebirth in a new and beautiful form.

Recounting its own experiences death and resurrection, the iris observes that "what you call death" isn't an ending: it's really only a dark passage that leads to "a door." In dying, the iris indeed encounters "nothing" and "oblivion," but after it's retborn, it can *remember* all that nothingness: its "consciousness" is never really *gone*, even when it's buried, frightened and alone in the ground. Death, in this iris's view, is really just a stage of life. It's not an ending, but a process.

And the process of death carries the iris through to a new life with new powers. Having spent time in the "other world" of death, the iris emerges with a new "voice": an ability to communicate its experience. That voice appears in the form of a "great fountain"—the iris's gorgeous deep-blue flower—and in the form of this very poem! Dying is what *allows* the iris to blossom again, and its blossoming is itself a "voice" of consolation to people who haven't yet died, assuring them that death is only one stage of life.

The fear, darkness, and silence of death, this poem thus suggests, are just a prelude to a mysterious flowering, a stage on the journey toward a beautiful resurrection. People, this iris suggests, can thus meet "that which [they] fear" with patience and courage, knowing that the terrifying darkness of death (or perhaps even the darkness of experiences that echo death, like a deep depression) is never permanent.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-23

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

At the end ...
... I remember.

"The Wild Iris" begins with some bold claims, told in a mysterious first-person voice: a voice that claims to have died, and lived to tell the tale.

Not only has this speaker died and returned to life, they really, really want the reader to hear their story and to believe it. Listen to the urgency of the caesura and the enjambment in lines 3-4:

> Hear me out: || that which you call death
> I remember.

That mid-line colon feels insistent, asking the reader to stop and really listen. Then, the enjambment sets off the strange idea that this speaker can "remember" their own death, giving this powerful declaration a whole line to itself.

Already, then, the reader has the sense that this speaker is someone who's been through an astonishing experience. And going through that experience has made them want to *share* it. This speaker wants to be heard, to communicate a powerful message: death isn't the end.

Take a look at the metaphor in the poem's very first lines:

> At the end of my suffering
> there was a door.

If there's a "door" at the end of suffering, then suffering itself isn't an infinite void, or a devouring monster. Instead, it's something more like a dark hallway: a difficult passage to navigate, but still a passage, a thing that takes people from one place to another.

And the way these two first stanzas mirror each other—each is only two lines long, and each is a single enjambed sentence—suggests that the speaker's "suffering" and their "death" are one and the same. Death isn't pure oblivion, but a painful passage—a trial, not an ending.

In other words: to this speaker, pain and death aren't terrible and irreversible fates. They're part of an ongoing journey.

LINES 5-7

Overhead, noises, branches ...
... the dry surface.

In the third stanza, the reader starts to get the sense that this resurrected speaker is none other than the "Wild Iris" of the title—a personified flower. The poem starts to look at the world from an iris's-eye view as the speaker recounts their own remembered death.

Take a look at how readers get to experience the world from the iris's perspective in line 5:

> Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting.

Here, the speaker notices the sounds of the "shifting" branches, not of a pine tree, but of the pine tree—the one and only pine tree this speaker knows. This is a speaker who is firmly (and literally!) planted in one place. And it has a strong sensory experience of that place: this line's seamless asyndeton, and the onomatopoeic sounds of "shifting," evoke the gentle, continuous shuffle of branches in the breeze.

But all that steady, vivid motion comes to a sudden end in the next line: all of a sudden, there's just "nothing." Or—not quite nothing! The speaker still has a sense of the "weak sun" as it flickers on the "dry surface" of the earth around it. But that weakness and dryness suggest that the iris is shrinking back, withering, and shriveling.

Even as the iris shrivels and fades to "nothing," though, the shape of the poem presents another take on the story. The first two stanzas were only two lines long; this stanza uses three lines. The iris might be fading, but *something new* is growing. There's an undercurrent of hope already perceptible in this free-verse poem's changing shape.

LINES 8-10

It is terrible ...
... the dark earth.

In this stanza, the iris confronts a fear that feels deeply human: the idea of being buried alive, helpless and "conscious[]" in the "dark earth." This, the iris says, is just as "terrible" as one would expect.

In other words: to this iris, encountering "nothing"—death itself—is, paradoxically, something one suffers *consciously*. Death, in the iris's experience, isn't just emptiness or void. It's a void that one has to helplessly experience. That survival is "terrible" not just in the sense of "really unpleasant," but in the sense of "inspiring terror and awe." It's a confrontation with something frightening beyond comprehension.

Around this point, the reader might begin to get the sense that there's something metaphorical going on here. You don't have to die to endure a seemingly endless nothingness: you need only feel deep despair, an experience that plenty of people have while they're very much alive.

Perhaps, then, this iris's experience isn't just about literal death. Perhaps it's about the kind of living death that plenty of people pass through: the kind of "dark" times that feel like they'll never end.

But again, there's a swelling undercurrent of mysterious anticipation in these lines. The iris might have been "buried in the dark earth," but it also "survive[d]"—as those first lines of the poem insisted. Where there's survival, there's hope. And flowers are an ancient symbol of just that: no matter how dark the winter was, the flowers always come back in the spring.

LINES 11-15

Then it was ...
... in low shrubs.

The iris's ordeal in the "dark earth" ends as suddenly as it began: all at once, it feels the "stiff earth" bending around it, and can again perceive the world around it, noticing "birds darting in low shrubs."

Lines 5-15 form a chiasmus, repeating ideas in reverse. First, the iris notices the sounds and movements of nature around it (line 5), then the "dry surface" of the earth (lines 6-7). It's trapped in the dark underground for a time (lines 8-9). Then it emerges through that "stiff earth" (lines 13-14) and experiences the sounds and movements of nature again (lines 14-15)!

The shape of these ideas suggests that the whole process of death and rebirth the iris has just endured is not a one-time thing, but a cycle, a rhythmic natural process that repeats and repeats. The part that people are used to thinking of as the hard end—death itself—is just a period of "surviv[al]" in the "dark earth," a waiting time.

What's more, it doesn't just apply to plants! Again, the iris reaches out to the reader directly here:

> Then it was over: that which you fear, being
> a soul and unable
> to speak, ending abruptly, [...]

There's something telling in the iris's idea of "that which [people] fear." "Being a soul and unable to speak," the iris suggests, is what's really terrifying about death—being a conscious self, but not able to communicate. While that might be a broad human fear in general, it also sounds like a writer's fear in particular: it sounds here as if the iris might be speaking to the *author* of this poem as much as anyone.

Again, this hints that the death and rebirth here might be metaphorical as well as literal. Perhaps one feature of a writer's darkest days is an inability to "speak" through poetry itself. And the idea of restored speech is only going to become more important in the next stanza.

LINES 16-20

You who do ...
... find a voice:

In this stanza, the iris's voice becomes more and more urgent—and makes bigger and bigger claims. Addressing the reader directly again, the iris speaks to "you who do not remember / passage from the other world," a line that suggests that everyone has gone through a rebirth like the one the iris has emerged from. This isn't just a flower thing, in other words: this is a process common to all life. And it's a process that it's apparently pretty easy to forget about after you've gone through it!

This process also seems to be closely connected with the ability to "speak." Coming back from "oblivion," the iris declares, means finding a new "voice."

Here again, there's a sense that this iris has something to say to people—like poets!—who especially long to *communicate*. A deathly period of mute despair, this iris seems to say, doesn't mean losing one's voice forever, being trapped in eternal "oblivion." It means that one is heading toward a "door"—the threshold of a whole *new* way of speaking. That's pretty easy to forget when one is "buried." But this iris's own urgent voice is evidence of exactly the point it's making.

Take a look at the way this stanza supports those ideas organically with repetition and enjambments:

> I tell you I could speak again: whatever
> returns from oblivion returns
> to find a voice:

The enjambments in this long sentence create a line that returns to the word "returns"! That diacope suggests that this cycle of death and rebirth—and losing and finding one's voice—happens over and over again. Nothing goes to "oblivion" without "return[ing]" to the same place it started from—and bringing a new voice with it.

Rebirth, in this poem's eyes, is thus both a way of going right back to the beginning again, and a way of transforming. "Return[ing] from oblivion," this iris "finds a voice" with which it can speak the words of this very poem.

LINES 21-23

from the center ...
... on azure seawater.

In the final stanza of this poem, the iris describes its new "voice": a voice that is a flower and a fountain all at once.

Take a look at the rich metaphor at the heart of these closing lines:

> from the center of my life came
> a great fountain, deep blue
> shadows on azure seawater.

On the one hand, this "great fountain" is just a lovely image of an iris's petals: deep blue on deeper blue, shooting up like jets of water. But those petals are also the iris's voice. And now that the iris is reborn, that voice is flowing freely.

Not only does the iris's voice run like a fountain, it seems to feed a whole ocean of "azure seawater"—an image that broadens far out from the iris's earlier little world of "the pine" and "birds darting in low shrubs." Now that it's been through its ordeal in the "dark earth," this iris seems to have found a voice as infinite and deep as the sea. And it comes right from the "center of [the iris's] life," the deepest place in its heart.

This personified iris, then, is here to share a message of deep hope, consolation, and joy with the "you" it so urgently speaks to all through this poem. The fearful, claustrophobic darkness of death—or of despair that feels as deep as death—isn't an ending, but part of a journey to a new life, richer than one can even imagine before one has passed through the darkness. (And perhaps this is especially true for the poet who wants to give "voice" to the agony and beauty of this endless process.)

Here at the end of the poem, changing stanza length gives readers another reminder that this cycle of death and resurrection just keeps going. Up until now, the stanzas have been steadily expanding, from two lines to three to five. In the final lines, even as the iris comes into full bloom, the size of the stanza shrinks back to three lines again. But perhaps, this time around, the iris will find its time underground less "terrible"—knowing that there will be a "door" at the end.

SYMBOLS

THE IRIS

This poem's iris doesn't just talk about rebirth—it *symbolizes* rebirth. Because they're some of the first plants to pop up in spring after the long dark winter, flowers are an ancient symbol of new life and resurrection. This iris seems

to die, but, really, it's only waiting for its time to come to life again. That, this poem suggests, is how all life works: death isn't the end of life, it's just another *stage* of life.

The iris may also symbolize people's inner lives, which similarly move through cycles of light and dark, joy and sorrow. Even in a frightening or empty-feeling part of life, this iris's symbolism suggests, people can take courage in the thought that they'll one day "bloom" again.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-23

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

Personification allows this poem's iris to speak directly to the reader, and hints that the flower's rebirth might also be an image of something that happens to humans.

This iris talks to its readers in the first person, remembering its experience of death and resurrection with a lot of detail and feeling. "It is terrible," it recalls, to be a "consciousness / buried in the dark earth." Moments like this make this poem work differently than other poems that use flowers as a symbol of rebirth. It's one thing for a poet to *look* at a flower and think, "How hopeful, flowers always come back in the spring!" It's quite another to imagine going through the harrowing, frightening experience of death while still "conscious[]," on the *way* to the spring. By allowing the iris to speak of its ordeal, personification allows the poem to explore the real terror and pain of undergoing a rebirth.

The iris's personification also suggests that *people* go through similar cycles of flowering and death, over and over. That might be true in a metaphorical sense: people endure grim periods of despair, feeling like they're "buried in the dark earth," only to emerge into the sunlight again. But perhaps this iris even offers hope that this is literally true: that death isn't the end, just a stage in an ongoing process of life.

Readers might even interpret this personified iris as the voice of the poet herself! When the iris talks to the reader, it seems to know that what the reader "fear[s]" is being conscious but mute—being "a soul and unable / to speak." This fear of being unable to *speak* might suggest a particularly poetic difficulty: the feeling of going through a period so dark that it's impossible even to write. The personified iris might speak for a poet who has suffered, but emerged to find her "voice"—a voice she'll use to share what she's discovered about life and death.

Personification thus makes the iris's experience seem deeply human.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "At the end of my suffering / there was a door. / Hear me out: that which you call death / I remember."
- **Lines 8-10:** "It is terrible to survive / as consciousness / buried in the dark earth."
- **Lines 14-15:** "And what I took to be / birds darting in low shrubs."
- **Line 18:** "I tell you I could speak again:"
- **Lines 21-22:** "from the center of my life came / a great fountain,"

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery grounds its ideas in the senses, making the iris's experience of death and rebirth feel immediate and vivid.

The imagery here gives readers an iris's-eye view of nature. Planted in one spot, the iris has a pretty small world—but it experiences that world intensely. For instance, take a look at lines 5-7, where the iris describes its surroundings at the moment of its death:

> Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting.
> Then nothing. The weak sun
> flickered over the dry surface.

Here, the iris experiences its world not just through visual images, but through sound and touch. The word "shifting" feels almost onomatopoeic, its gentle /sh/ and /ft/ sounds echoing the sound of moving branches. And the "weak," "flicker[ing]" sun on the "dry surface" of the ground evokes not just the iris's tangible surroundings, but its feelings as it finds itself becoming "nothing": the whole world seems to have wilted and shriveled around it.

Images like this come back in reverse when the iris gets reborn: here, the "stiff earth" begins to "bend[] a little," and the iris notices birds in the "low shrubs." Now, there's a movement from the physical feeling of the dirt to the *sight* of birds in bushes—a change that suggests the iris is poking a shoot through the crust of the earth and into the outside world again.

But perhaps the most memorable image in this poem comes right at the end in lines 21-23, when the iris feels " a great fountain" shooting up from "the center of [its] life." This metaphor suggests both the iris's blossoming and the new "voice" that it's found to tell its tale. Take a look at the intensity of this vision:

> from the center of my life came
> a great fountain, deep blue
> shadows on azure seawater.

The image of "deep blue / shadows on azure seawater" at once evokes the deep, varied blues of an iris's petals and transports

the iris—and the reader—to a whole different world. In returning from the dead, the iris hasn't just found a bloom and a voice: it's transcended the limits of its little plot of ground, and now speaks of the waters of an endless "sea[]" it can never have seen.

The poem's imagery thus gives readers an intense sense of the iris's experience—both physical and spiritual.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-7:** "noises, branches of the pine shifting. / Then nothing. The weak sun / flickered over the dry surface."
- **Line 10:** "buried in the dark earth."
- **Lines 13-15:** "the stiff earth / bending a little. And what I took to be / birds darting in low shrubs."
- **Lines 21-23:** "from the center of my life came / a great fountain, deep blue / shadows on azure seawater."

METAPHOR

The powerful metaphors that appear at the beginning and end of this poem evoke the iris's transformative rebirth.

The first of these metaphors appears in the poem's first short stanza:

> At the end of my suffering
> there was a door.

This "door" is a metaphor for a hard-to-describe mystery: the passage from the world of death into the world of life. Putting a "door" at the end of "suffering," the iris makes its pain and fear seem like a tunnel or a hallway—a necessary passage between one place and the next, rather than, say, an enveloping cloud or devouring monster. This hopeful "door" sets up one of the poem's biggest ideas right from the start: the pain and fear of death, or of deathlike despair, is part of a process, not a dreadful doom.

That hopeful idea blossoms (literally) in the last stanza, when the iris bursts into bloom. Take a look at the metaphor the iris uses to describe its flowering:

> from the center of my life came
> a great fountain, deep blue
> shadows on azure seawater.

Imagining its petals as a "great fountain" throwing its shadow on "azure" waters, the iris evokes the sheer overflowing freedom and liberation of its new life after death. Not only has it become a fountain, it's a fountain that seems to feed the vast "sea[]" itself, an image of new expansiveness and depth that suggests the iris hasn't just come back to life: it has truly transformed into a richer and wiser creature through its pain. And this fountain-like blossoming is also a metaphor for the "voice" that those who "return[] from oblivion" can hope to gain: this iris, after all, can tell its readers what it discovered underground.

The poem's metaphors thus make the poem's central ideas about death and resurrection feel rich and tangible, allowing readers to imagine these mysteries through their senses.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "At the end of my suffering / there was a door."
- **Lines 21-23:** "from the center of my life came / a great fountain, deep blue / shadows on azure seawater."

ASYNDETON

The poem's asyndeton helps to evoke movement and change. For instance, take a look at what asyndeton does in lines 5-6:

> Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting.
> Then nothing. [...]

Joining these words together with continuous commas, the poem suggests the constant "shifting" of those branches in the wind—a ceaseless background noise that comes to a sudden halt when the "nothing[ness]" of death puts in its startling appearance.

Asyndeton appears again when new life arrives just as "abruptly" as death did:

> Then it was over: that which you fear, being
> a soul and unable
> to speak, ending abruptly, the stiff earth
> bending a little. [...]

Here, all those clauses joined together with commas create a feeling of sudden movement, like the iris's shoot climbing upward toward the light.

And that sense of growth and upward-shooting motion gets even stronger in the asyndeton of the last stanza:

> from the center of my life came
> a great fountain, deep blue
> shadows on azure seawater.

Here, the swift, continuous feeling of asyndeton moves just like the swift, continuous "fountain" of the iris's petals.

All across the poem, then, asyndeton evokes ongoing, ceaseless movement, mirroring the poem's central idea: death isn't an ending, just a part of a natural process of perpetual motion.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting."

- **Lines 11-14:** "that which you fear, being / a soul and unable / to speak, ending abruptly, the stiff earth / bending a little."
- **Lines 22-23:** "a great fountain, deep blue / shadows on azure seawater."

ENJAMBMENT

The many enjambments in "The Wild Iris" do two different things at once: they create a sense of seamless, ongoing movement and also create surprising pauses in the poem's rhythm. Both the motion and the surprises fit right into the poem's mood, evoking both the ceaseless circle of life and the shock and wonder of being part of that circle.

For instance, take a look at the powerful enjambments in the first two stanzas:

> At the end of my suffering
> there was a door.
> Hear me out: that which you call death
> I remember.

In both of these short two-line stanzas, enjambment breaks up a single sentence into a setup and payoff:

- In the first stanza, the poem sets readers up with a sense that something's on its way, after "the end" of its "suffering"—and then gives that something, a metaphorical "door," a line to itself. Putting that mysterious image alone gives readers a moment to sit with it, imagining what such a "door" might be like or mean.
- Then, in the second stanza, the poem plays the same trick again, only even more intensely: this time, it's the powerful, surprising idea of "remember[ing]" death that gets its own line.

Here, then, these enjambments let the poem present strange (and even impossible-sounding) ideas with an extra little burst of surprise.

But enjambments can also create a feeling of onward flow, as they do in the poem's final stanza:

> from the center of my life came
> a great fountain, deep blue
> shadows on azure seawater.

These lines run as continuously as the metaphorical "fountain" of the iris's petals.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "suffering / there"
- **Lines 3-4:** "death / I"
- **Lines 6-7:** "sun / flickered"
- **Lines 8-9:** "survive / as"
- **Lines 9-10:** "consciousness / buried"
- **Lines 11-12:** "being / a"
- **Lines 12-13:** "unable / to"
- **Lines 13-14:** "earth / bending"
- **Lines 14-15:** "be / birds"
- **Lines 16-17:** "remember / passage"
- **Lines 18-19:** "whatever / returns"
- **Lines 19-20:** "returns / to"
- **Lines 21-22:** "came / a"
- **Lines 22-23:** "blue / shadows"

CAESURA

The poem's caesurae create meaningful pauses, evoking both the iris's experience of death and rebirth and its intensity as it shares what it has learned.

For instance, take a look at the strong caesura in line 3:

> Hear me out: || that which you call death
> I remember.

That mid-line colon only emphasizes the iris's insistent "Hear me out": it's clearly *really important* to this iris that the reader appreciate the importance of what it's about to say.

And almost that exact same effect turns up again in line 18:

> I tell you I could speak again: || whatever
> returns from oblivion returns
> to find a voice:

Once more, the iris's voice sounds urgent as it addresses the reader directly: "I tell you I could speak again." Here, the pause of the caesura leaves the reader sitting with that idea for a moment before encountering the iris's deeper point: that resurrection also confers a new voice, a new power to speak.

Caesurae also evoke the iris's experiences as it undergoes death and rebirth:

> Overhead, || noises, || branches of the pine shifting.
> Then nothing. || The weak sun

Here, the poem's caesurae change from the steady, continuous movement of commas to the sudden abrupt halt of a mid-line period—mirroring the iris's passage from the ongoing motion of life to the stillness of death.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "out: that"
- **Line 5:** "Overhead, noises, branches"
- **Line 6:** "nothing. The"
- **Line 11:** "over: that"
- **Line 13:** "speak, ending abruptly, the"
- **Line 14:** "little. And"
- **Line 18:** "again: whatever"
- **Line 22:** "fountain, deep"

REPETITION

"The Wild Iris" uses a single, meaningful moment of repetition (more specifically diacope) to describe what the iris has learned from its rebirth.

This moment turns up in lines 18-20:

> I tell you I could speak again: whatever
> returns from oblivion returns
> to find a voice:

On one level, that repetition suggests that the iris is making a big claim, a claim that applies to every single thing that dies and comes to life again: *whatever* comes back from the dead comes back with a new power to speak and communicate.

Also note how these words actually appear on the page. Not only is there diacope on the word "returns," but the lines quoted above are also enjambed so that the word, well, *returns*, appearing at both the beginning and end of line 19. That repetition—in which the beginning and end of the line consists of exactly the same word—evokes the continuous, mysterious process of life this iris describes. Life doesn't just return: it "returns" and "returns," beginning and ending over and over.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-20:** "whatever / returns from oblivion returns / to find a voice:"

VOCABULARY

Terrible (Lines 8-9) - Here, "terrible" doesn't just mean "really bad," but terrifying and awe-inspiring.

Oblivion (Lines 18-19) - Nothingness, obliteration, or complete forgetfulness.

Azure (Lines 22-23) - A deep, rich, jewellike blue.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Wild Iris" is written in free verse, meaning it has no regular rhyme scheme or meter. Its ever-changing, varied lines are broken up into seven stanzas of all different lengths.

But there's a subtle pattern *within* those differing stanzas. The poem starts out with a couple of stanzas of only two lines, but then slowly swells: it gathers to stanzas of three lines, then five lines. Then, the very last stanza shrinks back to three lines again.

This gradual process of growth and diminishment mirrors exactly what the poem is about: the cycle of death and rebirth. Even as this iris remembers how "terrible" it was to be buried underground in lines 8-10 ("It is terrible [...] dark earth"), the poem's lines are starting to swell up, like a bud getting ready to send out a shoot. And in the final stanza, when the iris blooms in a "great fountain" of color, there's a sense of both triumph and peaking: the stanza length starts to shrink back again here, suggesting that the iris will again shrivel and die—and again be reborn.

This is one of the strengths of free verse! Rather than fitting her ideas into a particular form like the sonnet or the sestina, Glück here allows the shape of her poem to mirror its subject.

METER

"The Wild Iris" is written in free verse, so it doesn't use a regular meter. The lack of a steady rhythm helps to give this poem an organic, free-flowing quality—appropriate for a poem about the mysteries of life, death, and growth!

Free verse also allows the poem to play with rhythms and line lengths for effect. Take a look at the way that works in the second stanza, for instance:

> Hear me out: that which you call death
> I remember.

This is a pretty dramatic declaration, and the speaker uses line lengths to make it feel even more powerful. The first, long line feels like a building drumroll: the iris even starts out by saying "Hear me out," letting readers know that something amazing (and maybe hard to believe) is coming. And when the iris finally drops that amazing idea—that it "remember[s]" death—it does so in a line of just two words, so short and firm that it falls like the sudden crash of a cymbal.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Wild Iris" is written in free verse, which means it doesn't use a rhyme scheme. Instead, it creates its music through other patterns of sound.

For instance, take a look at the subtle, varied assonance, consonance, and sibilance in the poem's final stanza:

> from the center of my life came
> a great fountain, deep blue
> shadows on azure seawater.

There are just a few dashes of similar sound here: the long /i/ of "my life," the /ee/ of "came / a great." And the final line uses a spectrum of sibilance: the /sh/, /z/, and /s/ sounds here belong to the same family, but don't match perfectly. These little grace notes give this passage a delicate music, highlighting the rich imagery of the fountain-like blossom.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Wild Iris" is the titular iris itself: a plant that has seen some things. This iris has been through death and returned to tell the tale. It remembers the terror of being buried in the darkness—but also the "door" at the end of its ordeal. Emerging from the dark underground, it produces "a great fountain," a metaphor for both its beautiful blue blossom and the "voice" that speaks this very poem. This iris undergoes a real metamorphosis: surviving death makes it both wise and beautiful.

In some sense, this iris might be the poet herself: a person who has gone through dark times only to emerge with a new "voice," an ability to share what she's learned through her suffering.

SETTING

"The Wild Iris" is set outdoors, though whether in a wilderness or a garden is difficult to say. The iris itself doesn't seem to make distinctions like that! But it does take note of "the pine" over its head, the birds in the "low shrubs" around it, and the exact texture of the "stiff earth" it's buried in.

In other words, the setting of this poem is nature from a flower's-eye view. Planted in one spot, this iris sees the tree above it, not just as a pine, but as the pine, the singular tree it knows. And it experiences different qualities of "flickering" sunlight and "dry" or "stiff" earth like a connoisseur. The iris's world is both small and rich.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The American poet Louise Glück first published "The Wild Iris" in a 1992 collection named after this very poem. *The Wild Iris* explores some of Glück's favorite themes: divided into poems spoken by flowers, poems spoken by a gardener, and poems spoken by the voice of an omniscient God, the book looks at the relationship between nature, humanity, and the divine. Glück won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for this collection.

Like the poetry of Alice Oswald and the short stories of Angela Carter, Glück's poems often draw on mythology and folklore and their connections to the natural world. "The Wild Iris," for instance, might be inflected by the Persephone myth, in which Hades (the god of the underworld) kidnaps Persephone (daughter of the earth goddess Demeter), causing a deathly winter to fall upon the world as Demeter mourns for her lost daughter. When Persephone returns to the world's surface to visit her mother, spring comes. Glück's collection *Averno* (2006) centers on this myth, reflecting her enduring interest in the cycle of death and rebirth—and her sense of both the intense pain and the stunning beauty of that cycle.

Glück published her first book in 1968, and remains an important and influential poet to this day: she served as the U.S. Poet Laureate in 2003-04, and in 2020, she won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Wild Iris, the collection this poem comes from, draws on Glück's own experiences as a writer and a gardener. The book follows a year in the life of a garden based on Glück's own Vermont backyard (though it could also be an every-garden, an archetypal place where humanity lives in harmony with nature—or tries to). And like plenty of poets before her, Glück saw her garden as a mirror for a whole range of human experiences.

Glück's poetry often examines her inner life, and the iris's "terrible" period of "consciousness / buried in the dark earth" can be read as the words of an artist intimately familiar with despair. This iris, like a deeply depressed person, endures the terrifying feeling of being dead and alive at once—"conscious[]" and thinking, but able to see only "oblivion."

Glück's own struggles with her mental health might have informed both the claustrophobic intensity of this iris's death and its eventual triumphant blossoming. Glück suffered from a severe case of anorexia as a young woman, and underwent years of therapy. But like this iris, she emerged "to find a voice": her suffering, too, gave birth to a "great fountain" of poetry.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Louise Glück's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/louise-gluck)
- Glück's Influence — Read an appreciation of Glück's work in the New Yorker. (https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/louise-gluck-whisperer-of-the-seasons)
- Glück's Reception — Read about Glück's recent work and honors (including the 2020 Nobel Prize for Literature). (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/15/she-never-stops-making-demands-on-herself-how-us-poet-louise-gluck-won-the-nobel)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Glück herself reading this

poem aloud. (https://youtu.be/oRASORxulTs)

- An Interview with Glück — Listen to an interview with Glück (conducted by the Irish novelist Colm Tóibín). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3kQGM_KhHQ)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LOUISE GLÜCK POEMS

- Gretel in Darkness

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*The Wild Iris*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 11 May 2021. Web. 19 May 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*The Wild Iris*." LitCharts LLC, May 11, 2021. Retrieved May 19, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/louise-gluck/the-wild-iris.