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English 251

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**Poetry Explication Assignment**

**Biography**

Louise Glück was born in 1943. Though she was born in New York City, most of her childhood was spent on Long Island. In 1968, she published her first book of poetry – titled *Firstborn* – and became known for the way it talked of isolation and other typically depressing topics. Prior to the publication of *Firstborn*, she attended both Sarah Lawrence College and Columbia University. Since the first book, she has had much success. In 2003, Louise Glück was nominated as the 12th Poet Laureate – a prestigious award that poets can be awarded. When not writing, she can be found teaching at Yale University (“Louise Glück”).

**Form**

“Gretel in Darkness” is a four-stanza free-form poem. There is no defined rhyme scheme, which I feel ties it back to the unexpected ending of the original story. However, Glück uses line rhyme in line 24, which reads “that black forest and the fire in earnest”. One other example of rhyme in the sparsely-rhymed poem is near rhyme between “arms” and “harm” in lines seven and eleven.

**Poem Summary**

This poem tells the story of Gretel from the Grimm brothers’ fairytale *Hansel and Gretel*. The poem picks up after the two have returned home, and the witch is dead. In a very literal sense, Gretel is describing what has happened to her after killing the witch. Four short stanzas tell the tale of how Gretel cannot forget what she did – even though her brother and the rest of the family has forgotten.

Gretel is the speaker of this poem. She is speaking to her brother, trying to convey the feelings she is having after they have escaped the witch. Killing the witch has left her unable to return to the same, calm girl she was before they entered the cottage. She wants Hansel to understand that.

**Poetic Devices**

One of the most powerful poetic devices in this poem is the imagery. In particular, the imagery in the lines “we are still there and it is real, real / that black forest and the fire in earnest” conjure up the witch’s sugary cottage from the original fairytale (lines 23-4). Sugary, wonderful, and a good respite after their journey, how could Hansel and Gretel not accept the witch’s invitation? It also provides a contrast between the surroundings at the beginning of the story, and those at the end of the story.

Another powerful device in this poem is simply the connotation. Glück picks the word “bars” in line 11. The words “keeps”, “locks”, and “shuts” would all have worked in place of “bars”. To bar something is to close it, but it’s more so than that. Barring harm – as the poem continues in line 11 – is a strong image. The word “armed” in line 17 is another example of connation in play. Who would think of firs – trees – as having weapons? Yet that is exactly what Gretel sees: “…I see armed firs, / the spires of that gleaming kiln” (17-8).

**Personal Reflection**

I connected with this poem on a sort of level that writers connect on, I think. What happens *after* the happily ever after is never thought of when it comes to these original fairy tales – Grimm brothers or otherwise. Writing what happens after is something that has only recently become interesting. It has only recently become something people think of. What happens after? No one knows quite for sure.

Works Cited

Glück, Louise. “Gretel in Darkness”. *Portable Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing*, edited by

Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell, Cengage Learning, 2016, pp. 501.

“Louise Glück”. *Poetry Foundation*, 2014.

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