Celestial Musing

The world is shrinking, and people with widely divergent perspectives and backgrounds are increasingly brought together. As a result, the places where we live and work may be fraught with occasions for conflict, and often it seems that religious differences can be the most divisive. In the poem “Celestial Music” contemporary American poet Louise Glück recounts a disagreement between a religious believer and an unbeliever who, despite their differences of faith, remain close friends. Using vivid imagery as a tool for philosophical reflection, the poem tells a story that demonstrates the power of friendship to provide solace and empathy in the face of profound disagreement.

Although the speaker ends by evoking harmony between the two friends, the conflict between them is dramatically explored throughout the poem. The opening stanzas use an arresting image derived from mundane experience to suggest that faith in God endows the believer with superior strength of character. The speaker and her friend are out walking and find “a caterpillar dying in the dirt, greedy ants crawling over it” (line 6). The speaker is disturbed by the experience; she is “quick to shut [her] eyes” (line 8), but her friend is “able to watch, to let events play out” (line 9). The speaker implies that her own reaction to the caterpillar, in which she finds herself “timid” (line 8) and repulsed, is typical of her reaction to all suffering. Also typical is her friend’s response to her repulsion. Her friend assumes a maternal role, “urging me / to wake up an adult like herself, a courageous person” (lines 15-16). All of this follows an opening stanza in which the speaker sets forth her friend’s staunch belief in “god” (line 2) while implying that she, the speaker, has no such faith. Thus, the speaker seems to suggest that her friend is better able to face suffering and pain because she has faith in a transcendent God who is ultimately in control of everything, even suffering that seems senseless.
Thus far, the poem may seem to give believers the upper hand, but in the fourth stanza the tables are turned. In a winter scene from the speaker’s “dreams” (line 17), the two friends’ perspectives are again contrasted, but now, after looking down in the first half of the poem, the women turn their gaze upward. The speaker’s friend tells her that “when you love the world you hear celestial music” and enjoins her to “look up” (lines 20-21). The friend alludes here to the so-called “music of the spheres.” According to scholar C. S. Lewis, Christians of the Middle Ages believed that the concentric “spheres” containing the planets created music as they rotated within God’s cosmos (112). So the speaker looks up, but, unlike her friend, she hears “nothing” (line 21). She then uses a simile to compare the snow in the branches of the trees overhead to “brides leaping to a great height” (lines 22-23). The contrast between the women’s perspectives is striking: when the friend looks up into the winter sky, she recycles a hackneyed cliché from an outmoded cosmology, while the speaker looks up and produces a simile that is fresh, allusive, and memorable. No wonder, then, that the speaker ends this stanza by professing that she is “afraid” for her friend and “see[s] her caught in a net deliberately cast over the earth” (lines 24-25). Her friend’s resort to a cliché suggests a consciousness bound by the “net” of stale dogma and rigid convention, while the speaker’s vision of “leaping brides” reveals a liberating and powerful creativity.

By the end of the fourth stanza, the poem has established the speaker as a sensitive, thoughtful person who sees the weaknesses and strengths of both sides of the “God question.” She realizes that by accepting traditional beliefs, her friend gains moral courage; at the same time, she is anxious about the price her friend may have to pay for this. But the major achievement of the poem occurs in the last two stanzas. Here the speaker and her friend are united in “a stillness
that we both love” (line 36), and the essence of this stillness is summed up in an epigram that concludes the poem: “The love of form is the love of endings” (line 37).

The epigram may seem enigmatic, but it yields to interpretation. The friend’s love of form is expressed when she draws a circle around the dead caterpillar, creating a form that symbolizes her belief in a divine power who “contains” suffering. Similarly, the speaker’s poem comes “full circle” and returns to the caterpillar, the image from the second stanza, creating a cyclical pattern that represents the speaker’s effort to “contain” her experience within the poem itself, which, as a work of art, constitutes a kind of form. But why must a “love of form” entail a “love of endings”? When something takes its proper form, it is whole, and thus, in a line that applies as much to herself as to her friend, the speaker says, “She’s always trying to make something whole” (line 31). Making “something whole” is obviously appealing, but when a creature has lived its “whole” life, it faces death, the ultimate ending.

Not surprisingly, then, these last two stanzas are shadowed by references to death. In the final scene, the women “sit by the side of the road, watching the sun set” (line 26), and the speaker finds that “we’re at ease with death, with solitude” (line 29). Paradoxically, this “solitude” is a shared experience. As the sun sets over the darkening road and the caterpillar “doesn’t move” (line 30), the women tacitly understand that they, too, will one day have completed their lives. What brings them together is a shared sense that, however different they may be on religious questions, they are both committed to the human experience of giving wholeness to their lives in the face of that ultimate ending.

When first encountered, Glück’s poem may seem inchoate and formless, but this analysis reveals a balanced three-part structure: after an introductory stanza, the speaker devotes two stanzas to the scene with the caterpillar and then moves to the dream interlude; after the interlude,
we return to the caterpillar for the final two stanzas. Along the way, we are treated to a reflective discourse on the dialectic between two contrasting spiritual visions, that of the believer and the skeptic.

Works Cited


Note: This is an “A” paper because, while meeting the General Rubric’s requirements for both “Competent” and “Beyond Competent” papers, it also demonstrates the first three qualities listed under the rubric’s stipulations for “Exceptional” papers: “original and insightful analysis,” “clear and refined discussion of complex ideas,” and “sophisticated rhetorical stance.” Insight and refinement, for example, are evident in the way the paper contextualizes the poem within established theological and philosophical ideas (e.g. theodicy), and the rhetorical stance is distinguished by incisive diction (“enigmatic,” “paradoxically”) and use of varying sentence structure to control emphasis and achieve an engaging tone.