Celestial Musing

In today’s society, the places where we live and work have grown increasingly diverse. Cultural differences are often sources of conflict, and religious differences often cause the most stress. In the poem “Celestial Music,” Louise Gluck, an American poet, shows how a religious believer and an unbeliever can disagree on matters of faith and still remain friends (708). Using vivid imagery, the poem tells a story that demonstrates the power of friendship to bring people together even though their worldviews are very different.

The speaker of the poem in the opening stanzas uses an emotional image from everyday life to suggest that faith in God gives the believer special strength. 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 how she reacts to all suffering. Also typical is her friend’s response to her repulsion. Her friend is like a mother, “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 strong belief in “god” (line 2) while implying that she, the speaker, has no such faith. The speaker suggests that her friend is better able to face suffering and pain because she has faith in a powerful God who is in control of everything, even suffering that seems senseless.

So 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 are walking down a road. The speaker’s friend tells her to “look up” and explains that “when you love the world you hear celestial music” (lines 20-21). Here the friend alludes to the idea of the
“music of the spheres.” According to C. S. Lewis, Christians of the Middle Ages believed that concentric “spheres” containing the planets created music as they rotated within God’s cosmos (112). 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 thinks of an old-fashioned idea from the Middle Ages that nobody believes anymore, while the speaker looks up and produces a vivid, creative simile. This simile shows the speaker’s creativity and freedom, so it is understandable that she ends the stanza by saying that she is “afraid” for her friend and “see[s] her caught in a net deliberately cast over the earth” (lines 24-25). The “net” is the tangle of out-dated, confining beliefs that her friend is bound up in, as shown by her friend’s use of the old cliché “celestial music.”

By the end of the fourth stanza, we see that the speaker is sensitive and thoughtful. She sees the weaknesses and strengths of both sides of the “God question.” She realizes that her friend gains moral courage by accepting traditional beliefs, but at the same time the speaker is anxious about the price her friend may have to pay for this. But the most important part of the poem is 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).

This epigram may be difficult to understand at first, but it makes sense. 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. 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.

These last two stanzas also have 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). Yet this “solitude” is a shared experience. As the sun sets
and it grows darker, and the caterpillar “doesn’t move” (line 30), the women seem to 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.

On a first reading, Gluck’s poem may be hard to understand, but it actually has a
balanced three-part structure: after an introductory stanza, the speaker spends two stanzas on the
scene with the caterpillar and then moves to the dream interlude. After that interlude, we return
to the caterpillar for the final two stanzas. Along the way, we are treated to interesting reflections
on the relationship between two contrasting spiritual visions, that of the believer and the skeptic.

Works Cited
Gluck, Louise. “Celestial Music.” Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing, 4th

[Copy of poem found at: http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/celestial-music/]

Note: This is a [high] “B,” paper because it exceeds the General Rubric requirements for “Competent,” by demonstrating qualities listed under “Beyond Competent” papers: “Fluency and Coherence” and “Forceful and Stimulating Writing.” The essay’s “Fluency and Coherence,” for example, is seen in its use of varied sentence structure, a structure that smoothly integrates quotes from the text--quotes that also consistently support the premises of the essay’s thesis. While not required by the assignment, the essay draws upon outside sources to explicate what may be unfamiliar concepts: the “Celestial Music” referenced by the title and by the speaker of the poem, for example. Errors in grammar and mechanics are present, but negligible.