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English 20-1

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“Scouring the Orchards for a Way Out”: Power and Silence in Glück’s “The School Children”

Louise Glück's poem "The School Children" concerns the power relationships between three groups: mothers, who are voiceless; students, forced to attend school without being able to voice word of protest; and teachers, who not only receive the students from the mothers but force the students to learn in silence. This silence in fact reflects the power of the teachers over the mothers. In this poem, the mothers and children have no voice and are thus powerless, while the teachers are the only actors who speak, and therefore assert their power over their charges and their guardians.

It is clear that the mothers have no voice as there is no reference to any speech acts made by them in the poem. In the first stanza, when their children go to school, the mothers say nothing (1). This might not be unusual, but as we will see later, the mothers send their children to school despite misgivings about the entire scenario. Later in that stanza, the mothers "labour... / to gather the late apples" (2-3). Finally, in the fourth stanza, "the mothers scour the orchards for a way out, / drawing to themselves the gray limbs of the fruit trees / bearing so little ammunition" (14-16). They gather apples and look for a way out without so much as a peep.

But why do they look for a way out? Does their silence indicate unhappiness? When they draw the limbs of the trees to themselves (15), we can't help but think that they're imagining their absent children who have been given to the school in the first stanza. If

their children were with them, it stands to reason, they would be embracing them rather than trees. It's clear, then, that they're deeply unhappy, and that they're looking for a way out, but being powerless they are unable to do so.

The teachers, on the other hand, quite obviously have the power in this poem. They "wait" (6) for the students, in contrast to the mothers who "labor" (2) and "scour the orchards for a way out" (14). It seems as if the teachers' lives are quite a bit easier than the mothers'. Moreover, they receive "offerings" (7). In the previous stanza, the mothers are picking apples, so it's entirely possible that the offerings are in fact apples, a traditional gift for teachers. On the other hand, when thinking about the word "offering" and with children associated with this offering, it's possible that this is an allusion to child sacrifice, the story of Abraham and Isaac, as an example. The mothers are unhappy, looking "for a way out", because their children are no longer theirs, just as Abraham was unhappy when God asked him to sacrifice his child to the Lord.

Moreover, the teachers require that the students listen to them in silence (12). Now, this line is somewhat ambiguous: the wording of the line could indicate that the teachers themselves are instructing without speaking, but this seems very odd, even within the context of the poem. It makes more sense to interpret this line as the silence of students rather than the silence of both students and teachers. With this in mind, when we think of a classroom where the students are completely silent, we get a picture of fear, of intimidation. The teachers are able to speak because they have power, whereas the students are unable to do so because they are relatively powerless.

Glück's "The School Children," then, is an illustration of the power conflict between teachers and mothers, with students caught in the middle. Voiceless, the mothers are

unable to convey their concerns as their children go off and are taught by the intimidating teachers, and likewise the children have no voice as they "go forward" (1) to school to be taught in silence. Students often feel that they have no voice in school, and perhaps this is what Glück is trying to convey. We could see this poem, then, as a call to action: students should stand up for their rights to be able to choose the path of their own education, and parents should be assisting them by, perhaps, looking for a way out. An overly-idealistic view of the future of education, perhaps, but one that's eminently preferable to the silence and intimidation within contemporary schools as depicted in the poem.

[Alternate introduction]

Louise Glück's [depressing] poem "The School Children" looks at a group of students who leave their mothers and go to school, a picture that is reenacted every fall in schools around the globe. This is typically portrayed as a time of jubilation for parents: a recent television commercial depicts a smiling and laughing father and mother as they gather school supplies for their children, who follow them dourly behind. The attitude of the children in the poem certainly reflects the attitude of these children in the advertisement, but the parents' glee is nowhere to be found in "The School Children." Indeed, the parents, specifically the mothers, are as silent as their children. In the poem, the only speakers are the teachers; this indicates their power over the mothers and the children, who have no voice.

[Alternate conclusion]

Perhaps Glück is concerned about the state of education in the United States, a system in which children have very little say in their education. Likewise, such a system discourages parental involvement. Teachers, then, do what they want in their classrooms, and such a state is seemingly alarming to Glück. What's the way out? The mothers in this poem haven't found one yet, and given what's happening in recent years in education, it seems as if the United States hasn't yet found a way out, either.