

This paper examines the role of nostalgia as it plays out in Louise Glück's 1997 collection, *Meadowlands*. From James Joyce's *Ulysses* to Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, writers have used the *Odyssey* as a framework to explore modern life, and when the American poet Louise Glück looks at a marriage unraveling, she also turns to the *Odyssey*. Some of the poems in *Meadowlands* directly refer to their ancient model as Glück gives voice to Circe's regrets and anger and to Penelope's grief and frustration. Other poems allude less transparently to their Homeric antecedents, but also go back to their ancient source as Glück explores the link between the ideas of homecoming, grief and various shades of nostalgia. Classicists have examined *Meadowlands* in generic terms as a lyric version of the *Odyssey* that highlights elements that are obscured in the epic (Murnaghan and Roberts 2002). My approach differs in focusing on the role of one Homeric motif and tracing its significance for Glück's poem. As she transforms the Homeric *nostos* into a narrative of disintegration and loss, Glück, I argue, returns to an epic understanding of homecoming that is fraught with ambiguities; *nostos* implies memory, and memory entails loss. Focusing on two poems ("Meadowlands 3" and "Nostos"), I show that the notion of nostalgia is key to Glück's narrative and to her understanding of the *Odyssey*.

Although the word nostalgia does not exist in ancient Greek, it is a concern central to the *Odyssey*, in which the hero first appears "with the tears he wept for his foiled journey home [*nostos*] / . . . all his days he'd sit on the rocks and beaches / Wrenching his heart with sobs and groans and anguish [*algos*]" (*Odyssey* 5.169-174 Fagles). Like the *Odyssey*, Glück's *Meadowlands* explores the juncture where the thought of homecoming ineluctably conjures the pain of separation and loss. Setting her poem in a landscape that evokes the impossibility of disentangling opposites, Glück's *Meadowlands* suggests at once the bucolic meadows of the ancient poets (including the one where Persephone plucks the narcissus) and the devastated industrial landscape of northern New Jersey. This is the landscape where the poem's *nostos* takes place, but this homecoming ends in denial and despair as the narrator realizes that experience unavoidably yields to time: "We look at the world once, in childhood. / The rest is memory" ("Nostos").

Another aspect of the Homeric poem that has kept the tradition under its spell is the self-consciousness of a narrative that makes its protagonist, Odysseus, a master story-teller as well as a hero. This self-awareness allows the poet to complicate the notion of heroism and to play on the ironies between different perspectives (e.g. Segal 1994). Glück absorbs and transforms this aspect of Homeric narrative. Her poems focus on a relationship, but also very much on the ways in which the people involved understand and tell their own stories, as they give voice to their sorrows alone and in dialogues ("Meadowlands 3").

Yet all is not bleak in Glück's *Meadowlands*. As in the *Odyssey*, it is poetry itself that ultimately gives meaning to suffering. Glück's vision of the *Odyssey* centers on its sadness, but it is a sadness that carries within itself the prospect of redemption. By centering her narrative on nostalgia rather than reunion and on dissolution rather than resolution, Glück transforms her ancient source and offers a resoundingly modern perspective. Yet Glück also goes back to a Homeric understanding of the *Odyssey*, and echoes Virginia Woolf's admiration for the poem's characters: "There is a sadness at the back of life which they do not attempt to mitigate. Entirely aware of their own standing in the shadow, and yet alive to every tremor and gleam of existence, there they endure" ("On Not Knowing Greek"). It is this "sadness at the back of life" that Glück's *Meadowlands* explores and ultimately celebrates.