

The Seven Ages

by Louise Glück

Ecco Press / HarperCollins

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Prepared by Seth Landman
Master's Candidate; MFA program
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

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SUMMARY:

In her ninth book of poems, *The Seven Ages*, Louise Glück crafts a moving sequence of lyric poems that describe a world familiar to us all. While some are set in dreamscapes and others in reality, they all deal with basic human concerns: love, loneliness, longing, difficulties in communication. Time is central to these issues, and a preoccupation throughout. In “The Sensual World,” the speaker confesses, “I was not prepared: sunset, end of summer. Demonstrations/ of time as a continuum, as something coming to an end, / not a suspension; the senses wouldn’t protect me.” Here, time is relentless, always bringing endings we are not ready to accept. In “Youth,” time is “The pages of novels turning...unending and without form.”

A sense of longing is created through this obsession with time. As Glück explores the many narratives of the book—the child’s perception of summer, the lover’s desire for control, the problems that come with the space between generations— time is always the key mover, the constant arrow pointing in one direction, unable to be stopped. Her characters long for the ability to forget about time: “Shortness of the days; darkness, coldness of winter. / It is in our blood and bones; it is in our history. / It takes genius to forget these things.” Instead, they are constantly remembering the past and relating it to the present.

The speakers of these poems are interpreters of the uncontrolled world. The questions they ask are essential: “Why should we look either forward or backward?” “What do you know of this world?” The characters are unafraid to give themselves up as long as it is through words. They reveal. In “From a Journal,” Glück writes of some old love letters, “And I feel, sometimes, part of something/ very great, wholly profound and sweeping.” This is no understatement. The “something” is what these characters long for; as time passes, to be part of something rather than nothing.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In the poem “Memoir” on page 62, Glück writes, “A few words were all I needed:/ nourish, sustain, attack.” What do these words mean to you in the context of the poem? What do they mean in the context of your own life?
2. Images of gardens and oceans appear throughout this book. How do these images function in the poems?
3. In “Ancient Text,” the speaker imagines her prayers as ancient texts, translated and edited, taken in and studied. In what ways are the poems in *The Seven Ages* prayers?
4. How are the adult characters in *The Seven Ages* victims of betrayal? How are the children?

ACTIVITIES:

1. Try to remember an event from your early childhood, maybe a time when you were sick and taken care of, a time when you felt a deep connection with someone your age, a time when you felt estranged from your parents. Try to write a short poem that incorporates how you think you may have felt at the time with your current feelings about the memory.
2. Try writing a poem about writing a love letter. Imagine the recipient of the letter as a conglomeration of many people you have loved or could love.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Louise Glück was the Poet Laureate of the United States from August, 2003 until October, 2004.. She serves as judge for the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize, the oldest annual literary award in the United States. She is the first female judge of the prize. Her awards and honors include The National Book Critics Circle Award, The Bollingen Prize, the William Carlos Williams Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. She lives in Cambridge, MA and has taught at Williams College since 1983. She teaches courses in contemporary poetry and poetry writing as the Margaret Bundy Scott Senior Lecturer in English. *The Seven Ages* was published by Ecco Press and is her ninth book of poems.

HELPFUL LINKS:

For more information about Louise Glück, the following websites are helpful:

<http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?45442B7C000C0E06> - The Academy of American Poets website. Contains some biographical information as well as three poems, one of which is an audio recording.

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/laureate.html#gluck> - The Poetry and Literature Center of the Library of Congress. Contains information about Glück's term as U.S. Poet Laureate.



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