





İstanbul Üniversitesi Sosyoloji Dergisi

Research Article

Open Access

Louise Glück's "A Myth of Innocence" and the Myth of Persephone: A Structuralist Analysis through Lévi-Strauss



Enes Taşdelen¹  

¹ Karabük University, Foreign Languages School Karabük, Türkiye

Abstract

This study aims to present a structuralist analysis of the Persephone myth in Louise Glück's poem "A Myth of Innocence." The analysis applies Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist theory of myth, which explains myths as systems of meaning that operate through binary oppositions and structural mediation. Using key tools from the structuralist methodology, including the identification of binary oppositions, the use of mythemes, and the role of mediating elements, the study explores how Glück reconfigures the traditional myth to dramatise personal and collective transformation. The poem reframes Persephone's descent into the underworld not simply as an act of abduction but as a symbolic negotiation between innocence and experience, passivity and agency, and surface and depth. Innocence is portrayed not as a static state but as a temporary phase, while knowledge and transformation emerge through internal and structural conflict. Formally, the poem mirrors this dynamic by simulating the logic of myth along a syntagmatic axis, particularly through the sequencing of thematic and narrative contrasts. Glück's manipulation of poetic structure, including enjambment, repetition, and rhyme variation, supports the underlying mythic logic. This study finds that Glück's poem does not merely retell a classical narrative but exposes how myth continues to function as a system of signification in modern literary contexts. This analysis contributes to myth criticism and contemporary poetry studies by demonstrating the applicability of structuralist theory to modern poetic texts and by offering insight into how contemporary literature engages with, transforms, and simulates classical mythic structures for new expressive purposes.

Keywords

Louise Glück · A myth of innocence · Persephone myth · Claude Lévi-Strauss · Structuralism · Transformation · Binary oppositions · Myth analysis



“ Citation: Taşdelen, E. (2025). Louise Glück's "a myth of innocence" and the myth of persephone: a structuralist analysis through Lévi-Strauss.. *İstanbul Üniversitesi Sosyoloji Dergisi*, 45(1), 240-261. <https://doi.org/10.26650/SJ.2025.45.1.0763>

© This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. 

© 2025. Taşdelen, E.

✉ Corresponding author: Enes Taşdelen enestasdelen@karabuk.edu.tr



Louise Glück's "A Myth of Innocence" and the Myth of Persephone: A Structuralist Analysis through Lévi-Strauss

Louise Glück (1943 - 2023) is an American poet renowned for her introspective style and profound engagement with themes of loss, memory, and transformation. She was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2020 for her ability to render universal human experiences with an "unmistakable poetic voice". "She has received virtually every national award for American poetry, including the Pulitzer Prize for *The Wild Iris* (1992), the National Book Critics Circle Award for *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985), and most recently, the Bollingen Prize for *The Seven Ages*" (Morris, 2006, p. 2).

Averno (2007) is one of her most praised works. It is a poetry collection re-imagining the myth of Persephone, the Greek goddess abducted by Hades and sentenced to divide her existence between the underworld and the earth. The work was named after Lake Avernus, which is a volcanic crater lake in southern Italy. It was historically regarded as one of the entrances to the underworld, and *Averno* is both a literal and figurative threshold, representing the liminal zones of transition, loss, and renewal that shape the human experience.

Glück approaches the Persephone myth in an unusual way. It is neither a straightforward retelling nor a mere appropriation of classical storytelling. Instead, she investigates on a more personal and philosophical ground, focusing more on topics like identity, mortality, and the transition from innocence to experience; the tension between longing and estrangement, autonomy and fate, and the cyclical nature of life and death. The myth is depicted beyond its ancient, original context. Glück turns it into an instrument to examine the intricacies of human existence.

This article analyzes Glück's "A Myth of Innocence"¹ through Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist theory of myth, examining how she reconfigures the mythic structure of Persephone through binary oppositions. While previous studies have focused on Glück's

¹The poem "A Myth of Innocence" can be found at the end of the article.



use of myth and female subjectivity, few apply Lévi-Strauss's structuralist model to her work, leaving a gap that this study aims to fill.

The collection establishes a dialogue between ancient myths and contemporary realities, blurring the distinction between myth and personal perception. For instance, in "Persephone the Wanderer", Glück reconfigures Persephone's abduction and cyclical return as a meditation on the loss of childhood and the painful, inevitable process of self-discovery. She dismantles the myth's traditional archetypes, presenting Persephone not merely as a passive victim but as a figure of resilience and transformation. This is evident in her lines:

did she cooperate in her rape,
or was she drugged, violated against her will,
as happens so often now to modern girls (Glück, 2007).

Here, Glück reinterpreted Persephone's abduction as a modern problem, challenging the dynamics of agency and victimhood and stressing the myth's ongoing significance in addressing contemporary issues. Using Lévi-Strauss's concepts of binary opposition, mediation, and transformation, this analysis reveals how Glück's poem subverts the structural logic of classical myth. Where traditional versions frame Persephone's story through rigid binaries (e.g., innocence/knowledge, life/death), Glück introduces ambiguity, mediating these oppositions to reflect the contemporary complexities of trauma and agency. Through the reinterpretation of the Persephone myth, Glück not only revitalises an ancient myth but also emphasises its relevance to modern discussions of identity, agency and the inescapable passing of time.

The concept of the literary myth has evolved significantly, particularly under the influence of modern anthropological and psychological insights. As noted by Melito (1964), "Not long ago, the word [myth] would have been the equivalent of 'fable'; that is, a fiction, untrue scientifically or historically, the most obvious examples to suggest themselves being the classical stories of the Greek and Roman deities" (p. 165). However, the term has

since acquired "a subtler and more complex meaning" (Melito, 1964, p. 165), reflecting its transformation from a label of falsehood to one of symbolic and cultural significance.

Early myths, though not literary in origin, served as "primitive attempts at patterned explanations of the universe, of the deity, or of nature," and while "the details of these patterns were not 'factual,' each framework, nevertheless, did embody a core of truth" (Melito, 1964, p. 165). Contemporary writers draw upon this symbolic potency, recognising myth's enduring relevance: "Creative writers have recognised this value and have on occasion adopted myth as a useful tool of their craft" (Melito, 1964, p. 165).

In literary contexts, myth functions not as a historical record but as a narrative strategy: "myth is for the writer a means of creating a framework within which he can order human experience into a meaningful pattern" (Melito, 1964, p. 165). Thus, literary myth transcends mere storytelling; it becomes a structural and thematic device that enables the articulation of deeper existential and cultural truths. Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach underscores this function, treating myth as a system of relationships (e.g., oppositions, transformations) that encode universal human concerns. By applying this model to Glück's work, we may uncover how her poetic reinvention of Persephone preserves the myth's systemic integrity, such as its cyclical rhythms and liminal spaces, while destabilising its traditional binaries to interrogate modern subjectivity.

The Dual Nature of Persephone: Transformation, Repetition, and Structural Oppositions in Myth

Persephone was one of Zeus and Demeter's daughters. She was often referred to as Kore ("Maiden"). The Persephone myth tells us about how her uncle Hades abducted her while she was picking up flowers. Aphrodite and Eros were later credited with making Hades fall in love with Persephone, according to expanded mythological accounts (Kapach, 2023). Her mother Demeter gets devastated and wanders around the world looking for her daughter. In the end, she finds Persephone in the Underworld and asks Hades to return her daughter. However, Hades deceives Persephone by making her eat some pomegranate,



and as a result, she unwittingly accepts staying in the Underworld for one-third of the year as Hades's wife. For the rest of the year, she is allowed to stay with her mother on Olympus. She was a powerful figure as being the wife of Hades; she was the queen of the Underworld.

Artistically, Persephone was depicted as a solemn young woman, robed modestly and crowned with either a diadem or a cylindrical polos. Her iconography commonly featured torches, grain stalks, and sceptres, while pomegranates and poppies appeared less frequently. Some cults also associated her with more niche symbols, such as the rooster.

In most accounts, Persephone was the offspring of Zeus, the ruler of the Olympians, and his sister Demeter, the harvest goddess. However, alternative myths present conflicting versions of her origins. Some traditions name Styx, the Underworld's sacred river embodied as a nymph, as her mother, making Persephone a daughter of Zeus and the personification of this Oceanid. The Orphic tradition offers another variation, presenting Persephone as the child of Zeus and the Titaness Rhea. Meanwhile, in Arcadian lore, she was worshipped as Despoina ("the Mistress"), said to be born from the union of Demeter and Poseidon (Kapach, 2023).

The existence of multiple, sometimes contradictory versions of Persephone's myth aligns with Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach, which holds that myths continuously transform while preserving underlying structures. As Demir (2013, p.26) states, "existing myths must be analysed in all their accessible versions, without assigning historical priority or authenticity to any particular one"² (Demir, 2013, p. 26). What matters is not the singularity of any one account, but rather the mechanisms by which myths recombine and rearticulate their fundamental structures across different retellings.

Despite her fearsome reputation, Persephone occasionally showed mercy by granting favours. She permitted the blind prophet Tiresias to retain his wisdom and the gift of prophecy even in the afterlife. The queen of the Underworld also played a key role in several heroic journeys to the realm of the dead. In one famous myth, she granted Orpheus

²My own translation



permission to retrieve his beloved Eurydice on the condition that he must not glance back at her during their ascent, a rule he ultimately broke. Another myth tells how Theseus joined Pirithous in his ill-fated attempt to kidnap Persephone, resulting in their imprisonment in Hades. Some accounts claim she later authorised Heracles to free Theseus during his mission to capture Cerberus.

Such recurring elements as the journeys to the Underworld, the tests, and the figures seeking divine favour reflect a broader mythic logic that, as Lévi-Strauss argues, operates through opposition, inversion and substitution. "For Lévi-Strauss, myths are transformation systems that can be analysed according to relations of contrast, inversion, symmetry, substitution, and displacement" (Demir, 2013, p. 26). These patterns are not arbitrary but function as a mode of thought designed to reconcile contradictions like the ones between life and death, power and submission, or innocence and experience, even when these patterns are invoked not in traditional myths but in their literary reworkings. In Glück's poem, such oppositional structures may not reflect lived mythological systems but instead simulate their logic within a fictional, poetic framework.

Additionally, Lévi-Strauss emphasises the role of repetition in myth, noting that "among all these variations, constant recurrences or repetitions stand out; within both the same and different stories, we encounter the same elements again and again" (Demir, 2013, pp. 26-27). This recurrence is not incidental but fundamental to the structure of myth, and in Glück's literary engagement with the myth of Persephone, such repetition functions as a symbolic echo of intergenerational communication, refracted through poetic fiction. In the case of Persephone, the cycle of descent and return—her annual movement between the Underworld and the world above—becomes a structuring principle, reinforcing the tension between death and rebirth.

Persephone's compassion also surfaced in the story of Alcestis. When the devoted wife sacrificed herself for her husband Admetus, some versions say that Persephone, touched by this selfless act, restored Alcestis to life, though most traditions credit Heracles with this miracle instead (Kapach, 2023). Some accounts suggest that Persephone competed

with Aphrodite for affecting Adonis. Zeus later decided that Adonis would divide his time between the two goddesses, spending part of the year with each. In a separate myth, Hades became involved with a nymph named Minthe. After discovering the affair, Persephone, in a fit of jealousy, crushed Minthe and transformed her into the mint plant (Kapach, 2023).

Through these variations, Persephone's myth continues to be retold in different contexts, demonstrating what Lévi-Strauss identifies as the enduring core of mythic thought: "For Lévi-Strauss, what is truly important and meaningful is to reveal what remains unchanged and constant across all these versions and transformations" (Demir, 2013, p. 27). Regardless of the specific details, the underlying oppositions—death and life, captivity and agency, seasonal decline and renewal—remain consistent across the many retellings of Persephone's myth.

Transforming Innocence: Persephone's Journey through Binary Oppositions in Glück's Poem

The oscillation between passivity and agency forms the structural core of Persephone's transformation in Glück's poem. In "A Myth of Innocence", Louise Glück explores the myth of Persephone through a transformative lens, presenting a nuanced portrayal of her abduction by Hades. Analysed through Lévi-Strauss's concept of mythemes (the irreducible units of myth) (1955, p. 211), the poem reveals how binary oppositions (e.g., innocence/experience, life/death) are mediated. As Lévi-Strauss notes, "Mythical thought always works from the awareness of oppositions towards their progressive mediation" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, p. 440).

Glück's poem simulates mythic mediation through the syntagmatic axis, which, as Rumsey (1986) explains, is "the axis, not of selection (which is the paradigmatic) but of combination of 'appropriate elements', each of which has been selected to the exclusion of others with which it forms a paradigmatic set" (p. 743). In the poem, this axis manifests in the linear progression of Persephone's transformation, structured as a sequence of

internalised stages. The line "A woman will return, looking for the girl she was" exemplifies this syntagmatic unfolding. It mediates the opposition between the "girl" (innocence) and the "woman" (experience), echoing the mythic tension between Persephone's roles on earth and in the underworld. By embedding this binary within the narrative structure, Glück's poem reconstructs mythic meaning through poetic combination rather than fixed symbolic representation.

Glück's reworking of the myth employs sensory cues to articulate structural permutations. Lévi-Strauss argues that myths are "works of art which arouse in those who hear them..." (1962, p. 202), a logic echoed in Glück's sensory imagery (e.g., "the pool," "the pomegranate"). These elements mark Persephone's transition from a mytheme of naivety ("simple girl") to one of compounded identity ("woman"). The line "Then death appears, like the answer to a prayer" resolves the opposition life/death through poetic inversion, a technique Lévi-Strauss identifies in mythic transformations (2013b, pp. 79-80). In Glück's poem, these sensory cues mark Persephone's transition from a naive girl to a woman who must reconcile her innocence with the inevitable encounter with death.

The notion of "permutation" in Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myths (1963, p. 223), particularly in how myths are adapted and reinterpreted across cultures and generations, can be seen in the way Glück reimagines Persephone's myth. As Tunçbilek states, "Levi-Strauss substituted the term of 'ethnology' in France with 'anthropology' he brought from the United States. Through his adaptation of the phonological method to the analysis of kinship systems and myths, he effectively instilled a 'sense of doing science'" (Tunçbilek, 2024, p. 242). Similarly, Glück reconfigures Persephone's myth, focusing less on the traditional narrative of abduction and more on the internal transformation the myth symbolises. The line "Then death appears, like the answer to a prayer" directly echoes the myth's symbolic resolution of oppositions: life and death, innocence and experience.

In "A Myth of Innocence", Persephone's transformation is framed not just as an external event but as an internal, emotional shift. She moves from a "simple girl" to a woman who must grapple with the complexities of existence. This aligns with Lévi-Strauss's



observation that "the really important point is that in all American mythology, and I could say in mythology the world over, we have deities or supernaturals, who play the roles of intermediaries between the powers above and humanity below" (Lévi-Strauss, 2005, p. 14). Persephone's role as the intermediary between the realms of the living and the dead reflects the mythic structures Lévi-Strauss describes, in which deities embody the reconciliation of oppositions.

Glück's destabilisation of binary oppositions interrogates mythic agency through structural permutation. In "A Myth of Innocence", the speaker's shifting assertions: "I was abducted," "I was not abducted," "I offered myself" exemplify Lévi-Strauss's concept of "mythemes" in flux, where fixed categories (e.g., knowledge/ignorance, agency/passivity) dissolve into fluid negotiations. This oscillation mirrors the poem's "syntagmatic" structure, where contradictory statements reveal an underlying mythic pattern: Persephone's duality as both victim and agent. As Lévi-Strauss argues, synchronic analysis must uncover "the structure which underlies the many manifestations" (1963, pp. 21–22). Here, the poem's fragmentation, such as the conflation of "death/husband" and "god/stranger", transforms traditional "oppositions" into "mediations", reflecting what Demir (2013, p. 26) identifies as myth's "relations of contrast, inversion, and substitution."

The poem's layered structure reflects Lévi-Strauss's matrix of meanings. Persephone's myth, as Glück interprets it, operates as a mythic matrix where oppositions (e.g., death/husband, god/stranger) are in continuous negotiation. Lévi-Strauss emphasises that "all systems have a 'complex' aspect" (1965, p. 18), evident in Glück's fragmentation of Persephone's voice. The poem's unresolved tensions such as "the girl who disappears" versus "the woman who returns" mirror the myth's inherent "structural complexity", where "meaning is arranged in lines or columns" (1969, pp. 340–341).

In conclusion, by applying Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology to Glück's "A Myth of Innocence", one can see how the poet transforms the myth of Persephone through a process of permutation, wherein binary oppositions and sensory imagery create a mythic structure that resonates across time and space. This structuralist lens not only illuminates

the intricacies of Persephone's journey but also highlights how ancient myths, like that of Persephone, can be reinterpreted to explore timeless human experiences such as transformation, loss, and the reconciliation of opposites.

The Dialogue among Myths

The term "mythic dialogue" in this study refers to the structural interplay between traditional mythemes and their literary transformation. Louise Glück's "A Myth of Innocence" engages with the Persephone myth not by reiterating it as a fixed narrative but by structurally reconfiguring its core oppositions. This aligns with Lévi-Strauss's view that myth's significance lies in "the arrangement of mythemes themselves; in short, the structure of the myth" (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 83). Glück's poem simulates this structural logic through a literary dialogue with inherited symbols, transforming abduction, loss, and transformation into subjective, fluid experiences.

The poem's opening presents Persephone in a state of self-examination, yet bound by her mythic role: "She sees / the same person, the horrible mantle / of daughterliness still clinging to her." Here, Glück exposes the rigidity of the mytheme "daughter/victim," which fractures when Persephone confronts death: "Then death appears, like the answer to a prayer." This reconfiguration is not a simple retelling but a structural dialogue with inherited symbols: "I offered myself, I wanted to escape my body" reworks the mytheme of sacrifice, inverting its traditional passivity into agency. As Schwimmer notes, mythemes can be "negated, inverted, or recoded" (2009, p. 167), a process Glück mirrors in her literary simulation.

The poem's non-linear structure mirrors myth's syntagmatic flexibility, where, as Lévi-Strauss argues, myth operates as a "single signifier" rather than a linear story (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 83). Persephone's fragmented voice ("A woman will return, / looking for the girl she was") enacts mythic permutation, reordering meaning through repetition and inversion.

Glück's poem exemplifies mythic dialogue through mechanisms like repetition, inversion, and reordering. In "A Myth of Innocence," this dialogue does not replicate fixed



mythological narratives but instead highlights mythos as an adaptive creative strategy: while core mythemes persist, their relational logic evolves. Here, the poem's engagement with myth is neither purely archival (preserving archetypes) nor purely deconstructive (erasing tradition). Rather, it stages a dynamic negotiation, where inherited narrative units are destabilised and reconfigured to serve new aesthetic ends. This process underscores the distinction between myth as a cultural inheritance and myth as a generative, literary practice—the latter privileging transformation over transmission.

The Transformation of Binary Oppositions in "A Myth of Innocence"

Louise Glück's poem engages with mythic structures by transforming binary oppositions. In particular, it reflects the interplay between "innocence/experience," "nature/culture," and "mother/daughter," which can be examined through Lévi-Strauss's notion of myth as a structured system of opposites.

Louise Glück's poem engages with mythic structures by not merely replicating but also subverting binary oppositions. Through a Lévi-Straussian lens, the poem mediates contradictions inherent in the Persephone myth, transforming static dichotomies (e.g., innocence/experience, nature/culture, mother/daughter) into dynamic, fluid relations.

Lévi-Strauss's concept of "bricolage" - myth's recombination of existing cultural materials (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p. 16), helps illuminate Glück's method. The poem dismantles oppositions through triadic mediation, as seen in Persephone's liminal reflections, which resist fixed categorisation.

From Taxonomy to Transformation: Reconfiguring Innocence and Experience

Lévi-Strauss states that mythic thought "operates with the aid of images borrowed from the sensible world. Instead of establishing relationships between ideas, it contrasts earth and sky, land and water, light and darkness, man and woman, the raw and the cooked, the fresh and the decayed" (Lévi-Strauss, 2013b, pp.79-80). Similarly, "A Myth of Innocence"



constructs meaning through the interplay of these contrasts. While the poem initially establishes these binaries, it ultimately destabilises them. For example, Persephone's reflection in the pool mediates between innocence (the girl) and experience (the woman): "the girl who disappears from the pool / [...] A woman will return, looking for the girl she was." This imagery functions as a mytheme, bridging raw/cooked (nature/culture) and passive/active. Unlike the classical versions, Glück's Persephone chooses ambiguity: "I offered myself, I wanted / to escape my body." Here, the poem inverts the traditional abduction narrative, transforming a binary of victimhood/agency into a spectrum.

Nature/Culture: Mediation Through Poetic Form

The opposition between nature and culture is further nuanced by Persephone's conflicting accounts of her own experience. She alternates between different subject positions: "I was abducted," "I was not abducted," "I offered myself," and "I wanted / to escape my body." These shifts are not merely thematic but also structural. The enjambment in "I wanted / to escape" mirrors the tension between nature (embodied desire) and culture (linguistic constraint), enacting Lévi-Strauss's diachronic view of myth as a process (1955, pp. 440-441). This tension parallels his broader conceptualisation of cultural transformation, such as cooking, which he describes as a "conversion from nature to culture, by means of which human subjectivity is produced" (Hickey-Moody, 2008, p. 199). Just as cooking mediates raw and cooked states, Persephone's narrative mediates between abduction and agency, desire and constraint, reflecting the structural dynamics that Lévi-Strauss identifies in mythic thought.

The sun's reflection "The sun seems, in the water, very close" serves as a homologous symbol (Lévi-Strauss, 2013b, p. 70) to Persephone's duality. Just as the reflection mediates the real/simulacrum, Persephone mediates chthonic/olympian realms, a structural innovation absent in classical myth. This imagery of the sun in the water parallels Lévi-Strauss's contrast between "raw and cooked", nature and mediation. Like the cook, who "mediates the conjunction of the raw product and the human consumer" (Hickey-Moody, 2008, p. 199), Persephone's liminal experience bridges her untouched past and her transformed

self, rendering her a site of cultural and subjective tension. Her shifting narratives "I was abducted," "I was not abducted" mirror the fluidity of the sun's reflection, destabilising fixed categories to reveal myth as a process of perpetual negotiation between opposing forces.

Rather than exemplifying how myth functions, Glück's poem engages with and transforms mythic binaries such as innocence/experience and nature/culture. In doing so, it reflects Lévi-Strauss's idea that myth encodes meaning by "choosing, combining, or contrasting qualities to transmit a somewhat coded message" (Lévi-Strauss, 2013b, p. 80). The poem does not simply retell the Persephone myth but reconfigures it within a contemporary literary context, emphasising the constant reinterpretation and negotiation of the meaning characteristic of the literary myth.

Mother/Daughter: Structural Fluidity and Mythic Revision

Glück's omission of Demeter (the mother figure) is a striking departure from tradition. This absence functions as a structural silence, a "mythème" (Lévi-Strauss, 1963) that re-frames the mother/daughter opposition as an unresolved tension. Persephone's solitude; "She keeps thinking the pool will remember", underscores her autonomy, contrasting with traditional myths where Demeter actively intervenes.

The poem's structural innovation lies in reversing the mytheme of maternal rescue. Unlike the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter" (Kapach, 2023), where the mother's grief drives the narrative, Glück privileges Persephone's voice: her reflection in the pool becomes the sole interlocutor. This aligns with Lévi-Strauss's view that myths mediate contradictions (1955, p. 440) and that the tension between maternal absence and daughterly self-determination is mediated.

Agency, Transformation, and Structural Fluidity in Glück's Poem

In traditional mythology, Persephone is often depicted as a passive victim of Hades' abduction, reinforcing the dichotomy between agency and subjugation (Kapach, 2023).

However, in "A Myth of Innocence," Glück subverts this passivity by granting Persephone an active voice and interiority. The poem's paradigmatic structure allows Persephone to simultaneously occupy multiple roles—abducted, willing, resistant. For example, the line "I was abducted, but it sounds / wrong to her, nothing like what she felt" challenges the conventional narrative of her victimhood, replacing it with ambiguity and self-determination. This line might be seen as exemplifying inversion, creating a new mytheme: the self-determined Persephone.

This transformation aligns with Demir's (2013) claim that "it is not people who communicate through myths, but always myths that communicate through people" (p. 24). Here, the literary myth does not merely speak of Persephone but through her, evolving its meaning over time. Unlike Kapach's (2023) description of Persephone's "dual nature," Glück's version synthesises opposites, as seen when the girl who disappears from the pool "will never return. A woman will return, looking for the girl she was." This transformation from innocence to experience illustrates how the literary myth reworks inherited figures to explore contemporary subjectivities.

Furthermore, this shift is not just personal but also structural, echoing Lévi-Strauss's (1963) notion that myths establish meaning through binary oppositions (p. 21). The poem reframes the myth's cyclical structure as an internal dialectic, illustrating how myth in literature can suppress linear temporality. This effect echoes structuralist readings of myth, where repetition and inversion challenge conventional notions of time and causality. Glück's poem captures this through recurring imagery of reflection and memory, where Persephone gazes into the pool but finds no answers, demonstrating how myth adapts to new interpretations.

Glück's Persephone actively participates in her fate, declaring: "I offered myself, I wanted / to escape my body. Even, sometimes, / I willed this" (Glück, 2007). This disruption of traditional passivity is reinforced by the Orphic tradition's reinterpretations (Kapach, 2023). The poem reconfigures mythological elements into a framework of oppositions that

function below conscious awareness, seen in recurring contrasts between light/darkness and the past/present.

The phrase "I was abducted" undergoes transformation through shifting declarations: "I was not abducted...I offered myself" (Glück, 2007). This structural fluidity mirrors Lévi-Strauss's (1963) assertion that a scheme exists "behind the chaos of rules and customs" (pp. 21-22). Similarly, "the sound of his footsteps" functions as a mythic signifier of transition, reducing chaos to "relationships of correlation and opposition" (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, pp. 21-22).

Overall, the poem participates in the myth's ongoing transformation. When Persephone reflects, "A woman will return, looking for the girl she was," she encapsulates the tension between the past and the present. By reshaping mythic oppositions through poetry, Glück demonstrates how literature can simulate myth's structural mechanisms while mediating the human experience.

Analysis of Language, Imagery, and Sound Patterns in "A Myth of Innocence"

The language and poetic form of Glück's "A Myth of Innocence" serve not merely as stylistic choices but also as vehicles that dramatise the poem's central psychological and mythic tensions. In line with structuralist approaches that emphasise the mediation of binary oppositions, Glück's formal techniques simulate internal fragmentation and cyclical return, echoing the myth's logic of transformation, loss, and return. Through these devices, the poem artistically reflects the structural tensions it inherits from the Persephone myth, particularly between innocence and experience, agency and victimhood.

One of the most salient techniques that Glück employs is repetition, which enacts the cyclical nature of both myth and psychological trauma. Repeated words and phrases such as "she remembers," "ignorance," and "the pool" function as refrains that mimic the mythic cycle of descent and return. This is most evident in the fragmented self-narration of Persephone:



*I was abducted, but it sounds
wrong to her, nothing like what she felt.
Then she says, I was not abducted.
Then she says, I offered myself, I wanted
to escape my body. Even, sometimes,
I willed this (Glück, 2007).*

Here, the shifting declarations parallel Lévi-Strauss's idea that myth is not a linear story but a system of oppositions in constant negotiation. The contradiction between being "abducted" and having "offered" herself suggests a mythic instability that the poem captures formally through recursive phrasing and syntactic ambiguity.

Enjambment—a "term in prosody that denotes run-on lines in poetry" (Dolin, 1993, p. 29) - is another central feature that mirrors Persephone's unstable sense of self. Glück's calculated use of enjambment not only defies conventional poetic closure but also represents the disjunction between thought and feeling, action and memory. For instance, the enjambed line "She remembers, / sunlight flashing on his bare arms" (Glück, 2007) blurs visual memory and present reflection. This suspended syntax illustrates a fragmented interiority consistent with mythic transformation, in which meaning is always in flux rather than firmly concluded.

Glück's manipulation of rhyme endings further emphasises this structural instability. Drawing on Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss's typology of rhyme, the poem oscillates between feminine endings (unstressed syllables) and masculine endings (stressed syllables), creating tonal variations that correspond to emotional states. As they note, "so-called feminine rhymes should always end with an unstressed syllable, and masculine rhymes with a stressed syllable" (Lévi-Strauss & Jakobson, 1962, p. 205). In Glück's usage, feminine endings evoke openness and uncertainty, reflecting Persephone's fragmented subjectivity:

I am never alone, she thinks,
turning the thought into a prayer.
Then death appears, like the answer to a prayer.
...
She stands by the pool saying, from time to time,
I was abducted, but it sounds
...
Everything sounds so simple, so conventional (Glück, 2007).

These gentle cadences drift rather than conclude, reinforcing the fluidity of her identity and her uncertain grasp on experience. The "softness" here contrasts with the key lines that conclude with masculine, stressed beats, signaling moments of irreversible transformation:

Then the dark god bore her away.
...
The girl who disappears from the pool
will never return.
...
But ignorance
cannot will knowledge.
...
I must have been, she thinks, a simple girl (Glück, 2007).

These endings assert finality, underlining the inexorable shift from girlhood to womanhood, from innocence to experience. Such tonal contrast between line endings enacts what might be called a formal binary, paralleling the myth's thematic oppositions—life/death, passivity/agency, and surface/underworld.

Finally, sound patterns, particularly the contrast between soft sibilance ("sunlight flashing") and harsh stressed syllables ("dark god bore her away"), further dramatise

Persephone's psychological and mythic transformation. The tension between these sonic textures reflects her shift from passivity to awareness, mirroring mythic codes that operate through inversion and contrast.

Taken together, these formal elements—repetition, enjambment, rhyme endings, and sound texture—not only convey Persephone's inner fragmentation but also simulate the structural tensions of myth. Rather than imitating the myth directly, Glück's poem functions as a literary myth: a poetic structure that reflects, transforms, and critiques the inherited oppositions embedded in classical mythology.

Conclusion

This study examined Louise Glück's "A Myth of Innocence" through the lens of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist theory of myth, revealing how the poem reconfigures classical structures through literary transformation. By tracing binary oppositions such as innocence/experience, life/death, and agency/passivity, the analysis demonstrated that Glück's poem does not merely adapt the Persephone myth but actively engages in its structural reorganisation. This engagement is evident both thematically and formally, as seen in Glück's use of poetic devices like enjambment, repetition, and rhyme, which mirror mythic mechanisms such as inversion, substitution, and mediation.

Rather than treating myth as a static cultural inheritance, Glück approaches it as a generative literary structure; a flexible system through which contemporary subjectivity, trauma, and transformation can be articulated. Her representation of Persephone's fragmented voice and cyclical self-awareness reflects the myth's enduring capacity to evolve while preserving its oppositional core. As Lévi-Strauss (1963) argues, myths persist by continually transforming while retaining structural constants—a process based on repetition, variation, and recombination rather than resolution (p. 210). The poem's movement between feminine and masculine endings and between fragmentation and resolution further mirrors this dynamic.



However, the scope of this study is necessarily limited. By focusing exclusively on a single poem and applying primarily one theoretical model, it leaves open questions about how Glück's broader poetic oeuvre engages with myth and how her approach compares with other contemporary mythopoetic writers. Moreover, the emphasis on structuralism may overshadow other critical frameworks—such as feminist, psychoanalytic, or post-structuralist readings—that could yield additional insights.

Nonetheless, this article contributes to both Glück scholarship and myth criticism by offering an interdisciplinary application of structuralist theory to contemporary poetry. It emphasises that literary myths are not passive vessels of ancient meaning but active reworkings that simulate and subvert mythic structures for new cultural and psychological ends. Future research might explore Glück's other myth-inspired works, such as the other poems in *Averno* (Glück, 2007), or engage in comparative analysis with poets like Margaret Atwood or Anne Carson, whose rewritings of classical myths similarly interrogate the boundaries between agency, identity, and tradition.

Ultimately, "A Myth of Innocence" illustrates how poetic form can echo mythic structure and how myth continues to function—not as an archival relic, but as a living, recursive system for making sense of human experience.

A MYTH OF INNOCENCE

One summer she goes into the field as usual
stopping for a bit at the pool where she often
looks at herself, to see
if she detects any changes. She sees
the same person, the horrible mantle
of daughterliness still clinging to her.

The sun seems, in the water, very close.
That's my uncle spying again, she thinks—
everything in nature is in some way her relative.



I am never alone, she thinks,
turning the thought into a prayer.
death appears, like the answer to a prayer.

No one understands anymore
how beautiful he was. But Persephone remembers.
Also that he embraced her, right there,
with her uncle watching. She remembers
sunlight flashing on his bare arms.

This is the last moment she remembers clearly.
Then the dark god bore her away.

She also remembers, less clearly,
the chilling insight that from this moment
she couldn't live without him again.

The girl who disappears from the pool
will never return. A woman will return,
looking for the girl she was.

She stands by the pool saying, from time to time,
I was abducted, but it sounds

wrong to her, nothing like what she felt.
Then she says, *I was not abducted*.
Then she says, *I offered myself, I wanted*
to escape my body. Even, sometimes,
I willed this. But ignorance

cannot will knowledge. Ignorance
wills something imagined, which it believes exists.

All the different nouns—
she says them in rotation.
Death, husband, god, stranger.
Everything sounds so simple, so conventional.
I must have been, she thinks, a simple girl.
She can't remember herself as that person
but she keeps thinking the pool will remember
and explain to her the meaning of her prayer
so she can understand
whether it was answered or not.



Peer Review Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest The author has no conflict of interest to declare.Yazar çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir.
Grant Support The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

Author Details **Enes Taşdelen (Lecturer)**
¹ Karabuk University, Foreign Languages School Karabük, Türkiye
0000-0002-4410-4085 enestasdelen@karabuk.edu.tr

References

- Demir, G. Y. (2013). Önsöz. *Mit ve anlam* (G. Y. Demir, Trans., pp. 1–29). İthaki.
- Dolin, S. (1993). Enjambment and the Erotics of the Gaze in Williams's Poetry. *American Imago*, 50(1), 29–53. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26303887>
- Glück, L. (2007). *Averno: Poems*. Macmillan [e-book].
- Hickey-Moody, A. C. (2008). Performing new spaces: the theatre of urban. *Critical Studies in Education*, 49(2), 199–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508480802072939>
- Kapach, A. (2023, March 9). *Persephone*. Mythopedia. <https://mythopedia.com/topics/persephone>
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1955). The structural study of myth. *Journal of American Folklore*, 68(270), 428. <https://doi.org/10.2307/536768>
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1963). *Structural anthropology* (C. Jakobson & B. Grundfest Schoepf, Trans.). Basic Books.



- Louise Glück's "A Myth of Innocence" and the Myth of Persephone: A Structuralist Analysis through... | Taşdelen, 2025
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1965). The future of kinship studies. *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3031752>
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1969). *The raw and the cooked* (J. Weightman & D. Weightman, Trans.; Vol. 1). Harper&Row.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (2005). *Myth and meaning*. Routledge.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (2013a). *Mit ve anlam* (G. Y. Demir, Trans.). İthaki.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (2013b). *Anthropology confronts the problems of the modern world* (J. M. Todd, Trans.). The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, C., & Jakobson, R. (1962). Charles Baudelaire's 'Les Chats*'. *postcolonial.net*. Retrieved January 26, 2025, from <https://postcolonial.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/StructurlismExampleessay.pdf>
- Melito, I. M. (1964). The Literary myth-makers. *The English Journal*, 53(3), 165–169. <https://doi.org/10.2307/810563>
- Morris, D. (2006). *The poetry of Louise Glück: A thematic introduction*. University of Missouri.
- Ricoeur, P. (1976). *Interpretation theory: Discourse and the surplus of meaning*. The Texas Christian University Press.
- Rumsey, A., & Layton, R. (1986). Saussure in Australia? *Man*, 21(4), 743–745. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2802907>
- Tuncbilek, Ş. S., (2024). Sociologizing Hau: Translation of Maussian concepts into Bourdieu's theory of practice. *İstanbul Üniversitesi Sosyoloji Dergisi*, 44, 239-256. <https://doi.org/10.26>
- Wiseman, B. (Ed.). (2009). The local and the universal. In E. Eric Schwimmer, *The Cambridge companion to Lévi-Strauss* (pp. 167–185). Cambridge University Press.

