

Louise Gluck, US poet and 2020 Nobel laureate, dies at 80

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Online Desk: American poet Louise Gluck, winner of the Nobel prize for her distinctively austere writing that touched on themes of mythology and the universal human experience, has died, a Yale University spokeswoman told AFP on Friday. She was 80.

The New York native most recently taught at Yale as a poetry professor. She died of cancer, The New York Times reported, citing friend and former Yale colleague Richard Deming, on Friday at her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Gluck was the 2020 Nobel laureate in literature, the 16th woman to win the award. Her idols included other winners of the same prize, such as William Butler Yeats (1923) and T.S. Eliot (1948).

Like theirs, the austerity of her poetry was a source of strength: “The unsaid, for me, exerts great power,” she wrote in a collection of essays on poetry, “Proofs and Theories.” “Louise Gluck’s poetry gives voice to our untrusting but unstillable need for knowledge and connection in an often unreliable world,” her longtime editor Jonathan Galassi said in a statement.

“Her work is immortal.”

Gluck’s work was informed by subjects such as nature’s simple beauty and a child’s experience of the world, coupled with the bold storylines of mythology. Her 2020 Nobel prize, which she received at home when the ceremony was canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic, honored her for “her unmistakable poetic voice that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal.” The winner of a Pulitzer Prize in 1993 for her collection “The Wild Iris,” Gluck became a professor despite never finishing college herself.

She grew up in Long Island, New York, the descendant on her father’s side of Hungarian Jews who emigrated in the early 20th century. She was also the winner of a National Book Award in 2014 for her collection “Faithful and Virtuous Night,” and served as the US Poet Laureate from 2003 to 2004.

– Personal, yet universal –

Her work was known for its emotional intensity, often reflecting on her personal life. Yet by playing on myths and classical motifs, it often spoke to a broader human experience. “The voices of Dido, Persephone, and Eurydice — the abandoned, the punished, the betrayed — are masks for a self in transformation, as personal as it is universally valid,” the Swedish Academy said in its citation for her 2020 Nobel prize. Her collections “The Triumph of Achilles” (1985) and “Ararat” (1990) addressed “almost brutally straightforward images of painful family relations,” the jury said, noting that her use of a “deceptively natural tone is striking,” with “no trace of poetic ornament.” In her poem “Snowdrops,” she described the miraculous return of life after winter. Gluck was also a “poet of radical change and rebirth,” her work often marked by “humor and biting wit,” the jury added.

– Difficult childhood –

Gluck started reading and writing poetry as a child, encouraged by her father, who invented the X-Acto Knife but had a penchant for writing. It was not an easy childhood, marked by anorexia and the knowledge that she had a sister who died when very young. In her 1990 poem “Lost Love,” she wrote: “My sister spent a whole life in the earth. She was born, she died. In between, not one alert look, not one sentence.” In a 2006 interview, she described a lonely childhood. “My interactions with the world as a social being were

unnatural, forced, performances, and I was happiest reading. Well, it wasn't all that sublime, I watched a lot of television and ate a lot of food, too." After dropping out of college and weathering a failed first marriage, Gluck began to find her feet with her first collection of poems in 1968, "Firstborn." With her second marriage, which produced a son, she found more stability, returning to her studies and eventually landing a teaching job at Goddard College in Vermont. In a 2012 interview, she credited psychoanalysis with teaching her how to think. She described writing poetry as "often a torment, a place of suffering, harrowing" before "a kind of tranquility" sets in after having completed a piece.