

A Review of the Poem “Missed”: To Live is to Miss

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Abstract:

Gu Cheng’s poem “Missed” explores the theme of failed connections and the emotional consequences of differing worldviews. Through natural imagery—such as melting “thin ice” and “clear lake water”—the poem symbolizes the fragile yet persistent barriers between individuals. Despite the clarity and renewal suggested by spring, the characters remain unable to bridge their emotional and philosophical divides. One believes in fate, embodying passive acceptance, while the other doubts life, reflecting existential skepticism. This fundamental discord prevents reconciliation, highlighting how internal beliefs can obstruct human connection even when external circumstances seem favorable. The poem’s melancholic tone underscores the tragedy of missed opportunities, resonating with universal experiences of miscommunication and unfulfilled relationships.

Keywords: Gu Cheng; natural imagery; philosophical discord; emotional barriers; fate and doubt

Missed

Gu Cheng¹

The thin ice of separation has melted,

The lake water is so clear.

Life buried by snow and riddles,

Revives in the spring light.

Everything is crystal clear,

Yet we still hurriedly miss each other,

Because you believe in fate,

Because I doubt life...

¹ Gu Cheng (顾城) was an important representative of the Misty School of Chinese poetry.

Original Chinese poem:

错过

顾城

隔膜的薄冰溶化了
湖水是那样透彻
被雪和谜掩埋的生命
都在春光中复活
一切都明明白白
但我们仍匆匆错过
因为你相信命运
因为我怀疑生活…(Gu, 1993)

At the core of Gu Cheng's poem is the concept of missed connections and the emotional consequences of misunderstandings or differing worldviews. The title itself, "Missed", sets the tone for this reflective, almost tragic meditation on how two people, despite the apparent opportunity for reconciliation, fail to meet each other on a meaningful level.

Gu Cheng skillfully employs natural imagery to describe the emotional and existential states of the characters. The "thin ice" that has melted refers to the fragile barrier that once existed between two people, symbolizing their emotional distance. Ice is often associated with coldness and separation, and its melting here represents the potential for a thaw in their relationship. The ice's "thinness" implies that this separation was always fragile, not insurmountable.

The "lake water" being "so clear" continues the theme of clarity. It suggests that the truth or understanding between the two individuals is now unobstructed, as if all misunderstandings

could be dissolved if only the two individuals looked at each other. Yet, despite the potential for clarity, they still fail to connect.

The imagery of life “buried by snow and riddles” evokes a sense of being trapped or obscured by external forces. Snow, often a metaphor for coldness or stillness, can bury things away, hiding them from view. “Riddles” imply mystery or confusion, suggesting that the relationship or the individuals’ emotions have been previously clouded by uncertainty. But spring arrives, and with it, the thawing of snow and the solving of riddles — the natural world’s rebirth parallels the possibility of revival in their relationship. It conveys that life’s potential to flourish again, like the resurrection of nature in spring, is available.

Despite the rebirth and the newfound clarity that the springtime suggests, the line “Everything is crystal clear, / Yet we still hurriedly miss each other” underlines a tragic irony. The poem presents a paradox: even when the world is transparent and truths are revealed, human beings can still fail to grasp or connect with one another. This suggests that understanding and clarity alone are not enough to bridge the gap between individuals. There are deeper emotional or existential barriers at play, which transcend mere logical or visual clarity.

The final lines, “Because you believe in fate, / Because I doubt life,” expose the philosophical discord between the two characters. One person’s belief in fate suggests a sense of resignation or trust in the inevitability of life’s events, whereas the other’s doubt in life implies a more questioning, perhaps cynical or existential stance. This fundamental difference in how they approach life leads to their inability to connect.

The person who “believes in fate” might be seen as someone who passively accepts events as they come, allowing destiny to shape their path. On the other hand, the person who “doubts life” is more critical, more analytical, perhaps more wary of life’s unpredictability. This contrast reflects not just a difference in beliefs but a difference in how each character engages with the world. Believing in fate might bring peace but could also lead to inaction, while doubting life could mean a more active engagement with the world but also a constant state of questioning and unrest.

The poem has a melancholic and reflective tone. There is a sense of resignation, a bittersweet acknowledgment of what could have been but wasn’t. The use of nature’s imagery contrasts with the internal emotional states of the characters. While nature is revitalizing and full of promise, the human experience in the poem is filled with missed chances and unfulfilled potential. The characters are trapped in their beliefs — one in fate, the other in doubt — preventing them from truly connecting, even though the external world seems ready to offer them that opportunity.

Gu Cheng’s poem touches on universal human experiences: the sense of isolation, the feeling of missed opportunities, and the tragedy of two people failing to connect despite having the chance to do so. It speaks to the human condition — how often people allow their beliefs or doubts to get in the way of love, understanding, or companionship.

The poem also explores the idea that even when the barriers between people are removed, their internal worlds, their personal philosophies, can continue to keep them apart. This is a deeply philosophical reflection on how human beings navigate relationships, often impeded by their own thoughts and convictions.

In “Missed”, Gu Cheng masterfully blends nature, philosophy, and emotion to illustrate the complex dynamics of human relationships. The melting ice and clear waters are symbols of the potential for understanding, but the individuals’ opposing views on life and fate keep them apart, even when all external obstacles have vanished. The poem captures the delicate interplay between chance, belief, and doubt, painting a portrait of two people unable to meet each other halfway, even when the world around them provides every opportunity. This complexity gives the poem its enduring poignancy and resonance with readers who have themselves experienced such near-misses in their own relationships.

References

Gu, C. (1993). 错过 [Missed] [Poem]. (Original work published in 1993)