

A Review of the Poem “Avoidance”: Philosophy of a Stoic

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Abstract:

Gu Cheng’s poem “Avoidance” explores the theme of evading life’s natural cycles due to the fear of loss. The speaker reflects on someone who refuses to plant flowers as a metaphor for resisting new beginnings to avoid the pain of their eventual end. This avoidance, while shielding against sorrow, also denies the beauty and joy inherent in transient experiences. The poem critiques this defensive mindset, arguing that by rejecting endings, one forfeits the richness of life itself. Through simple yet profound imagery, Gu Cheng highlighted the paradox of self-protection leading to emotional stagnation. The melancholic tone underscores the regret of missed opportunities, urging readers to embrace impermanence rather than retreat from it. Ultimately, the poem suggests that true fulfillment comes from engaging with life despite its inevitable losses.

Keywords: Gu Cheng; fear of loss; impermanence; flower metaphor; life cycle; existential stagnation

Avoidance

Gu Cheng¹

You don’t want to plant flowers,

You say:

“I don’t want to see them

Wither away bit by bit.”

Yes,

To avoid an ending,

You avoided all beginnings.

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

Original Chinese poem:

避免

顾城

你不愿意种花

你说：

“我不愿看见它

一点点凋落”

是的

为了避免结束

您避免了一切开始 (Gu, 1986)

In Gu Cheng’s poem “Avoidance”, the central theme revolves around the fear of loss and the avoidance of life’s natural cycles. The speaker addresses someone who refuses to plant flowers, symbolizing a reluctance to engage with beauty or life because it inevitably leads to decay or an end. The refusal to plant the flowers is not out of apathy, but rather out of a deep-seated desire to avoid the pain of watching them wither and die.

This reluctance reflects a broader human tendency to avoid emotional investment or new experiences for fear of eventual disappointment or sorrow. In a way, the poem critiques this mindset, pointing out that in the effort to avoid the pain of an ending, the person has forfeited the beauty and joy that comes from any beginning. By refusing to plant flowers, they have also refused to experience their bloom — a metaphor for life’s fleeting moments of beauty.

Flowers in this poem serve as a metaphor for the fragility and impermanence of life. They represent not only beauty and growth but also the inevitability of death. The act of planting flowers is a metaphor for starting something new — a relationship, a project, a phase in life.

To “plant flowers” would be to embrace life’s transient beauty, even with the understanding that it will eventually fade.

The phrase “I don't want to see them / Wither away bit by bit” expresses a profound sensitivity toward the passage of time. The gradual decay of the flowers reflects the speaker’s awareness of time’s unstoppable forward march. The pain comes not from the end itself but from the slow and inevitable approach of that end — watching something beautiful deteriorate is, for the speaker, unbearable.

The lines “To avoid an ending, / You avoided all beginnings” underscore the poem’s central argument: that in trying to avoid the sorrow of an inevitable end, one ultimately misses out on everything that life has to offer. The speaker points out the paradox that avoiding endings also means forfeiting the richness and fullness of life. It highlights how fear of loss or failure can result in never starting anything meaningful, and in doing so, one avoids not just pain but also joy, growth, and love.

This is a critique of a passive approach to life, where the fear of loss leads to an emotional and existential stagnation. It suggests that endings are an inextricable part of the life cycle, and to avoid them is to avoid life itself. The poem thus invites readers to consider whether the avoidance of pain is worth the cost of missing out on the beauty and fullness of experience.

Gu Cheng’s language is characteristically simple yet profoundly emotional. The short lines and sparse language create a sense of intimacy, as if the speaker is sharing a personal and heartfelt observation. The poem is neither overly dramatic nor filled with grand gestures. Instead, it uses everyday imagery and direct language to explore a deep emotional truth. This

simplicity allows the message to resonate more clearly, without the distraction of complex metaphors or convoluted phrasing.

The tone of the poem is quietly melancholic. There is a deep sadness in the realization that by trying to protect oneself from loss, one ends up forfeiting the chance to experience the beauty and meaning that life offers. The poem suggests a kind of regret — not for any particular event or relationship, but for the missed opportunities that come with a life lived in avoidance.

While the poem speaks to a specific decision — the refusal to plant flowers — its message is universal. Many people choose not to embark on new ventures, relationships, or experiences because they fear the eventual disappointment or heartbreak. The poem subtly suggests that this approach to life is ultimately limiting. Yes, all things must end, but that doesn't diminish the value of the experiences we have along the way. The refusal to engage, out of fear of loss, can lead to a life devoid of richness and fulfilment.

The poem also speaks to a human condition often characterized by a desire for control. In trying to control the outcome — by avoiding it altogether — the individual in the poem surrenders the unpredictable but potentially beautiful moments that could have been. The poem encourages readers to embrace life's impermanence, acknowledging that every beginning carries the seeds of its end, but that shouldn't stop us from beginning.

In “Avoidance”, Gu Cheng poignantly explores the paradox of avoiding life's inevitable pains at the cost of life's potential joys. Through the symbol of flowers, he captures the fragility and beauty of existence, and how our fear of loss can lead us to a state of emotional paralysis. The poem's quiet tone and simple imagery belie a deeper existential truth: that in avoiding the end, we also avoid the richness of life itself. By pointing out this paradox, Gu Cheng invites

the reader to reconsider their own approach to life, encouraging an embrace of life's fullness despite its inherent impermanence.

References

Gu, C. (1986). 避免 [Avoidance] [Poem].(Original work published in 1986)