

On Love, Loss, Drunkenness and the Passage of Time: An examination of the Individual's Struggle for Salvation in Li-Qing Zhao's *Like a Dream, Rogue the Lips, and Lamentation*

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Chinese literature remains to be one of the most influential literary traditions in the world. Poetry was considered as the principle genre of Chinese literature, which contained ancient themes of loss and longing as expressed through their folk songs. The middle period (Song and Tang dynasties) of Chinese literature occupies an important place in China's cultural history because even though there was a significant decline in the importance of Confucianism, it was also the same period that was characterized by the flourishing of poetry. Chinese writings, then, could be described as prescriptive in nature, since they were motivated by themes of renewal and personal growth; they upheld an ethical and social system different Confucianism so as to suffer the same moral and social ills.

It was during the 12th century that China gave birth to poet Li-Qing Zhao who is considered the pre-eminent female writer in Chinese literature. Her works are classified under the middle period, when women were actively excluded from literary circles since writing was then considered a male-dominated enterprise. However, her works are considered timeless classics because her works are characterized by a distinct, emotional quality and in spite of the simplicity of her writings they were a reflection of her own personal issues. As if standing out as the most influential female writer of the period was not enough, Li-Qing Zhao also defied the standard representations of the female literary archetype through her portrayal of women in the state of drunkenness, or as empowered women.

For this paper, a selection of poems entitled "Like a Dream," "Rogue the Lips," and "Lamentation" by Li-Qing Zhao has been chosen for the discussion. Through the use of a Formalist method of analysis, this paper aims to demonstrate how the persona in each poem struggles with personal salvation given their similar experiences of loss, longing and their recollections of passed time.

In "Like a Dream," the author makes use of a first-person voice that is strikingly deadpan to bring back the persona's experience of attempting to return home after a day of heavy drinking. While there is no explicit reference as to whether the persona is male or female apart from the subtle reference of the character being in a state of drunkenness, the narrator will henceforth be simply referred to as "the persona." It is worthy of note that the persona's drunken experience is told by the persona from memory, even though the memory itself is what the poem is mainly about.

"Like a Dream" takes on a single stanza format. However, the use of space and the way the lines are arranged are important. The text does not follow the left text align format which is the customary layout for poems; instead, there is an indentation present in the second, fourth and last lines of the poem. The use of such a technique gives the poem the appearance of a zigzag which coincides with its thematic content of drunkenness. The way the words break off from the margins of the poem appear to be symbolic of the persona's own fragile hold on reality due to his tipsiness. The form of the poem also gives the impression that it was written hastily and by a drunk hand.

Unlike the other two poems, "Like a Dream" takes place in an external environment which serves to shed light on the state of the individual outside the home. The setting of the poem is by the creek where an ancient pavilion has been set up, and the night is fast approaching. Being told from memory, the persona appears to stumble out of the wilderness inebriated, unable to properly tell his way home. As the narrator shares his experience, it is interesting how he appears to be devoid of any emotion, which is further emphasized by the line

My mood left me" (4). The piece taken on a callous tone; there appear no dominant emotions of anger or dread in the poem, only a sense of perpetual disorientation. With little thought to himself, the only question and coherent thought in the persona's head is "How to get through?"

How to get through?" (7-8) which is repeated twice.

When the persona turns back to his boat, it is described how he "strayed deep among lotuses" (6). Though the poem strays from an actual description, it is possible that the lines refers to how the persona ends up falling into the creek by accident and wades through the water lilies due to his drunkenness. The last two lines of the poem could attest to such a fact which state, "and I startled to flight a whole shoal / of egrets and gulls" (9-10). They seem to make an implicit suggestion on the persona's actions and gesticulations; a flock of birds would not choose to fly out had they not been threatened by wild actions or a loud noise.

It would do well to return to the fact that the poem is told from a narrator recalling his memory. The words "I will always recall" (1) indicate the distinct passage of time following the incident. Even though the persona remembers his past experience of intoxication, his words do not hint at any feelings of shame or remorse whatsoever; they contain no insights which could shed light on the persona's opinion of his past actions. However, the title of the poem proves to be telling. The words "like a dream" seem to suggest that the experience was unreal, though in some cases even presents a sense of fondness and warmth for the past incident. The words "I will always recall" (1) drip with nostalgia. In some ways, the persona even treats the experience as comical: accidentally falling into the water and scaring off a flight of birds. While it was not entirely a harmful experience, it was something that the persona didn't mind returning to every once in a while. The deadpan tone that the persona uses however, betrays a sense of how the he thought the entire incident was immature and he look unto it with from more wisdom and restraint.

In "Rogue the Lips," an emotional first-person point-of-view is used by the author so as to communicate the persona's despair after waiting for a loved one to return home. Unlike the previous poem, "Rogue the Lips" is fraught by emotional intensity as seen through its sentimental choice of adjectives such as "lonely," "sensitive," "weary," "depressed," and "anxiously." Despite the persona's longing and despair, the poem ends on a less-than-hopeful note without any guarantees of future reassurance. However, the persona keeps watching the grassy landscape before her, with every thought to her beloved.

Made up of three separate stanzas, "Rogue the Lips" makes use of line spacing and white space to give the poem the appearance of being fragmentary and incomplete. The separation between lines and the poem's centre alignment are also subtleties utilised by the author to establish a sense of distance; such a technique could also enforce the distance existing between the persona and her lost lover. The

division of the poem into three separate stanzas also helped in better visualizations of the different images of the persona in grief: first, of the persona mourning over her lover alone in her chamber; second, of the persona slouched against the balcony in depression and fatigue; and third, of the persona with her head held high, watching the grassland closely for the familiar sight of his beloved. Each stanza also ends with a powerful emotional phrase such as “of my sensitive being,” and “weary and depressed.” Such phrases were used to tie up each stanza and give it an overall emotional punch.

In contrast to “Like a Dream,” the poem provides a glimpse into the inner workings of the individual within the household setting. In this case, it would be helpful to firstly supply a description of the persona in the poem. Judging by the word associations, “lonely,” “sensitive,” “flowers” and “beloved,” may be appropriately described as feminine adjectives especially regarding their treatment of the persona which is a woman. Furthermore, the image of the persona leaning over the balustrade is also reflected in other works of literature, especially those that deal with the dynamics of courtship (e.g. *Romeo and Juliet*). The image of the woman by the balustrade also appears to fit into the star-crossed lover literary archetype – it is by some tragic circumstance that the persona’s lover was torn from her arms and has not yet returned home.

The distinct tone of sadness and longing is a theme that pervades the entire poem. However, the degree of such sadness and longing is expressed differently in each stanza. In the case of the first stanza, it serves to accentuate the persona’s state of vulnerability and her isolation. The author goes into a detailed description saying “A thousand sorrows fill every inch / of my sensitive being” (2-3). Not only is she “lonely,” but the persona keeps to her secluded chamber where she mourns for her distant lover, who was separated from her by cruel fate. The proof that it is the “lover” that the persona lies in wait for may be seen in line 8, when the persona asks, “Where is my beloved?” *Beloved* is a term of endearment one usually reserved for their significant other.

The second stanza, on the other hand, contains references to the passage of time and how it was accompanied by the persona’s decline in morale. The spring season has come and gone, which indicates that the persona’s lover has been away for around three months. However, when the persona describes how the season had “so soon passed” the choice of words appear to suggest that she possessed a shorter concept of time which she admirably spends solely in wait for her beloved. When the persona leans over the balustrade feeling “weary and depressed” (7) she refers to weariness and depression on both a physical and emotional degree. The metaphor of the rain drops during spring time which had “hastened the falling flowers” (5) prove to be appropriate especially in reflecting the persona’s state of emotional being. The persona appears as a falling flower herself; one that had passed through one season and is soon to be confronted with its end.

The final stanza opens with the lines, “Where is my beloved?” which, upon an examination of the entire text, proves to be the central passage in the poem. Despite the passage of the season, the persona’s despair and desperate expectation for her lover to come home remained a steady constant. The poem ends without any suggestions as to whether the persona’s lover will make his way home; however, in spite of the female lover’s lack of consolation and reassurance, the poem closes with the image of the persona staring out into the grass field before her. The choice of the

persona to stare out into the open, empty field is an act of defiance in itself: she holds on out to hope and remains concerned for her lover's welfare. Though she has suffered heartbreak and loss, she could have chosen to retreat into her "secluded chambers" or at least move on to a better life for herself by moving past him and refusing to get hurt. Instead, the sacrifice of her character is representative of the female archetype of the dutiful wife (or lover).

After the going through the content of the poem, it is also important that one understand the significance of the title. The word *rogue* is used to describe a mischievous person, or one who tends to misbehave. The title "Rogue the Lips" uses the word *rogue* as a verb; in such a context, the phrase may contain sensual and erotic undertones. It is possible that the title expresses the persona's need for human comfort or for her inner longing to have a physical body to hold on to. The phrase serves to shed light on the nature of the relationship between the lovers; the word "rogue" even adds a tone of mystery and thrill to their relationship. Since the word suggests mischief, it may be possible that they were involved in an illicit love affair or that they enjoyed adventure and/or ventured out into the unknown. And for whatever reason it may be, mischievous or no, the long lost lover has yet to make it back into the persona's arms.

"Lamentation" is a poem told from a first person point-of-view. A female persona who is half-drunk grows sentimental over a plum flower and ponders over past memories and the lost time. The poem proves to be interesting because it deals with a main character that is a female drunkard; while drinking was a customary practice in Ancient Chinese society, it was an act more commonly associated with men (as is the case in other Asian cultures). The significance of the flower is also important because it was what brought on the persona's past memories, it was perhaps a memento from the days of a happier past. It is worthy of note that it is between the period wherein the persona is half-drunk and half-awake that she finds a startling moment of clarity – this could serve to shed more light in understanding the nature of drunkenness and despair as depicted in the poem.

The poem "Lamentation" follows the typical format of a poem; only it is centre aligned and made up of three separate stanzas. The arrangement of the lines and words were deliberate so as to stimulate the readers' own interpretation because each line of the poem corresponds to a distinct image and description. For example, in the last stanza, there is the image of a quiet atmosphere, the moon, and the emerald screen; the form of the poem thus serves the purpose of accentuating its existing content.

The setting of the poem takes place in the persona's chambers, a very personal environment, during the dead of the night. By the first line poem itself, there is already an indication that the persona is in a state of drunkenness. It is there that the persona decides to take off her ornaments, which are fanciful accessories designed to make an individual appear more classy and sophisticated. The presence of such ornaments proves that the persona is indeed female. However, the author creates an interesting juxtaposition between the ornaments and the withered flower. While the ornaments serve to make the individual appear more beautiful, the presence of the wilted flower serves contradict to the classic ideal of beauty – it gives the persona the look of a woman in the wilderness with unkempt hair. It is however interesting that it is the ornaments that the persona decides to take off. The succeeding lines of the

poem serve to prove that the wilted flower itself holds a certain sentimental value for the persona.

In the second stanza, the persona starts to recover from her tipsiness. However, it is also revealed that it was the lingering smell of alcohol that had “broke my [her] fond dream” (6). In this way, the persona treats alcohol as a way to keep her thoughts and dreams in control, lest they overcome her. Alcohol functioned as a forgetting tool for the persona just so emotions would no longer have to be felt in all their intensity. As “Rogue the Lips” appears to demonstrate, emotions felt in their full force prove to be damaging. However, “Like a Dream” also shows the negative impact of the excessive consumption of alcohol. The current poem strives for a median between the two extremes before “finding my [her] way home” (8).

In lines 5-8 of the same stanza, the lines read
 The lingering smell of wine
 Broke my fond dream
 Before my dreaming soul could find
 My way home.

The persona’s “fond dream” ends up as her distinct moment of clarity; it is at that moment that she can afford herself a moment of honesty and mourn about the loss she associates with the wilted flower (as the fourth stanza will later on reveal). It is her “dreaming soul,” that same state of being partly drunk but in a state of wakefulness, which allows the persona to feel sadness about her past before her drunkenness once again threatens to bring her under.

The last stanza starts with the sentence “All is quiet.” It is a powerful sentence and establishes a sense of universality in the poem. It is worthy of note how the author expands the visual horizon of the poem following that same line: while all stay silent, “the moon lingered / and the emerald screen hangs low” (10-11). It is as if the natural elements have come to witness how the persona brings homage to the wilted flower and reminisces how it brings back memories of days gone by. In looking at the persona’s treatment of the wilted flower, one may observe tenderness and an attempt to preserve its sentimental value – “I caress the withered flower / fondle the fragrant petals” (12-13). However, the poem offers no clue as to what the flower could possibly stand for or be a symbol of. Suffice it to say that the flower reminds the persona of her distant past. In spite of the flower’s faded and disintegrated character, it is timeless and the memory attached to it lives on.

As much as the poem deals with the symbolism of the wilted flower, it is less of a matter of what the flower could stand for as much as it means how the flower contributes to the persona’s own state of despair. The poem is entitled “Lamentation” because it seeks to emphasize the persona’s sadness that, the past is no longer the present due to the passage of time. Her wish of bringing back lost time appears to suggest that the persona craves something that used to be present but is no longer there; it could be a past lover or any happy memory. But since it left, things have not been the same since, which could be a possible reason behind the persona’s alcoholism and existing state of moral disrepair.

In conclusion, the characters portrayed by Li-Qing Zhao in the selected poems were all faced with their own individual experience of love, loss or drunkenness. The three personas were held together by their shared lamentation over passed time. The personas are portrayed in each poem faced their struggle for personal salvation in

varying degrees of sobriety: in “Like a Dream” the persona was drunk, in “Rogue the Lips” the persona was simply depressed, and in “Lamentation” it was a combination of both. Judging by the three poems as a whole, the intensity of emotions such as sadness or longing are viewed negatively. Excessive sadness could, for example, prove to be damaging. Drunkenness was then presented as a means to cope: as either a rejection of reality or a means to (temporarily) forget.

Li Qing-Zhao’s poems

Like a Dream

I will always recall that day at dusk,
 the pavilion by the creek,
 and I was so drunk I couldn't tell
 the way home. My mood left me,
 it was late when I turned back in my boat
 and I strayed deep among lotuses —
 how to get through?
 how to get through?
 and I startled to flight a whole shoal
 of egrets and gulls.

Rouge The Lips

Lonely in my secluded chamber,
 A thousand sorrows fill every inch
 Of my sensitive being.

Regretting that spring has so soon passed,
 That rain drops have hastened the falling flowers,
 I lean over the balustrade,
 Weary and depressed.

Where is my beloved?
 Only the fading grassland
 stretches endlessly toward the horizon;
 Anxiously I watch the road for your return.

Lamentation

It was far into the night when, intoxicated,
 I took off my ornaments;
 The plum flower withered in my hair.

Recovered from tipsiness,
 The lingering smell of wine
 Broke my fond dream
 Before my dreaming soul could find
 My way home.

All is quiet.

The moon lingered,
And the emerald screen hangs low.
I caress the withered flower,
Fondle the fragrant petals,
Trying to bring back the lost time.

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