

# *Analysis of the Tragic Fate of "Lei Yu" from the Complex Character Relationships*

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**Abstract:** "Lei Yu (Thunderstorm)" by Cao Yu presents the tragedy of Zhou Gong Guan, a feudal family in the Republican era, by characterizing different personalities, backgrounds and ethical relationships. As a dramatic work of considerable status in modern Chinese literature, "Lei Yu" contains many profound connotations. From its publication in 1934 to the present, "Lei Yu" has profoundly exposed the problems of the feudal family's autocratic and corrupt times through the meticulous and precise portrayal of its many characters' complex relationships and the gradual clarification of its historical past. This work exposes not only the conflicts of the members of the Zhou Gong Guan but also the class disparity and the status of men and women in the era through the class and gender of each member. At present, academic research on "Lei Yu" is very mature, but there is still some room for research on the analysis of the characters' relationship and tragedy of fate in relation to the author's view of fate and the imagery of "Lei Yu". Therefore, this paper will start with the interpretation of Cao Yu's view of fate, analyze the author's view of "the fatalism of gods and ghosts" and "the view of nature and heaven" in the preface, and then analyze the imagery of "Lei Yu" to derive the tragedy of fate. Then, through the analysis of the imagery of this work, the complex family conflicts and the characters' view of fate behind it are derived, and then the characters' characters, experiences and identities are carefully analyzed through both character tragedies and ethical tragedies, revealing the irresistible tragedy of fate in the relationship between the characters of "Lei Yu", which means that all characters in the play have tragedies in character and ethical relationships.

**Keywords:** Lei Yu, tragic, character relationship

## 1. Introduction

Cao Yu was deeply touched by the September 18 incident in 1931. After the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan, students from colleges and universities all over the world joined the anti-Japanese cause. When college students organized themselves to promote the resistance against Japan, Cao Yu, as a member of the propaganda department of Tsinghua University, also firmly joined them. He actively exerted his ability and talent to create excellent works, and "Lei Yu" was one of them. In the process of creating "Lei Yu", he depicted the characteristics of the time, family relations and class conflicts realistically based on his personal experiences and what he saw and heard over the years. For example, he was touched by the stout man named Zhao, whom he met on the train, and with Cao Yu's enthusiasm, this stout man became the prototype of Lu Dahai. Because of the darkness of the

time, Cao Yu called "Lei Yu" a product of the sunless days." At the same time, this work is also the first cry of Cao Yu as a young man educated by new ideas. Since its release, such a play with a complete plot and full of characters has received widespread attention in literary and academic circles, so it has been studied profoundly at home and abroad. Many literary researchers have also written many related documents, such as exploring the tragedy of fate in the play, the portrayal of women, and the conflicts within social classes and families. However, there is still room for research from the perspective of Cao Yu's view of fate and the imagery of "Lei Yu" in the preface. Therefore, this paper will start from the analysis of the original author's creative thinking on the basis of the original text, then progress to the study of the deeper meaning of "Lei Yu" as a clue of the text, and finally, there will be analysis of the tragedy of character and ethics in "Lei Yu" through the relationship between characters, thus forming a progressive structure. The highlight of this paper is the progressive analysis of the work based on the original text and on Cao Yu's own view of fate.

## **2. Author Cao Yu's View of Fate in "Lei Yu": "Fatalism of Gods and Ghosts" and "Natural World View"**

As the cornerstone of realism in Chinese drama, Lei Yu has great value in its excellent writing skills, character relationship settings and the hidden view of fate that controls the whole situation. In the self-critical outline of his article "On Literature as Anthropology", Qian Gurong once discussed the writer's worldview and creative method, which should be consistent, and the writer's worldview plays a decisive guiding role in the creative process [1].

In the discussion of the concept of fate in Lei Yu, many researchers believe that "the concept of fate" refers to the idea that fate controls people and that people cannot escape from it. Such a "view of fate" is not fundamentally different from "fatalism" and can be regarded as the same concept [2].

Cao Yu wrote in the preface to Lei Yu: "I have been asked how or why Lei Yu was written. Perhaps by the end of the writing, it was as if a raging stream of emotion had come to propel me, and I was giving vent to the repressed resentment [3]." This shows that Cao Yu's writing at that time was not only consciously setting up the direction of the plot but was still influenced by the "hidden emotional surge" while writing. The author calls "Lei Yu" a "remnant of barbarism" and says, "I am like the primitive ancestors who opened their eyes in wonder at those incomprehensible phenomena", which can show that although Cao Yu himself wrote the play, he also felt uncontrollable about some of the episodes in Lei Yu.

This uncontrollability is divided into two aspects: on the one hand, the fatalism of the "gods and ghosts" in the universe, and on the other hand, the cruelty of the natural world, "I cannot conclude that the impetus of Lei Yu is due to the gods and ghosts, to fate or to any kind of manifest power [3]." This is a manifestation of Cao Yu's certain fatalistic concept, which is the first aspect. In the latter sentences, he expresses that "what 'Lei Yu' shows is not cause and effect, not retribution, but what I feel is the 'cruelty' of nature", which is another manifestation of the cruelty of the law of survival in nature. Cao Yu believes that the encounters between Si Feng and Zhou Chong are the most representative of this "natural 'cruelty'" because "their deaths are not their own fault". When the storylines of Si Feng and Zhou Chong are drawn together, they continuously, if inadvertently, reveal this hidden secret - the "cruelty" and "coldness" of the struggle in the universe. Cao Yu believes that there may be a master governing the "struggle" of the universe, and the "master" here is called "God" by the prophets in Hebrew, "fate" by the dramatists in Greece, and "destiny" by the dramatists in modern times. "Modern people have discarded these confused notions and called it 'the law of nature'". What Cao Yu's emotions express is only a vision of one aspect of the universe, what he believes is expressed in "Lei Yu", namely the cruelty and callousness of the universe, whether it is fatalism or the law of nature theory, and these two different statements are in fact the embodiment of the same phenomenon. Cao Yu's view of fate is not a dichotomy between the fatalism of the universe and the

cruelty of nature. Both ideas are essentially expressions of the idea of destiny in the underworld. Both divine fatalism and naturalism have a certain influence on Cao Yu's view of fate, and they should not be analyzed separately. Belinsky, speaking of the play's characteristics, said that "each character pursues his own purpose and acts only for himself, thus unconsciously contributing to the whole event of the play." "Lei Yu" embodies what this text says. The characters in the book all have intentions and passions; all have things to pursue. Moreover, their actions in pursuit of each other create a complex and tense conflict. However, they end tragically -- with no one's dreams coming true. This leads the reader to believe in the existence of fatalism in "Lei Yu" [4].

### **3. Analysis of Thunderstorm Imagery**

The imagery of thunderstorms in the book "Lei Yu" is worth pondering. One is the literal meaning of "a thunderstorm is coming", and the other is that the thunderstorm symbolizes the conflict between the characters of Zhou Gong Guan, which is like a thunderstorm, from dull to dark clouds and then to thunder and lightning.

#### **3.1. The Hint of Plot Development by the Natural Environment Padding of the Dense Gloom and Impending Thunderstorm**

As the plot develops, the characters' past experiences gradually emerge, and the relationship conflicts are about to erupt, and the corresponding external environment also changes from hot and muggy to dark clouds and then stormy [5]. From the beginning of Act I to the end of Act IV, the setting is introduced in each act. In the first act, "The house was very stuffy, hot and depressing, and the air was low-pressure. Outside, there was no sunlight, and the sky was gray, with the look of a rainstorm about to fall." In the second act, the weather is gloomier, more depressed and hot, humid air, and the first signs of the coming storm have been revealed. Then the third act of the "starless sky and sometimes hit the lightning without thunder ... around the quiet, thunder and faintly ringing. Later, the lightning is brighter blue eerie terrible, "thunder also more vicious like rumbling rolled, but around the more dreary quiet, wild rain is coming. Finally, the rainstorm stormed until the closing. Implying that the conflict is imminent, the final act is the fourth "outside still faintly rolling thunder; the rain can be heard, the garden scene is buried in darkness, except for an occasional flash of dazzling lightning in the sky, a flash of darkness again [3]. Not only does it bring the gloomy atmosphere of Zhou Gong Guan to its climax, but it also hints at the tragic episode later on when the characters' ethical relationships are revealed, and Si Feng and Zhou Chong die from electrocution. The thunderstorm, from scattering to gathering to the eruption, drives the characters' conflicts to become tenser and tenser, and past experiences are recreated in the words of truth, scene by scene.

#### **3.2. Undercurrents of Family Conflict**

Another important reason why Cao Yu uses the word "Lei Yu" to name the play is that the imagery of "Lei Yu" can reflect the apparently peaceful Zhou Gong Guan, which is already a dandy but deceitful appearance. "Lei Yu" is not only a kind of weather description that can play a suggestive role but also a process. It is not only the storm but also the gloomy weather before the storm and the aftermath of the storm. It is the thread and is reflected throughout the text, most notably in the conflict between the characters. If the thunderstorm is the force that ultimately destroys everything, then the relationships of each of them are the dark clouds that are integral to this storm. For example, Zhou Chong's innocents and passionate but forced-to-be-abandoned burning feelings for Si Feng, and Si Feng's tragic feelings for Zhou Ping's class-ethical duality, all illustrate that family conflicts in Zhou Gong Guan are like thunderstorms in that there is a backlog of conflicts, an outbreak of conflicts, and a tragic outcome after the conflicts. The nineteenth-century English writer Thomas de Quincey

divided literature into two categories, literature of knowledge and literature of power, and Thunderstorm undoubtedly belongs to the category of literature of power. The voiced or silent cries of the characters in the script and their intentional or unintentional resistance all reveal the power contained in it [6].

## 4. The Tragic Nature of "Lei Yu"

### 4.1. Tragedy of Character

The tragedy of character is an objective tragedy in which material and class conflicts are projected onto the physical and psychological character and act together. Kierkegaard mentions that a tragic character is a character full of contradictions within the character, and this inner world of contradictions fights for his destruction [7].

#### 4.1.1. The Weakness of Zhou Chong

In "Lei Yu", Zhou Chong's weak character and naive thoughts are the cause of his ultimate tragedy. In the relationship between Zhou Chong and Si Feng, Zhou Chong has always been very fond of Si Feng and is willing to give. When Zhou Chong says to Fanyi that he likes Si Feng, he says sincerely and exclusively, "She is the girl I think is the most satisfying", and Fanyi asks, "Aren't you afraid that your father won't be satisfied with you?" "The first thing you need to do is to get a good idea of what you're doing. He replied firmly, "This is my own business." "Then I don't care about it [3]." This is one of the characteristics of Zhou Chong's character: he is stubborn and is not easily swayed by the opinions of others, even his parents, whom he respects very much. However, when Zhou Chong bravely applies with Zhou Puyuan to give a portion of his tuition to Si Feng, he is shocked by his father's authority and does not dare to mention it again, which also shows that although he has his own thoughts inside, still forced to show them due to authority, reflecting the weakness of Zhou Chong's character, which is the second of Zhou Chong's character traits. The formation of this weakness of character comes from a variety of sources; one is that he grew up in a family full of authority and did not need to whisper about learning to smooth things out. This is reflected in the dialogue between Si Feng and Zhou Chong. As a subordinate, he addresses Zhou Chong as the second young master, and when he uses "you" to address him, Zhou Chong's words, "Don't talk like that, I've never treated you as my subordinate," fully reflect the concept of equality in his heart. Secondly, because he is the youngest, his perception of things is still black or white and full of good hopes. Many of Zhou Chong's words reflect his innermost desire for a better life, and he truly believes that he can have such a good life. He says to Si Feng, "I and you, we can fly to a really clean, happy place where there is no quarrel, no hypocrisy, no inequality", which shows that although he is a young master, he is still as pure as a child in his heart [3]. There is no class superiority; in Zhou Chong's mind, he and Si Feng are equal. It is such a simple character, so his character with plasticity, and because the personality is easy to shape, so simple, soft and delicate emotions easily because of the wall and convergence. Zhou Chong's stubborn character makes him struggle for his own emotions and those of Si Feng, but his simple personality and young age do not allow him to have the ability to fight, and eventually, the weakness of his character overcomes his stubbornness.

The tragedy of Zhou Chong's character is also reflected in his dealings with Zhou Puyuan. Although Zhou Chong was the young master of the Zhou family, he had to submit to Zhou Puyuan's authority because he was so high up and ruled the entire Zhou Gong Guan. From the conversation between Zhou Chong and Zhou Puyuan, it can be understood that even though Zhou Chong has an independent mind and personality and is firm in what he determines, he has no choice but to maintain a strong attitude and authority over Zhou Puyuan. Even when Fanyi, who had a strong personality, did not want to drink the medicine arranged by Zhou Puyuan. Zhou Puyuan coldly asked Zhou Chong,

who was on the side, to kneel down and beg Fanyi to drink the medicine, and Zhou Chong did not even dare to do so after speaking. Such a weak character makes him unable to confront Zhou Puyuan, who is the head of the family and has high authority.

#### **4.1.2. Zhou Fanyi: New Age Women with Independent Thought but Unable to Confront Feudalism**

In the preface to *Thunderstorm*, it is written that Cao Yu first came up with, and at the same time felt most true to, the characterization of Zhou Fanyi. "She has a passion like fire, a strong heart. She dares to break through all shackles and do a trapped fight [3]." Fanyi is like someone who is begging for a living in the gutter but whose heart is higher than the sky. Her passion is like an inextinguishable fire, but it can only grow dry on the sand. Even though she has a beautiful heart, due to the inevitable stifling environment, she can only perversely endure and submit, suppressed by the feudal society and feudal family, called a trapped beast and depressed for the rest of her life. Zhou Fanyi is a tragedy born in a chaotic era of sobriety, but what is even more deplorable is that there were countless such tragic images in that era, which was criticized by feudalism. Zhou Fanyi is a collection of sharp contradictions, on the one hand, looking forward to freedom, but on the other hand, unable to obtain it; on the one hand, pure soft love. Another is sharp hatred of love but cannot get it. The mixture of love and hate makes Zhou Fanyi a tragic character who is influenced by advanced ideas and unable to escape from her predicament by herself. As Cao Yu says, "Zhou Fanyi's 'loveliness' lies in her 'unloveliness' [3]." Zhou Fanyi's loveliness is not measured by a worldly ruler but is a unique 'loveliness' that is revealed by comparing her with many other women. Zhou Fanyi's charm is hidden under her thin appearance, and her latent unruly and mischievous character can be reflected in her language. For example, in her conversation with Zhou Ping about moving in the first act (at this time, the article has not yet revealed their incestuous relationship), when Zhou Ping picks up the newspaper to cover up that she has been living in the old house for too long and is bored, Zhou Fanyi directly laughs and asks, "I'm afraid you are timid, right? Then she smiled and said, "If I were you, I would be disgusted with all the people around here, and I would leave this dead place [3]." The smile here is not a simple smile but a cold smile with profound connotations, which shows that Zhou Fanyi is not just a weak woman who can endure humiliation, but also has the spirit of rebellion that advanced thinkers have. Throughout the play, Zhou Fanyi's struggle is strengthened not because she sees hope but because her hope is dashed. Even though Zhou Fanyi's struggle is tragic in nature, from the beginning of her persistent and determined struggle to the later realization that her efforts are just a futile struggle, she still cannot give in to other people's arrangements and chooses to fight back and retaliate. Such complex character traits create a unique Zhou Fanyi, but at the same time, it is also the contradictory and sharp character that leads to Zhou Fanyi's tragedy [8].

Zhou Puyuan is a representative of the feudal family forces, while Zhou Fanyi is a new-age woman imbued with advanced ideas. The relationship between Zhou Fanyi and Zhou Puyuan represents the conflict between the emerging advanced ideas and the feudal family. From the ending of "Lei Yu", it can be known that Zhou Fanyi's ending is more devastating compared to Zhou Puyuan's. The two labels are also representative of the society at the time. Zhou Fanyi, as a dignified and beautiful "mistress" in the eyes of outsiders, is depressed every day, and even though she is called the "mistress" of a large family, Zhou Fanyi must still obey the orders of the head of the family. The fact is that even though she was called the "mistress" of a large family, Zhou Fanyi still had to follow the orders of the head of the family -- whether it was to see Dr. Ke or to drink Chinese medicine, she could not even make decisions about her own body. This shows that in the feudal era, a woman was subject to feudal oppression regardless of whether she was cultured or had her own sense of independence and daring character qualities [7]. As Cao Yu says in the preface, "She is full of the 'force' of repression,

and Zhou Fanyi bears too much pressure from different places, which is the source of her unique character and the curse of her tragic ending.

## **4.2. Ethical Tragedy**

### **4.2.1. Zhou Puyuan and Siping, Lu Dahai: The Ethical Tragedy of Abandoning Wife and Child**

The confusion about Zhou Puyuan's ethical identity is the root cause of the tragedy between Zhou and Lu. As the character who links the two families, he has the dual ethical identities of "husband" and "father" [9]. Zhou Puyuan's character has two important traits, one is bossy and stubborn, and the other is hypocritical. The former is reflected in the fact that although he was born into a feudal family and had studied in an "educated" family, in order to make a fortune for himself, he deliberately allowed the river bank he had contracted to take a risk and drowned 2,200 workers; in order to suppress the workers' movement in town, he told the police to shoot dozens of workers; the latter is reflected in his temper justice with mercy [8]. As an indifferent capitalist, Zhou Puyuan abandoned his beloved "inferior" Shi Ping and their second son Lu Dahai for his own benefit and married a rich girl of his own family. As a father, he is tyrannical and violent towards his children, not only failing in his duty to care for them and educate them but also abandoning his second son, who was born soon after. "He abandons his once devoted and loving Shi Ping and lacks respect and cares for her. When he abandons his wife and children, Zhou Puyuan also abandons his dual ethical identity of "husband" and "father". In the second act, when Zhou Puyuan learns the true identities of Shi Ping and Lu Dahai, his attitude toward Shi Ping is only to say coldly, "After thirty years of work, you have finally found your way here [3]." To Lu Dahai, he sneered and said, "So, my own flesh and blood are agitating for a strike in the mine against me! [3]" Treating his wife and children, who were now living in hardship, Zhou did not even show any remorse and shame for his past mistakes but suddenly said to Ping, "Good! It's painful! How much money do you want now? [3]" In his eyes, he could make up for the past thirty years of grudges with money alone. This illustrates Zhou's cold and heartless nature and the principle of profit first. It is his irresponsible attitude that leads to the suffering of Shi Ping, the loneliness and vulnerability of Zhou Fanyi, and the anger and helplessness of Lu Dahai after he learns the truth and the irrevocable fact of class antagonism between father and son.

### **4.2.2. Si Feng and Zhou Ping ---- Incest Tragedy Between Brother and Sister**

As a servant of the Zhou family, Si Feng falls in love with the youngest master Zhou Ping and becomes pregnant, but due to the enmity of the previous generation, Si Feng and Zhou Ping are unable to learn that they are half-brothers and sisters [9]. In the episode in Act IV where Si Feng and Zhou Ping are determined to leave together and persuade Shi Ping, in the beginning, Shi Ping is reluctant, to tell the truth just to take Si Feng away, and only after learning that Si Feng is three months pregnant does she tell the truth -- "I am dreaming. My children, my own children! Thirty years of work ---- Oh, my God! You go away; I won't recognize you [3]." In the final scene of the drama, Zhou Ping rarely convinces Lu Dahai to marry Si Feng and reaches an agreement, in the plot immediately ushers in a great ending, the truth comes out, but all the good is shattered. This is the tragedy of incest between brother and sister, but also the tragedy of fate. The true identity of Zhou Ping and Si Feng is revealed, and the aura of love is completely extinguished by the incestuous relationship, and the death of the two in the thunderstorm brings the chaotic relationship to a complete end [10].

## 5. Conclusions

To sum up, this paper elaborates on the author's "Fatalism of Gods and Ghosts" and "Natural View " as proposed in the preface, analyses the imagery of "Lei Yu", and deduces the complex family conflicts and characters' fate behind "Lei Yu". It also explains the irresistible tragedy of fate in the relationship between the characters of "Lei Yu" through a detailed analysis of the character, experience, and identity of the characters in both the tragedy of character and the tragedy of ethics, which is an appropriate supplement to the study of the tragedy of fate in "Lei Yu" in the field and proposes some more novel writing styles and lines. The book is a novel and innovative approach to writing and writing structure. However, due to the limitation of space and the limited extent of the author's current research, the article still has many shortcomings; many parts that need to be elaborated can still be discussed in detail; there are still many related works of literature that have not been included in the research vision. The author will continue to work on this literary work and persistently read and study the works and ideas of scholars both inside and outside the ancient world in order to conduct more in-depth research and discussion in the future.

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