

# The Battle of Trapped Beasts Against the Coming Fate

-- Comparative Study of Oedipus the King and Thunderstorm from the Destiny Perspective

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**Abstract.** Oedipus the King and Thunderstorm, two famous tragedies of fate at home and abroad, have many similarities in plot structure, core conflicts, and artistic presentation. However, they are also different in characters, cultural context, theme connotation, and value orientation. Focusing on the comparative analysis of their common concept of fate, this paper not only showcases how Cao Yu inherits and expands the connotation of fate in the ancient Greek tragedy, but also discusses the universal dilemma of human beings within the “inevitable fate” as a motif, appreciating the beauty of human nature and eternal dignity displayed by their fight against fate.

**Keywords:** Thunderstorm; Oedipus the King; View of Destiny; Tragedy of Fate; Incest.

## 1. Introduction

Reflection on fate is the inexhaustible source of literary creation at all times all over the world, especially the tragedy of fate, which is the eternal motif of literary creation. When the unavoidable tragedy comes, the creator expresses the mystery of human existence with the image of fate. Meanwhile, in the writing of the indomitable struggle against destiny, the greatness of human self-consciousness and subjective spirit can be manifested again.

The best works of fate tragedy in China and the West are *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles, an ancient Greek dramatist, and *Thunderstorm* by Cao Yu, a Chinese dramatist. Viewed from the perspective of ethical tragedy, these two works show the fierce struggle of characters and characters themselves under cruel fate, which exposes the sad destruction brought by fate to people. This paper which focuses on the comparative analysis of their common concept of destiny showcases how Cao Yu internalizes, absorbs, and expands the concept of destiny in ancient Greek tragedy, so as to explore the different presentation of the “destiny” as a motif in Chinese and Western regions.

## 2. Patricide and Oedipus Complex—Same and Repeated Fate

In Oedipus the King, “killing his father and marrying his mother” is the fate of Oedipus, so he was abandoned by his biological parents, but he survived thanks to the compassion of the old servant and moved to the neighboring King Corinth. In order to prevent the oracle from being fulfilled, Oedipus stayed away from his native land when he grew up. However, he still killed his biological father by coincidence when heading for Thebes and was even elected king for solving the mystery of the Sphinx. Thus, he had to marry his biological mother Iocaster. Oedipus wanted to get rid of the net woven by fate, but every escape was approaching his terrible fate. The Oracle had already been realized unwittingly. (Pavel, 118-128)

The incest relationship between Zhou Ping and his stepmother Fan Yi in *Thunderstorm* is a similar reflection of Oedipus and Iocaster. After drinking, Zhou Puyuan confided to Fan Yi that he had abandoned his wife and children. When he was sober afterwards, he isolated Fan Yi mentally with the excuse of her illness. In such a gloomy and depressing environment, the affection of Fan Yi was ignited by her stepson Zhou Ping who was similar to her age with a good appearance. A shockingly deformed love also unfolds in Zhou Mansion. (Han, 24-26)

There are profound psychological reasons for the same Oedipus complex in the two works. Freud, a psychoanalyst, expounded in *New Introduction to Psychoanalysis* that children’s early self is extremely fragile. After being decisively suppressed, they will encounter traumatic setbacks. Besides,

their behavior patterns and psychological mechanisms will be changed and stereotyped, resulting in the Oedipus complex. (Freud, qtd. In Fromm 22-27) That is to say, the children's growth will affect the criteria of early mate selection, with the ideal prototype of mate image deep rooted in the images of their parents. (Kohut, 537-567) Oedipus was abandoned three days after he was born and rumors circulated that he was a bastard, rather than a true royal descendant, which was even exposed in public by a drunker at a banquet. In contrast, being told from an early age that his mother had passed away, Zhou Ping was fostered in the countryside and grew up without parents. When he grew older, he went to the Zhou Mansion, where Zhou Puyuan deliberately kept the house furnishings to pay homage to his gone mother. It's obvious that the growth of these two characters is similar, and both lack parental care, especially maternal care. Therefore, the desire for maternal love has become their subconscious lust, which is reasonable for them to fall in love with their mothers later. (Xu, 17-18) Oedipus complex is particularly obvious in Zhou Ping. In the early days, he fell in love with his stepmother Fan Yi, on which he projected his fantasy about his mother. Then, he loved his sister Lu Sifeng, who had the same temperament and appearance as his mother Lu Shiping, completely embarking on a road of no return.

However, it can be found after careful observation that Zhou Ping has only the Oedipus complex without patricide. Although he hated his father and wished him to die when falling in love with Fan Yi, even at the expense of committing incest, Zhou Ping did not take action. On the contrary, he admired his father's persistence and determination and offered to go to the mine for his career. Zhou Ping also hopes that he can "follow the so-called moral life of ordinary people" like his father. Confronted by Fan Yi's coercion, he "admitted being his father's son" and even used the family order to evade responsibility, so as to put this deformed love back on track. He "admires his father" and is willing to succumb to his authority. When Zhou Puyuan forced him to kneel down and compel Fan Yi to drink medicine, he chose to surrender and obey. When his father questioned whether he had followed the ethnic rules over the years, he was in chaos and afraid that his love affair with Fan Yi would be revealed. (Cao, 26-27) Thus, he succumbed to the patriarchal order in his nature.

However, it's not convincing to believe that the inheritance of patricide and Oedipus complex is incomplete in *Thunderstorm*. In fact, Lu Shiping's two sons together, Zhou Ping marrying the mother, and Lu Dahai, the younger brother of Zhou Ping, who killed the father, form a full image of Oedipus. (Ma, 1550-1552) Lu Dahai fought with the servants of Zhou Mansion at times, lambasting and insulting his father Zhou Puyuan for "making a fortune violating his conscience". Moreover, he publicly exposed Zhou Puyuan's bad deeds, including his killing of workers indiscriminately while pulling strings with the police, drowning coolies while repairing the bridge, and leading the workers to strike and resist. He has a sworn hatred for Zhou Puyuan, with the patricide displayed vividly. From this point of view, the shaping of core contradictions in *Thunderstorm* inherits the tragic core of the ancient Greek drama *Oedipus the King* to a certain extent, which makes readers think about the unavoidable curse of fate and its destructive power in the repeated tragedies of patricide and Oedipus complex.

### 3. Inevitable Destiny—Same Theme Expression

In ancient Greek mythology, all people are under the control of the gods, but fate is beyond any control of the gods. Influenced by this cultural tradition, Sophocles' plays mostly express the basic concept of "inevitable fate" that cannot be traced back, explored, resisted, and explained. (Allan, 259-278) Driven by this value, Oedipus who was born with the curse of the oracle turned the murderer of his father and defiled his mother. In search of the culprit who brought the bane to Thebes, he cast a curse for being blind and exiled. When he finally learned the truth, he poked his eyes to blindness and exiled himself to the mountain. All the oracles and curses were fulfilled. However, the author thinks that Oedipus' tragedy lies not in his fate of patricide, marriage with his mother, exile, and blindness, but in his failure of escaping fate, which in the end contributed to the tragedy. In fact, every effort made to fight against fate only resulted in the proximity of his destined doom. In order to

avoid the fulfillment of the oracle, he left what he believed to be his biological parents and embarked on a journey to a foreign country. As a result, he got closer to his real biological parents. The oracle hung over his head like the sword of Damocles. Solving the mystery of the Sphinx with extraordinary wisdom and courage, he was elected as the new king and married the queen. However, he did not know that his wife was his biological mother. When the plague was rampant in the city-state, he searched for the bane with courage, only to make his true life experience and unintentional sins come to light, falling into the abyss beyond redemption. Undoubtedly, as a tragic figure, Oedipus cannot escape the suppression of fate with every effort, which embodies the ancient Greeks' view of fate, which is given by the gods, natural, mysterious, and undefiant. Human struggle makes no difference to change it. After a short deviation, fate still returns to the established track. (Versnel, 379-438)

This view of fate is inseparable from the historical background and thinking mode of ancient Greeks. Oedipus lived in the transitional stage of human civilization from barbarism to civilization. When supernatural phenomena cannot be explained by existing knowledge, the view of the mythical world will win over the scientific and rational one to be mainstream. Various literary and artistic works will be endowed with strong fatalism. At the same time, they also advocate heroic responsibility and lofty enterprising spirit, so Oedipus-style tragic hero was destined to embark on a sacred road of self-salvation with suffering. (Chen, 69-70)

*Thunderstorm* also holds a pessimistic attitude towards the view of fate. After being abandoned by Zhou Puyuan, Lu Shiping left home and lived alone under a false identity for decades. However, because her husband Lu Gui recommended Sifeng as a maid, the family coincided with the Zhou family again. To escape the unrequited love with his stepmother Fan Yi, Zhou Ping turned to pursue Sifeng and fell into another unethical love with his own sister. Lu Dahai led the workers to strike, made trouble with Zhou Mansion in the mine, and was beaten by Zhou Ping, which implicitly manifests the brothers' conflict. Zhou Ping was expelled by Zhou Puyuan, constituting the hatred between the father and son. Confessing with Sifeng's mother to save her endangered love, Fan Yi just contributed to a dead end of grievances and feud. Zhou Chong and Sifeng, who fled in shame, were electrocuted by disrepair wires in the garden on a stormy day, making the destruction of the most innocent and beautiful soul in the whole drama. Zhou Puyuan worked hard to maintain his dignity and the order of the feudal family all his life. However, everything he painstakingly worked for vanished after a farce. He ended up being alone without a wife and sons. There are coincidences created for centralized conflict and ethical tragedies caused by characters' personality weaknesses, which reflect the view of fate to a certain extent. Under fate, no matter how the characters break free and resist, they will slip into the abyss of failure.

In fact, when Cao Yu talked about the *Thunderstorm*, he responded to the fate reflected in the work. "The born emotions of *Thunderstorm* have become an indescribable yearning for many mysterious things in the universe, which is a cruel well. When you fall inside, it is difficult to get rid of its darkness and restraint." (Cao, 13-15) When the real society faced by creators is too dark and full of extremely intense conflicts with no scientific road found, they may be forced to retreat to the corner of unknown mysticism, and their works will also show certain mysticism and fatalism. (Wang, 38-42) However, in the era of *Thunderstorm*, the rational world outlook was already complete and natural science developed rapidly. The ancient Greek view of destiny could not fundamentally solve the practical problems at that time. Therefore, under the same view of inevitable fate, *Thunderstorm* has irreconcilable class contradictions and deeper tragic endings.

#### 4. Closed-end Structure—Similar Artistic Presentation

It is a long process for the oracle to come true and the entanglement between two generations for nearly 30 years also needs abundant foreshadowing. How to quickly explain the story and show the conflict tests the creators' narrative art. Both *Oedipus the King* and *Thunderstorm* adopt a closed creative structure, that is, the events take place in the same place at a compact time with a unified theme. Meanwhile, the event is directly narrated from the place close to the climax, revealing the

origin of the event in recollection, so as to prepare for the climax, instead of following the traditional chronological order. (Jing, 63-65)

In *Oedipus the King*, the plague runs rampant in Thebes at the beginning. Besides, the priests cooperate with the people of Thebes to ask Oedipus for truth and save the city-state. Oedipus' life experiences and sins come to the fore. The following scenes are repeated in the memories and narrations of the prophet Terethias, the messenger, and the shepherd until the truth is revealed. The climax is near the end, where Oedipus destroyed his eyesight and was voluntarily exiled, completing the storyline in less than one day.

The prelude of *Thunderstorm* began on a winter afternoon. The dialogue between church nuns, pale-haired old people, brothers, and sisters led to the tragedy that happened in Zhou Mansion ten years ago, that is, the afternoon when Fan Yi asked to meet Lu Shiping, the mother of Sifeng, in the Zhou Mansion. At this time, the dusty grievances burst out. The whole drama lasted only one day from the first to the fourth scene. In a highly concentrated period of time, it traced back to the unbearable secret that Zhou Puyuan abandoned his wife and children because of the feudal family, Zhou Ping and Fan Yi fell in love with each other in an oppressive environment. In the preservation and disclosure of secrets, the story was pushed to the climax. Thus, drawing lessons from the closed narrative structure of *Oedipus the King*, *Thunderstorm* cuts into the narrative around the climax to create suspense and builds a strong dramatic tension between secrecy and decryption, reaching a climax in discovering and revealing secrets. A sudden turn and ends are presented quickly, which makes the drama a stronger appeal with a more tragic sense of destiny.

## 5. Forbidden Love—Different Incest Incentives

*Thunderstorm* has inherent inheritances from *Oedipus the King* with innovations and developments. For example, in the setting of incest incentives, the hero changes from an incomplete to a complete insider. (Yan, 150)

In *Oedipus the King*, the oracle of patricide and marrying his mother was a sin that Oedipus was born with, so he was abandoned or even killed by his parents. However, thanks to the compassion of the elderly, Oedipus survived and accidentally learned the Oracle when he grew up. Fearing to commit a great sin, Oedipus left his old country but stepped into a trap set by fate. In the process of finding out the truth about the trouble in Thebes, he flew into a rage at the honest revelation of the prophet Terethias and was alert to his life story told by the messenger of Corentos. Moreover, he was so desperate for the shepherd who told the whole story of the past that destroyed his eyes in shame and anger. He is innocent when he doesn't know the fate of incest. After knowing it, he resisted. That is to say, his incest was not intentional, but a joke made by fate.

At the same time, the author does not agree that Oedipus is a victim of fate, because he had already known the oracle. If he was careful enough to avoid killing any man at his father's age or refused to kill others, he would not commit patricide. If he avoided marrying a woman of his mother's age or stayed single during his whole lifetime, he would not marry his mother. Therefore, he can only be an "incomplete insider". It is his character defect and fate that lead to his tragedy.

On the other hand, Zhou Ping, who also committed incest in *Thunderstorm*, was a complete insider. When the unethical love happened, he realized that the "mother" and "stepson" could not be related to the "lover". He also knew that this deformed relationship should only be kept secret, otherwise, both of them would be ruined, and so did the reputation of the Zhou family. However, under the deviant control of Zhou Puyuan, a feudal leader, people's mental state was bound to be abnormal, with repressed emotions and desires released wantonly in taboo. This deformed love was also the self-rebellion, self-salvation, and self-destruction of two people in Zhou Mansion. Zhou Ping was well aware of the injustice of this relationship. Thus, when encountering his father's temptation, he was ashamed to admit it and felt lucky that his father did not find his secret. Furthermore, under his father's authority all the time, he was eager to draw a clear line with Fan Yi, reminding her that she was "his father's wife" and himself that he was "his son", so as to cut off their tie with the shackles

of ethics. (Cao, 34-36) From beginning to end, Zhou Ping knew about incest, and his personal tragic style was weakened by comparison.

These plot sets imply the creator's value orientation. As for Oedipus, he fell into a terrible incest fate due to the Oracle, but he never compromised. Disciplining himself by poking his eyes and exiling himself, he resisted fate and returned purification and peace to the state. Thus, God can wantonly reverse the fate of mankind and trample on human happiness but cannot erase human conscience and dignity. In Sophocles' works, he is not a criminal who violates morality and ethics, but a tragic hero worthy of admiration.

For Zhou Ping's unethical love, the creator prefers to blame it on causal retribution. Zhou Puyuan abandoned his wife and daughter, marrying a rich lady for his future. However, his wife's love flowed to his son, which is the first irony. Once this love is exposed, it will also bring shame to Zhou Mansion. The image of his harmonious marriage and orderly family atmosphere that he has been operating for many years would collapse, which is the second irony. Retribution always exists, which acted on Zhou Ping who fell into a double love affair with his mother and sister. Fate plays a just judge at this time. If Zhou Puyuan had never abandoned Lu Shiping, Lu Sifeng would have become Zhou Ping's sister and they would not fall in love. If Zhou Puyuan did not exert extreme control over Fan Yi and Zhou Ping, they would remain in their respective positions, instead of loving each other. In the end, the feud and secrets collected by the Zhou Mansion were released. Besides, the people living in it were either crazy, dead, escaping, or desperate, which was a wonderful irony of retribution for Zhou Puyuan.

## 6. Game of Fate—Different Character Positioning

*Thunderstorm* expands *Oedipus the King* not only in the plot setting, but also in the characters' depiction. In *Oedipus the King*, the hero dominated by fate is noble and respectable, while the hero suffering from tragedy in *Thunderstorm* is an ordinary person with a low social status. (Fan, 19-21)

The strong tragedy of *Oedipus the King* is realized through the double contrast between the sublimity of characters and the thoroughness of destruction, the strength of fate, and the inability to resist. Ancient Greek city-states have always had xenophobia. Oedipus was a foreigner in Thebes, but he was regarded as the savior and enjoyed their submission. Oedipus' extraordinary wisdom, courage, and boldness can be seen. But even such a character cannot compete with fate. His efforts to fight against fate are all futile and he can only destroy himself in the struggle between man and God to preserve his dignity as a human being. Raiois, the father of Oedipus, pierced his son's heel with nails and abandoned him cruelly to avoid the oracle being fulfilled. Finally, he was killed by his son by mistake. Iocasta, the mother of Oedipus, tried her best to stop Oedipus' investigation when she realized that the truth was about to be revealed, and finally committed suicide in shame and anger. (Sophocles, 38-42) As royal families with prominent backgrounds, they failed to change their destiny by all means, and so did the tiny mortals and civilians. In this way, drama is more tragic.

Cao Yu is influenced by ancient Greek tragedy, but he has his own artistic breakthrough, which focuses on the poor people oppressed and exploited at the bottom of society. It is no longer just heroes who are paid attention to, but also the toiling masses who deserve to be seen. They should give an unyielding cry to the unfair fate. Born humble, Lu Sifeng also has the right to pursue love and the courage to cross the unfathomable class gap with her lover. Her innocence and kindness are always fixed on a stormy night with thunder and lightning. With extremely rebellious characteristics, Lu Dahai who went to Zhou Mansion alone to negotiate was beaten and dismissed. What he wanted was only to seek justice for the dead workers, gain benefits for the existing trade unions, and expose the hypocrisy of capitalists. Lu Shiping has been fighting against fate for 30 years. After failing to commit suicide in the river, she took her children away from the past entanglements and lived a life with determination. When she found herself involved in the Zhou family again, she restrained her sufferings and avoided the sibling conflict between Lu Dahai and Zhou Ping. In addition, she kept

secrets of the incest between Sifeng and Zhou Ping, which reflected the moral strength of tenacity. In the struggle against fate, the lofty beauty of human nature in these nobodies shines.

## 7. Conclusion

By comparative analysis, we can find that the intertwining of desire and ethics is the primitive impulse of human beings, and “inevitable fate” is the common dilemma of all mankind. Thus, there are endless literary creations reflecting China and the West. However, it is in the struggle against fate that the beauty of human nature shines and the dignity of humans is reflected. *Thunderstorm* written by Cao Yu inherits and extends Sophocles’ destiny view embodied in *Oedipus the King*, which localizes the ancient Greek view of destiny in the oriental context and demonstrates a strong aesthetic oriental tragedy and immortal humanistic value.

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